

CHANGING the LANDSCAPE

Healthy Yards = Healthy People

SUMMER
2021



Photo Credit: Chris Couill

PROJECT TEAM STEPS UP COMMUNITY OUTREACH EFFORTS

Between tornado warnings, storm damage, coronavirus confusion, and the long-awaited return to in-person gatherings, it has been difficult to get the attention of Princeton residents and landscapers this summer on the complex issue of sustainable lawn care. But the Changing the Landscape team – on a mission to protect the health of residents, landscape workers and the local environment – stepped up its outreach activities in an effort to rise above the noise.

Project team members made numerous phone calls, sent additional emails and texts, created videos for social media, and even hit the streets to hand-deliver flyers promoting a free workshop for professional landscapers. They sent a survey to Princeton residents asking about their yards and landscaping practices. More than 100 people responded. And multiple meetings were held to bring landscapers and municipal policy makers together to share their views on potential ordinance changes.

As a result, the team was able to make progress on educating residents and landscapers about sustainable landscaping, although more needs to be done. There was strong attendance and participation during online programs as well as public presentations to the Princeton Council and the Princeton Environmental Commission. The resident survey prompted 72 people to sign up for regular emails containing tailored suggestions for incorporating more sustainable landscaping

practices on their properties. And nine signed a pledge to plant native plants in their yards this year, some for the first time.

“Our goal is to shift people’s thinking toward healthier, more sustainable landscaping options,” says Jenny Ludmer, Community Outreach Manager, Sustainable Princeton. “But opening minds to change is a process that requires sustained effort.”

Change is a two-way street

“It’s clear from the feedback we’ve gotten that residents want these changes, but they must be willing to educate themselves about the impact they have on landscapers,” says Molly Jones, Executive Director, Sustainable Princeton.

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“Landscapers are also open to change, but they can’t be the ones to bear the burden financially. Residents and landscapers must work together to create phased-in ordinance amendments and other changes that are acceptable to both parties.”

One major issue for many landscapers is that not all landscape companies and independent contractors register with the municipality as they are required to do. This creates an uneven playing field, with some not operating by the same regulations as those registered, and thereby gaining an unfair price advantage over those that follow the rules, pay fair wages to their workers, and supply them with protective gear.

“We need to strengthen the registration requirements and bring all landscaping businesses above the table,” says Jones. “This will help improve worker safety and ensure fair pricing for all.”

Going forward, further communication and collaboration among all stakeholders will be key to the success of the Changing the Landscape project.

“Landscapers are willing and able to adapt, but they need to hear from their customers that this is what they want,” says Josh Perlsweig, Program Coordinator, Sustainable Princeton. “Small landscaping companies are not in a position to risk change unless they get a signal from customers.”

“We must stay committed to hearing all voices and keeping the historically excluded voices elevated,” adds Christine Symington, Program Director, Sustainable Princeton. “While we may not agree on everything, we can still make meaningful progress on the issues where we do agree.”

Funding the transition

Another critical next step is to explore sources of funding to help small- and medium-sized landscape companies transition to electric battery-powered equipment. “There is an upfront cost of purchasing equipment,” says Symington. “Currently, there are no state or federal programs to support the transition financially, so members of the Changing the Landscape steering committee are actively working on investigating opportunities for a transition fund.”



TAMMY L. SANDS: LOOKING BEYOND THE GAS LEAF BLOWER

PEC chair shares her thoughts about sustainable landscaping efforts in Princeton



As a co-partner with Sustainable Princeton on the Changing the Landscape project, the Princeton Environmental Commission (PEC) has been a key player in promoting sustainable landscaping. In fact, its efforts go back many years. When a proposal to ban gas-powered leaf blowers failed 25

years ago, PEC began providing resources and guidance on a number of sustainable landscaping practices.

Tammy L. Sands, chair of PEC and steering committee member for Changing the Landscape, answers a few questions about current efforts to steer the town toward lawn care practices that are healthier for residents, landscape workers and the environment.

Q: In your opinion, how is the sustainable landscaping project going so far?

