

## Overplanting

By Cass Turnbull

It's not easy being green. Urban trees and landscapes suffer from a multitude of problems, most of them human-made — everything from forgetting to water to overzealous pruning. But the worst problem facing the urban landscape is created when impatient property owners meet up with inexperienced landscape architects. Together they design landscapes that look good now but inevitably result in total landscape self-destruction in only a few years. But total landscape removal will not take place before landscapers are futilely required to prune for size control. Overplanting is the root cause of much (but by no means all) of the mal-pruning commonly seen everywhere. Overplanting, which seems to have gotten worse (believe it or not) in recent years, is often accompanied by improper placement.

### Tale of Three Public Landscapes

Over the past few years, I have been called upon to consult at several relatively new landscape projects. The first one, a planned mixed-use residential community, had quite a nice plant palette. It was a mix of sturdy groundcovers, deciduous and evergreen, drought tolerant shrubs, some natives, good trees, and a few not-too onerous ornamental grasses and perennials. Although the beds were roomy, the plants were all crowded next to the edges, where they would, and did, interfere with foot traffic, signage, and parked cars. The result was that the landscape crew was forced to shear the shrubs. What really killed me was that this landscape design actually won awards. My only explanation is that perhaps a well-meaning installation crew planted the shrubs in an attempt *to make it look finished now*. The same plants and the same numbers of plants, if correctly spaced and sited, would last for thirty years, as all good landscapes should. I wound up telling the crew that they would have to dig up and rearrange almost all the existing plants in the fall and winter. Given tight maintenance budgets, *what are the chances that would happen?*

The landscaping at the second housing development where I consulted had a similarly nice plant selection that was massively overplanted with four-to-six times the number of plants required to make a successful landscape. The mix of tall and lower-story shrubs was good, but the spacing was simply insane. In the space that one Philadelphus (mock orange) might survive un mutilated, there were three, planted on four-foot centers! They were already being pruned back by the grounds crew struggling to employ selective pruning techniques. When I pointed out to the group that the size they like to be is eight feet by five feet, all eyes turned to the grounds crew in condemnation, rather than to the absent and culpable designer. There were

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unending blocks of equally overplanted landscapes. Furthermore, the crew had been instructed to continue to overplant by an utterly unqualified and insistent property manager whose mantra was “no bare earth.” That person was absent as well. Here again, in order to keep the landscape from self-destructing in just three years, the crew would need to rearrange existing plantings, eliminating two thirds of the shrubs that had just been paid for and installed. *What were the chances that would happen?* And the work would have to be done within the year to keep horticultural havoc from erupting. This mind-boggling waste of money and plant material is not just annoying — it’s absurd! Who can afford this ridiculousness? What will actually happen, as we all know, is that the grounds crew will fail at controlling plant size. An inevitable rule of nature is that plants will reach their genetically programmed sizes. Babies cry, dogs bark, plants grow. The harder plants are pruned, the faster they grow. Then, after several years of mal-pruning, the entire landscape will have to be removed. In fact, the new catch phrase spouted by some landscape architects justifying this waste is that “landscapes are only expected to last eleven years.” A good design will last thirty with a renovation (partial removal and rearrangement) in fifteen years and will otherwise require almost no pruning, which equals low maintenance costs and maximum user satisfaction. By the way, I should mention that this landscape had also won an award.

The final landscape I visited was at a school district. Much of it was new; some was older. The landscape had and would continue to hold up pretty well over time. There were lots of lower-story plantings surrounded by groundcovers that would never interfere with foot traffic. There were a few choicer and taller landscape plants in the centers of spacious beds. Where lower story plants were massed (read overplanted to look good now), they were the sort that would combine into a nice mass planting over time. Unfortunately, the landscape suffered from a huge weed infestation. The crew was, for the most part, friendly and receptive to selective pruning. But I fear for the landscape because, even with the adoption of mulching as a standard practice, the crew would need to be convinced to actually bend over and dig out an acre of dandelions. *What were the chances that would happen?* And mulch, without a thorough hand weeding first, will not work.

