

Sustainability

by Diana Pieti

In 1987, the United Nations Bruntland Report on sustainability described the movement as "design, construction, operations, and maintenance practices that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

But what does this mean for us? What can we do in our gardens and lifestyle to help. After all we are so small in this big world. This definition was written in 1987 but are we subscribing to it today in our daily life? Population has grown since this was written and we think it is a mantra that we should take seriously in our own small way, hoping it teaches and guides others to follow. Let's set an example. Let's learn more about sustainability.

We need to start with our soil, but first a lesson from the past. In the 1920s wheat prices began to grow and our government encouraged farmers in the Midwest to plow up the prairies and plant wheat and other grain crops. But not long after that, prices fell and some of those big acreages were left bare. In addition to this Mother Nature sent high winds day after day and without those deep-rooted prairie grasses, the soil blew away and created what we called the dust bowl. The use of some chemical fertilizers that were just introduced played a part in poor soil as well because farmers began to rely on them to fertilize the soil, but this did not include animal manures which were also mixed with the bedding and this provided compost as well.

We are not plowing big fields of prairie grass, but we can start in a small way in our gardens, and landscape, from the bottom up to make sure we are improving the soil, to make it sustainable for us and for the future for others. There are many ways you can add to its richness by using some of what you have. And of course, this can sustain our bank accounts as well. Those leaves you haul to the compost area of the landfill can be put back into the soil by running over them with a mower and then adding them to your beds. Over time they will return to the soil. The same holds true for your lawn clippings. If you do not use chemicals on your lawn, use your bagger and add the lawn clippings the same way you did with the leaves. This practice of mulching has a twofold mission; you improve the soil and adding this to the top of your landscape, you shade the soil from our hot summers, and this lets you water less.

Start composting. So much of your waste can be returned to the soil. Our landfills are filled with leftover food stuff and those leaves, and lawn clippings and all of it can be used to improve that soil. There are so many online sites, library books and our Master Gardener plant clinic that can help you if you have never created a compost area, and many ideas can be created by using what you have such as old boards, bricks, concrete blocks, and pallets to build a 3 x 3 x 3 foot structure. When looking for ideas be sure to learn how to keep a good balance of 1 part green and 2 parts brown in your compost pile. Some of our Master Gardeners simply bury a lot of kitchen waste by just digging a hole in their planting areas and putting in those apple peels and crushed eggshells from our kitchen. Dig a deep hole, put in your kitchen scraps, cover and come back in a couple of weeks to watch all the earthworms that have gathered there, enjoying their food and adding nutrients to your soil. Or put them in your compost pile. It is our responsibility to help sustain good soil, and to add less to our landfills.

Bring awareness of what you plant. Include native plants or those that grow easily here. This will save water, encourage more native pollinators to help boost your crops, and encourage birds to help with insect control. Your tree plantings should be all shapes and heights, dense to provide cover for birds and their nests, two-fold to give you fruit crops, and provide shade to help with our very hot summers. Vegetables and ornamentals should be planted densely to shade the earth to keep it moist and to lessen weeds coming into the area to compete with your crops. Learn to be a little messy, to leave some of that leaf cover, a pile of pruning's in the corner and puddles of water for all those living beings, be it birds, or butterflies. Let's help sustain wildlife. Let's help cool the earth.

Learn to save seeds properly. This gives you more variety, saves money and allows you to share. Knowing you have your own heirloom seeds helps with sustaining your garden. Yakima County Master Gardeners holds a seed saving class each February and once you have taken the class you can get free seeds from our library.

Get acquainted with your neighbors and share these ideas. There is always something new we can learn from each other. And let's not forget to include the kids. It may turn out that they will be teaching us about the future and what it holds for them. Let's begin today to commit to helping sustain the good things that will help those who follow us.

For any gardening questions - you are always welcome to contact our Master Gardener Clinic at 509-574-1604 or email gardener@co.yakima.wa.us.