

A Fresh Look at Shoreline Landscaping

Tradition! To many shoreline property owners, the word means an expanse of mowed lawn up to the lake's or stream's edge. When asked why they follow this landscape practice, landowners often respond "to maintain the view of the water," "to reduce the problem with mosquitos" or "we've always done it this way."

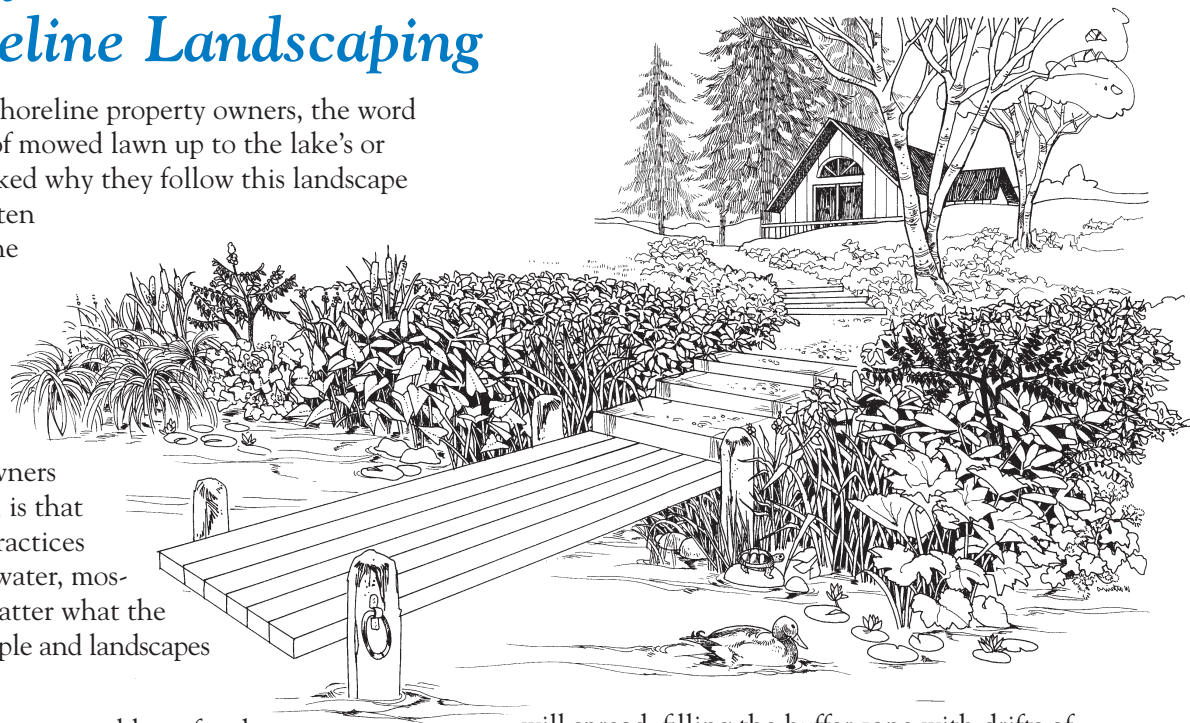
What these property owners are forgetting, however, is that alternative landscape practices still allow views of the water, mosquitos are present no matter what the landscape style, and people and landscapes can change.

An expansive lawn can cause problems for the adjacent lake or stream. Soil, fertilizers, and pesticides may be carried with runoff waters from lawns into the water.

Proper landscape design and selection of plants for shoreline residences can reduce detrimental effects on water quality. Traditional yards should be redesigned to allow a 15-30 foot (or wider) "buffer" zone of more natural vegetation adjacent to the lake or stream. Banks can easily be densely planted to control soil erosion and eliminate the work involved in maintaining a lawn.

Modifying shoreline management practices of the lake or stream can be accomplished in a number of ways, depending on the site situation and desires of the property owner.

- Leaving a buffer zone of unmowed turf along shorelines is the first and easiest step to reduce the runoff of pollutants. The grasses will grow 12-24 inches tall before going to seed. Using a smooth flowing curve for the buffer zone's inland edge and any pathways to the water creates a pleasing, natural appearance.
- Planting bulbs, perennial flowers, and/or groundcovers in the grasses of a buffer zone adds seasonal color. Working up small areas and mulching around new plantings will reduce both competition from the grasses and potential runoff problems.
- Native plants are well adapted to our climate and blend in well with natural shorelines. Native prairie forbs (wildflowers) planted in the buffer zone can provide an ever-changing foreground to the view of the water. Over time, the native wildflowers



will spread, filling the buffer zone with drifts of color. "Purists" may wish to gradually convert the area to prairie by incorporating native grasses along with the forbs.

- Another shoreline alternative is to use trees, shrubs, and groundlayer plants in the buffer zone. Properly placed, these plants will frame good views, screen unappealing views, and muffle the noise of lake activities.
- Incorporating woody plants in planting beds reduces runoff, beneficially modifies soil moisture and temperature, and provides a natural appearance. Gradually the whole shoreline can be planted to create a woodland setting with appropriate openings for visual and physical access to the water. Woodland wildflowers can be planted under the trees and shrubs as they grow and establish their shade patterns. This landscape option creates the shoreline appearance that was naturally adjacent to most of our Southeastern Wisconsin lakes and streams before the water's edge was altered by human activities.

More information on shoreline landscaping alternatives is contained in the publication "Shoreline Plants and Landscaping," (GWQ014) one of the Yard Care and the Environment series of fact sheets available from your local UW-Extension or Land Conservation Department office. Many property owners will want to maintain some conventional lawn away from the shoreline. Other fact sheets in the Yard Care and the Environment series offer lawn management suggestions.