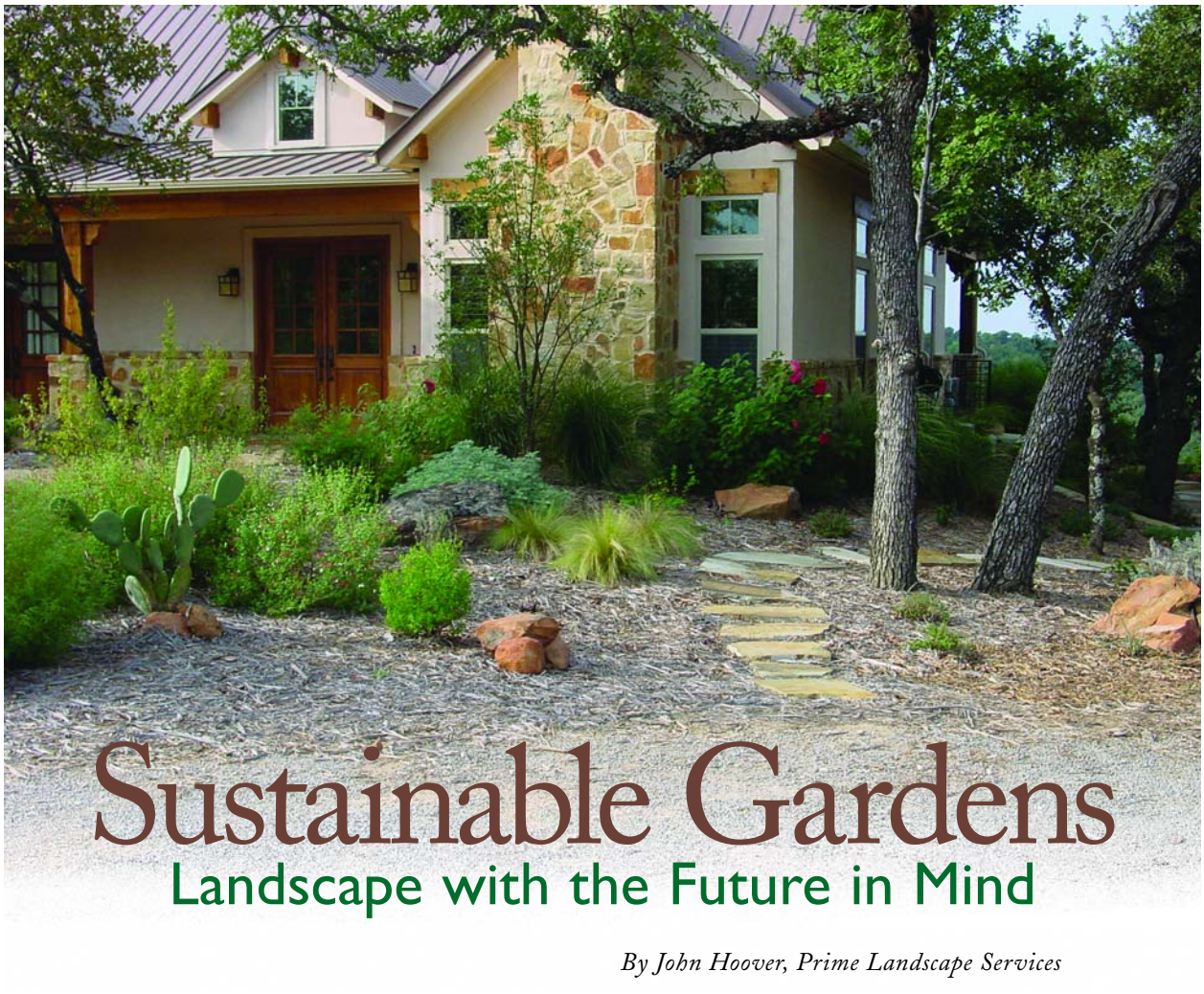

Sustainable Gardens

Landscape with the Future in Mind

By John Hoover, Prime Landscape Services

Ah, how sweet it is. After decades of seemingly indifference by the general public of environmental issues, terms like "green" and "sustainable" have suddenly become part of our mainstream culture. For older gardeners like myself that were reading *Mother Earth News* and *Organic Gardening* back in the seventies it is refreshing to see a return to the idea that being kind to Mother Earth is not just for environmentalist whackos. It is actually popular again!