A: I think we've made great strides. We just started the Changing the Landscape effort at the end of 2020 and the fact that we've already gotten to the ordinance revision process – with input from people who are not typically heard – is fantastic. But I want to emphasize that this is really a first step. This project is not just about banning or restricting the use of gas leaf blowers. It's about a broader effort to promote and establish sustainable landscaping practices in Princeton. During the next two years, we will be working on a new, comprehensive ordinance covering other sustainable landscaping practices – things such as planting native species, using integrative pest management to support the elimination of toxic sprays, phasing out other gas-powered equipment, and preventing the destruction of certain trees that are effective at absorbing stormwater runoff in Princeton.

Q: What has brought this effort to the forefront now? What's different from 25 years ago?

A: The cultural and political environment is completely different, of course. We have more

knowledge about the harmful effects of excessive noise, pollution and harmful substances, and the realities of climate change have become apparent. A big driver now, though, is the fact that the pandemic forced many people to work and attend school at home. As a result, they have become much more aware of the incessant noise and disruptive effects of loud, gas-powered leaf blowers and other lawn equipment. Last December, there was a public outcry about the ill effects of gas leaf blowers at the most widely attended PEC meeting in its history!

Q: What steps have been taken to build consensus on current ordinance amendments?

A: Sustainable Princeton and the Changing the Landscape team have conducted extensive outreach and education with landscape workers, owners of landscape companies, and property owners. We've also had several meetings where we encouraged conversations between the mayor and other municipal officials, landscapers, and key stakeholders. We felt it was important that any ordinance amendments PEC recommends to Council are shaped by multiple, diverse voices, and specifically those most adversely affected.

Out of these discussions came the realization that we need to strengthen our existing ordinances as a first step. We already have ordinances regulating such things as excessive noise and landscaper registration policies, but they are not enforced. PEC has also created guidance documents on things like fall leaf management and the handling of invasive species, and provides links to other applicable resources on its website. But we've learned that guidelines and resources are only effective if they are implemented. And ordinances are meaningless if they are not enforced.

Providing the necessary education, support and resources for proper ordinance adherence must be a priority. The rules (and any fines levied for breaking them) must also be fair, reasonable, and should apply equally to both landscape company owners and property owners, including municipally owned properties. Landscapers should not shoulder all the responsibility when, oftentimes, they are simply doing what the property owners want. We all have a responsibility to follow the rules if we are doing our own lawn care, and to make sure that we hire only registered landscapers who follow the rules.

Q: What is the timeline for the proposed ordinance changes?

A: We hope to have the ordinance amendments introduced at Princeton Council this fall. This will be followed by a period of public comment and a public hearing. If the amendments are approved, they are likely to take effect on January 1, 2022. In the meantime, all community members are encouraged to weigh in, including landscapers who work in Princeton.

Q: What is your ultimate wish for sustainable landscaping in Princeton?

A: Our goal is not to just replace every gas-powered leaf blower with an electric one. In an ideal world, people would think beyond the traditional manicured lawn and view their properties as ecosystems. They would welcome pollinators with native plants and prevent runoff and soil erosion by turning sections of a large lawn into a meadow or rain garden, for instance. And they would keep at least some of their leaves on the lawn as nutrients for the soil. These practices might even encourage people to connect more with the natural world. This will take years of education about the many benefits of sustainable landscaping practices. It won't happen overnight, and our work won't be done when this one-year project is over. But we are making progress.

LANDSCAPERS INVITED TO FREE WORKSHOP

On August 24, a group of Princeton landscape professionals gathered at Community Park School to learn more about how sustainable landscaping practices, including the switch to electric equipment, can help protect the health of workers, families and the environment by eliminating toxic exhaust and dramatically reducing noise levels.

Presentations at the event covered the benefits of going electric, as well as electric battery maintenance, troubleshooting and charging procedures. One session also provided tips on how commercial landscapers can remain profitable and successful as they transition to electric equipment and more sustainable lawn care.

The workshop was hosted jointly by Sustainable Princeton, Quiet Communities, Unidad Latina en Acción NJ, and the American Green Zone Alliance (AGZA), a national organization committed to sustainable land care and improving working conditions for landscape workers. Interpreters offered real-time Spanish and American Sign Language translation to make the workshop more accessible to those who requested it.

Participants were provided with lunch, cash stipends, and hands-on demonstrations of commercial-grade electric equipment by sales representatives from several major brands. Three lucky attendees won electric leaf blowers of their own in a drawing at the event.

