

Benefits of Natural Landscaping

Just as there are significant environmental burdens and costs associated with conventional turf landscaping, there are benefits associated with natural landscaping. The primary benefits are described below.

Environmental benefits

Reduced air pollution. Native landscaping generally does not require regular mowing, which eliminates or greatly reduces the air pollution resulting from turf landscapes. There can be pollution emissions from natural landscaping, however—see discussion below on pollution from fire management.

Reduced nutrient runoff. Native landscaping does not require fertilizer, so the runoff and infiltration of nutrients is eliminated. Buffers of natural landscaping can be used to capture runoff from hard surfaces or less permeable turf to keep the pollutants in that stormwater from entering surface waters. Keeping nutrients out of the groundwater also protects surface waters, because groundwater surfaces in springs and flows into streams and rivers.

Health benefits

Reduced pesticide use. Because natural landscaping involves the establishment of balanced ecosystems, the use of herbicides, insecticides, and other pesticides is generally not required (though herbicides are often used to remove invasive plants during the establishment of natural landscapes). Reduced operation of lawnmowers and other lawn care-related power equipment reduces air pollution both locally and regionally, thus improving health. And keeping pollutants out of water supplies also protects our health.

Ecological benefits

Increased biodiversity. Natural landscapes inherently support greater biodiversity than conventional turf landscapes. Native plants provide diverse food and habitat for birds, small mammals, insects, reptiles, and amphibians. In heavily developed urban areas, even small patches of natural landscape can be critical in maintaining populations of native fauna and flora.

Economic benefits

Cost avoidance. Significant savings in landscape management costs can be realized by converting lawns to natural landscapes. While the initial costs of creating natural landscapes can be relatively high, annual operating costs of established natural landscapes are generally far lower than annual operating costs of lawn area. Operating cost savings were a primary motivation for the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Chicago to convert turf area to tall-grass prairie—to date, approximately 20 acres (8 ha) of turf has been restored to natural landscape, with guidance from Conservation Design Forum of Elmhurst, Illinois.