Elsewhere in the district, perfectly nice landscapes had been subjected to the overzealous work of one shear-happy groundsman. I feel for the landscape architect who must gnash her teeth to see her carefully chosen plants suffer the ignominy and needless expense of unsustainable shearing. There is plenty of blame to go around in the green industry, you bet!

## **Overplanting Solutions**

Great design, like good maintenance, is almost invisible and is measured by the lack of

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annoyance and mal- pruning. And the success of a landscape, including its design and maintenance, should be measured over the span of two decades, not two years.

I have given some thought to what could be done about overplanting, besides a good cathartic rant that *might* find its way into the hands of a perp. First of all, as with the tree-topping problem, a goal must be set to educate the consumer, both through the media and individually by designers and maintenance people at all levels. They need to stress the waste of money caused by overplanting. Customer education cannot be emphasized strongly enough. As long as there is a demand, there will be a supply. Perhaps we should invent our own catch phrase. How about, “If it looks right to you now, it’s wrong.” Like the tree industry regarding tree topping, at some point landscape architects will need to refuse to pander to the shortsighted demands of their customers. We know how we feel about physicians who prescribe medication that way—the physician is considered unethical. The sooner we all politely walk away, the sooner overplanting will end. The tree industry apologists used to say, “I try to educate the customer about topping, but if I don’t do it someone else will.” Then one day the arborists simply stopped doing what shouldn’t be done. That woke the customers up. In other words, those who know that overplanting is wrong need to hold their ground and refuse to do it.

*What are the chances that will happen?*

Also, an awards program for *Landscapes That Last* should be created by the green industry and promoted to municipalities, builders, and property management companies.

And finally, new specifications for property managers should be developed: one for design and one for maintenance.

## **Design Specifications**

For design, the specs should specifically ban overplanting as being increasingly costly and necessitating total landscape replacement as often as every eight years. The specs must additionally assert that no shrubs shall be planted within three feet of hardscapes. No plants that mature to over three feet tall will be planted under windows. Space equal to the mature height of each shrub will be maintained between plants that mature at six feet and over. One-half to two-thirds of the plants used in the landscape will mature at two feet or under. Interplanting for immediate impact will be accomplished with massed ground covers and perennials that grow no more than six inches tall. Rocks and hardscape features will be the initial focal points until shrubs mature. A shrub will be centered as far from hardscapes as the mature height listed in the *Sunset Western Garden Book*, not on the plant tag. Spreading shrubs such as snowberry, bamboo, and rugosa roses will not be planted with other shrubs in the same

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size range. Trees will not be overplanted for immediate impact. In fact, industry standards for correct spacing already exist and should be additionally referenced, but not until property owners thoroughly understand the importance and cost-effectiveness of these standards.

## **Maintenance Specifications**

As you can well imagine, I have a lot to say about maintenance specifications, too. First off, every crew needs a horticulturist on staff; someone with a degree from a horticulture school. That person is authorized to train the crew, make re-design decisions, and handle customer education. Given that the common practice of shearing and shaping is high maintenance, causing unruly growth and premature plant mortality, only the selective pruning technique will be employed. Shearing, both power and hand shearing, will be reserved for formal hedges, lavender, cistus, and broom. All tree pruning will be done according to the national ANSI A-300 standards. When shrubs must be pruned lightly more than once a year for size constraint, they will be removed and replaced with lower maturing shrubs. Priority will be given to reusing other mature but smaller shrubs on site. The budget will allocate time for the grounds crew to transplant and rearrange existing plants each winter. Time will be allowed to enlarge beds to accommodate maturing shrubs. A holding pen of mulch will be kept on site and used to heel in ill-sited plants until they can be replanted in more suitable spaces.

Mulch will be kept at a depth of one-to-three inches in all areas, no more and no less will be used. Mulch will not be placed against the crowns of trees or shrubs. A well-weeded and mulched tree ring will be maintained around trees to prevent string-trimmer and mower damage.

Hopefully, these specs will somehow find their way into general use. Then the day will arrive when money and plant material are being used wisely and well.