In our Fall update, we will include more photos from the workshop and share some thoughts and reactions from participants.



above: Raffle winner Vito Rossi from Vito Rossi Landscaping shows off his new electric leaf blower at the AGZA workshop.



above: Sales representatives from several major brands demonstrate their electric lawn equipment at a workshop for professional landscapers.

Photo Credit: Jairo Palomo, ULA

FOCUS: LANDSCAPE WORKER HEALTH & SAFETY

Concern about the health and safety of landscape workers has been front-and-center from the beginning of the Changing the Landscape project. Steering committee members discuss it at each monthly meeting, exploring ways to promote the use of protective gear such as masks, gloves, and hearing protection. They are also studying how a switch to electric equipment and other sustainable landscaping practices might reduce or eliminate worker risks.

“Landscapers working in traditional lawn care are subject to a number of health and safety risks,” notes Betsy Marshall, PhD, an environmental and occupational epidemiologist with the Rutgers School of Public Health and a steering committee member. “These risks include hearing loss and other chronic diseases associated with excessive noise, injuries related to the use of heavy equipment, and exposure to chemical pesticides, gasoline, sun, heat, and certain types of plants.”

During focus groups with landscape workers, they have voiced fears about the adverse effects their exposure to excessive noise and the handling of gasoline and toxic chemicals is having on their health. Some landscape company owners do provide safety training and protective gear, but others do not, they say, leaving workers at risk.

What makes gasoline-powered equipment so much more hazardous to landscape workers than average homeowners who take care of their own lawns is the duration of exposure, Marshall explains. For the homeowner, the exposure might be a couple of hours a week, but for landscape workers, it’s all day, five to six days a week.

“Many of the risks can be managed successfully with safety training, appropriate equipment, and safe practices,” says Marshall. “The good news is that changing to more sustainable practices should also reduce risks for landscape workers.”

James Lomonte, an intern with the Changing the Landscape project, is studying that premise for one of the projects he is conducting as a Master of Public Health candidate at the Rutgers University School of Public Health.

“One of my efforts is to estimate the potential negative health impacts from air pollution and excessive noise produced by the gasoline-powered equipment used daily by landscape workers in Princeton,” says Lomonte. “We are comparing these impacts to similar machines powered by electricity and developing a health assessment.”

Lomonte adds that he and Marshall are working in collaboration with Princeton community members, lawn care workers, and undergraduate and graduate students from Princeton University’s CAPERS (Climate Action Plan Emission Reduction Strategies) team. CAPERS helps conduct research into the environmental actions outlined in Princeton’s Climate Action Plan.



THOUGHTS FROM OUR COMMUNITY LEADERS

“Our goal is to balance ways to address noise pollution with ways to make the process of landscaping healthier, while also protecting jobs.”

Princeton Mayor Mark Freda

“This partnership has become a model for Princeton and other nearby cities. It really embodies community work. In various ways, our organizations have come together to work on environmental issues, which probably wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for this project. It is a healthy partnership, where we give voice to the landscape workers, the landscape company owners, and residents, who can further educate themselves and their neighbors about the issues involved. We hope to continue our efforts for the health and safety of our residents and our workers.”

Ana Paola-Pazmiño, Executive Director, Unidad Latina en Acción NJ

FROM LANDING STRIP TO LASAGNA GARDEN

Princeton resident Gay Bitter took what she calls “a large landing strip” between the sidewalk and road in front of her house and transformed it into her first “lasagna garden.” And no, a lasagna garden has nothing to do with growing the ingredients for lasagna. It refers to the “layers” one creates using this no-dig, no-till organic gardening method that results in rich soil with minimal work from the gardener. Gay plans to enlarge the native plant bed this fall using the same method. She says she was inspired when she joined the Hopewell, NJ Native Plant Swap Facebook group, where people share native plants and exchange ideas on native gardening.



above: Pictured here are three stages of creating a “lasagna garden” - first, layer with newspapers and leaves to kill the grass and form the bed, then add soil, and finally plant with (preferably) native plants.

IN THE NEWS

- An article about the Changing the Landscape project was published in the August 2021 issue of *Princeton Perspectives*. You can read it at: <https://princetonperspectives.com>
- *Town Topics* reported on the sustainable landscaping presentation that was given at the Princeton Council meeting on June 28. <https://bit.ly/TownTopics6-30-21>

PROJECT PARTNERS



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