

Landscaping Nature's Way

In 2001, in compliance with then-Governor Kitzhaber's executive order promoting sustainability in state government operations, the new landscape around the Science and Math Building was designed to provide a host of economic and environmental benefits. Over time, the site is developing into a rich mosaic of grassland, savanna, and woodland habitats that cost very little to care for and that provide an ever-increasing "return" on the initially small investment in plants and labor.

Unlike conventional landscapes which tend to displace local plant and animal communities, this landscape makes every effort to re-create the attractive, functional native landscape that belongs here in the upper Willamette Valley. The so-called instruction manual for landscaping a site such as this can be "read" by observing nearby natural areas; in this case, the LCC School Forest Reserve and Nature Trail area just uphill from the south parking lot serves as a model.

To encourage a variety of beneficial insects, birds, and other creatures, the use of all pesticides is forbidden. And in order to protect our community's ground water, no fertilizer is used. The site's overall health is ensured by working *with* rather than *against* Nature, and by taking advantage of natural cycles to maintain site fertility, prevent weeds, and provide biologically rich habitats.

We hope that you will observe and enjoy the changes that occur as this special landscape continues to develop and evolve. By making the site a more pleasant place for song sparrows and praying mantises, we make it a more pleasant place for humans, too!

Please feel free to contact any of us, should you have questions or comments.

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Some Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

Because the natural landscape in front of you is very different—in both design and on-going care—from the conventional landscapes that most of us are familiar with, some visitors have questions about it. We hope our answers will help you better understand the exciting changes occurring here.

Why have some of the trees died—or at least their tops? And why don't you remove them and replant?

During construction of the Science and Math Building in 1999-2001, most of the soil native to this site was removed and in many places bedrock was exposed. Some new soil was brought in before the site was planted, but much of it was sandy soil that doesn't retain water well. Most of the trees did fine during the first three summers when we were watering them. Now that they're on their own, however, we're seeing the effects of inadequate volumes of appropriate soil.

The least drought-tolerant trees—big leaf maples—have suffered the most, but the tops of some Douglas-firs have also died due to insufficient water. The valley pines, however, are thriving, as they are more drought-tolerant than the firs.

We may replant in a couple of years with more pines and with Oregon white oaks, but we want to first see how the site is going to “stabilize.” Meanwhile, the dead trees and tops serve as perches for birds, and as a reminder that plants, even after they or parts of them die, still have important ecological roles to play.

How do you decide which parts of the site to mow, and which to leave unmowed?

In order to provide better visual and physical access to the new landscape—as well as to suggest to passersby that this landscape is, in fact, being cared for and not just “let go”—some areas are mowed year-round on a regular basis. Then every fall, about half of the unmowed part of the site is mowed; the other half remains in tall grass through the next season, both to provide “cover” for birds and insects and other creatures, and to permit ripened grass and flower seeds to disperse across the site. The following year, the part that was mowed the year before is now left, and the part that was unmowed gets cut. At any given time, then, the site provides a variety of grassland habitats, both for humans as well as for wildlife.

Wouldn't this landscape be a lot prettier if it were watered in the summer?

Early Euro-American settlers in this area praised the changing natural landscape which was green in winter, lush and flower-filled in spring, golden and brown in summer, and then green again after the return of the fall rains. These days, however, many local landscapes are more reminiscent of England—which most years has rain year-round—than they are of the natural landscape here in the upper Willamette Valley.

In an effort to create a landscape better suited to local conditions, we have selected plants that are native to this area and that do not require supplemental irrigation. The young trees and shrubs here were watered by hand the summers of 2002-2004, saving both money (automatic irrigation systems are costly to install and to maintain) and saving water by not wasting it on the grasses and wildflowers, most of which are naturally dormant anyway during our annual summer drought.

Doesn't a landscape like this just invite unwanted non-native animals like rats and starlings?

On the contrary, this site provides a variety of habitats that are essential to many native creatures, from song sparrows—which find the tall grass and young trees and shrubs perfect for nesting—to garter snakes, who safely cruise along the ground beneath the grasses, in search of insects, slugs, and other invertebrates. Goldfinches feed on some of the plants after they've gone to seed. Monarch butterflies find here the only plant upon which they can lay their eggs—the showy milkweed.

This landscape, in contrast to conventional landscapes of mowed lawns, shrub beds, and English ivy, is full of all kinds of life, not just the toughest, most adaptable species such as starlings and house sparrows (both non-native) and scrub jays.

What's next?

Over the next few years, we plan to introduce more native wildflowers as well as additional shrubs and trees—such as Lewis's mockorange and Oregon white oak. Plantings will occur during the winter when most plants are dormant and transplant easily. And mowing will continue in selected parts of the site and at specific seasons. We also hope to place benches so people can sit and enjoy in comfort this life-filled landscape.

Prepared by Whitey Lueck
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