

Landscaping to Keep Inland Lakes Alive and Beautiful

BY TOM SPRINGER PHOTOS BY MARK BUGNASKI

There's something magical about spending time at a lake, whether you're swimming, boating, fishing, or just sitting and listening to the lapping waves. There are simple steps property owners can take to keep their lakes clean and healthy for generations to come. This publication shares examples of five ordinary families who have done something extraordinary. Each is taking steps in their own way to do their part to care for the lake.

From small steps on a relatively manicured property to an almost fully forested and natural landscape, the articles within feature the efforts of people just like you.

Traditional lake landscaping practices – large expanses of lawn, seawalls, and removal of aquatic plants – may be harming thousands of Midwestern lakes. While the ordered beauty of a flawless yard has its appeal, it's

crucial to remember that lakes are living systems. What a lake's wild creatures need are leafy shoreline edges with aquatic plants where they can feed, rest and raise their young. What turtles and frogs need are natural shorelines where they can easily move from land to water and back again. What all lakes need is clean water to support the minnows, mayflies and other tiny organisms that sustain life up and down the food chain.



*Time wasted at the lake
is time well spent.* – UNKNOWN

With native landscaping, homeowners can have the best of both worlds. They can keep stretches of mowed turf grass around the house for paths and play areas. Yet along the shore, they can plant a border of native grass and wildflowers that will filter out contaminants, such as lawn fertilizer and dog feces, before they run into the lake to cause weed and algae growth. Homeowners can also plant native trees – or leave existing trees standing – as a means to enhance the lake’s vitality. Tree roots will hold the soil in place to prevent bank erosion and branches that fall into the lake provide habitat for fish and other animals.

Beyond their value as habitat, native plants will make lake properties beautiful and distinct in ways that turf grass cannot. The varied blooms, colors and textures of native plants change with the seasons, much like a woods, wetland or prairie. This ever-changing tableau will make your yard a visual focal point on the waterfront. It will also set a positive example for neighbors who may want to try something similar on their property.

And, there’s no need to abandon turf grass all at once. While some hire landscapers to install large plantings, others start with a few native plants and build from there.

Native landscapes can be as personal and diverse as the people who plant them. What they have in common, however, are these popular benefits:

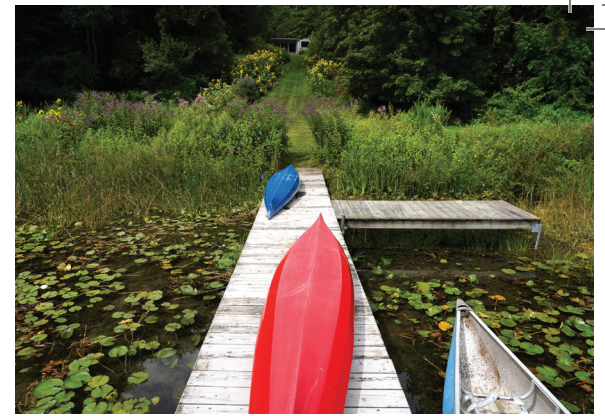
Adding Beauty Across the Seasons:

As landscapes go, turfgrass lawns are fairly binary: they’re either green or they’re not. Not so with native plants in the Midwest. In spring, an array of hazy greens emerges with the new growth of buds and leaves. In summer, wildflowers bloom in vibrant hues of yellow, orange, red, pink and purple. Then after first frost, the colors soften to an earthy palate of wine reds, flame crimson and dusky bronze. From December on, the rustle of sere beige stalks in the breeze add a note of interest to the quiet season.

Keeping Geese at Bay: Canada

Geese are beautiful birds, but their gooey droppings and turf-plucking ways can make a slimy mess of a turfgrass lawn. How to keep them away? Plant a buffer strip of native plants along the shore. Geese won’t pass through the buffer, because they have a natural fear of upright vegetation – they think it provides cover for predators.

Reducing Yard Maintenance: It’s often hard to mow next to a lake, because the grass there is soggy and spongy, or dangerous because of





the slope. It's a naturally wet transition zone between the uplands and the water. In many cases, the lake "wants" wetland plants to grow there. With a buffer strip of native plants, you can give that stretch back to nature and rest easy. You will have less yard to mow, and compared to turf grass, far less maintenance. Once native plants are established, they'll thrive without fertilizer or sprinkling systems.

Attracting Butterflies, Hummingbirds, Frogs and More: This is one of best draws of all: the bevy of butterflies,



hummingbirds, songbirds, turtles and frogs that a natural landscape attracts. Your backyard can become a mini-sanctuary, with live nature lessons for kids and adults alike. On milkweed, for instance, observers can see the life cycle of a monarch butterfly as it transforms from caterpillar to chrysalis to adult. Even in winter, the seed heads of plants can nourish chickadees, finches and cardinals – another chapter in the ongoing story of a native landscape.



PHOTO BY AMY PETERSON

Expansive lawns attract Canada Geese whose droppings can wash into the lake and be a nuisance for homeowners.