The concept of environmental sustainability has many definitions depending on who is using the term and what purpose they are applying it to. A jog through just a few internet sites on sustainability will yield such diverse definitions as these: "Meeting the needs of the present without depleting resources or harming natural cycles for future generations". "The ability to continue an activity for a long period of time while maintaining diverse, healthy and productive ecosystems." "Not taking more from the earth than you put back." It is easy to see that sustainability is a broad concept that reaches into every part of our culture, society, and economy, but let's narrow our focus and look at what we urban gardeners might do to leave our little piece of the planet a better place for future generations.

Sustainability in our urban gardens does not have to be complicated, but careful thought and research should go into planning your landscape. Application of the basics of good gardening practices can go a long way towards giving our environment the respect and care it deserves. Choosing the right plant for the right area and using natives or well adapted plants can reduce or eliminate the need for pesticides, fertilizers, and watering. Well designed irrigation systems, particularly those that make use of drip and low volume application can be a tremendous asset, but we must learn how to use them properly and avoid water waste and runoff. Rainwater harvesting is another way to conserve a precious resource. Recycling yard waste in the form of compost and mulches is not only good for your soil; it reduces the burden on our landfills. And finally, patronizing local sources of plants and products reduces our consumption of fossil fuels used in the transportation of products from faraway sources.

So where to begin? Most of our traditional landscape schemes require far too much water. Most lawn grasses consume a lot of energy in the form of mowing and fertilizers and are big water consumers. Changing over to organic fertilizers and not over fertilizing will reduce the amount of nutrients that make their way to the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. Use vinegar to spot spray or hand pull weeds instead of using petroleum based weed control products, and choose a grass that will need the least maintenance for the type of activities you plan. If a lawn is unimportant to you and your homeowners association and local ordinances allow, convert your lawn areas to attractive and functional xeriscape plantings. Choose plants that require little or no supplemental water once established and make prodigious use of native mulches or decorative gravels in the open areas between new plantings. Just don't think that changing your lawn to beautiful beds will reduce the amount of time you spend tending your garden. Beds will always need weeding, fresh mulch, and pruning to look their best, but a hoe and pair of hand pruners have taken the place of your noisy polluting lawn equipment, and butterflies and blooms have replaced your expanse of green.

A well designed garden also incorporates biodiversity. Include a variety of plants that offer structure, habitat, and forage for local wildlife. Hardy blooming perennials provide nectar for honeybees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. Trees and shrubs of varying sizes provide shade, forage, and habitat for birds and mammals. A source of water such as a water garden provides a cool drink for wildlife as well as habitat for dragonflies, toads, frogs, and other critters.

Most people use far more water than is necessary, and unfortunately many of our sprinkler systems are not really well designed. At the least, have your sprinkler system audited by a qualified irrigator and make as many improvements as are practical. Be sure beds and lawns are separated. Spray heads and rotor heads may not be on the same zone – the precipitation rates are far too different. If possible, convert bed zones over to drip. Learn how to program your system so that you get a deep soaking without runoff about once a week when we are in periods of no rain. Deep watering develops deeper roots that withstand drought better than plants receiving several shallow applications each week. Rainwater harvesting is another innovative concept that can be incorporated on a scale large or small. Even a few simple rainwater barrels collecting from the gutters can supply you with plenty of high quality H2O for hand watering pots and veggies.

Most cities are instituting yard waste recycling programs and it is easy to compost in your own yard on a small scale. Never bag grass clippings or leaves unless they are going in the compost or you are converting them to mulch. Think of your gardens as a forest floor – what falls from the trees decomposes on the ground to enrich the soil. Your yard is capable of consuming most of its detritus in the forms of mulch and compost. And speaking of keeping close to home, the ability to purchase locally produced goods will become more viable in the green industry as we make our voices heard. In our consumer society, supply follows demand. Support your local feed store or nursery and ask them to buy from local suppliers. There are large scale compost and mulch manufacturers in our area and a wealth of nurseries that grow their own stock. And of course, there are always like minded friends and neighbors that may share gardening successes.

Just like the dinosaur tracks in the Paluxy River, our footprints may last for centuries. Tread lightly in your gardens.