



SEEDS OF SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPING ARE SPROUTING IN PRINCETON

Like many towns throughout the country, Princeton has its share of residents eager to ban noisy, polluting gas-powered leaf blowers and other lawn maintenance equipment. It is also home to numerous landscape company owners and workers whose livelihoods depend on this equipment, and who see it as a necessary tool to satisfy customers in search of a perfect lawn.

Is it too idealistic to think that Princeton can bring the two groups together as partners to work toward a mutually agreeable solution? A dedicated coalition of people in Princeton doesn't think so and is well on its way to proving it.

Backed by a one-year grant, Sustainable Princeton is coordinating a project team whose mission is to work with Princeton residents and the landscaping community to adopt practices that protect the health of both landscape workers and the local environment. The project – called Changing the Landscape: Healthy Yards = Healthy People – goes beyond a focus on leaf blowers, aiming to encourage a variety of sustainable landscaping practices.

The project team includes co-partners Sustainable Princeton and the Princeton Environmental Commission, along with Unidad Latina en Acción NJ, the Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Quiet Princeton, Rutgers School of Public Health, the Rutgers Environmental Stewards program, and several Municipality

of Princeton departments and commissions, including Human Services, the Board of Health, and the Civil Rights Commission.

When team members embarked on this journey, they knew they were pioneers in this collaborative approach. In fact, their primary funder, Partners for Places, awarded them the grant for that very reason, explains Christine Symington, Program Director, Sustainable Princeton. It's much simpler to pass ordinances and ban gas-powered equipment with little consideration for the consequences. It takes more thought – and effort – to explore all sides of this complex issue and consider not only the health and environmental benefits, but the financial consequences as well.

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Voicing Concerns

Despite enthusiasm for a perfect solution, the concerns, especially from the landscaping community, are real and must be addressed. During focus group meetings, landscape company owners and workers voiced their fears – most notably, that new policies and ordinances would unfairly target them and their ability to make a living. Electric equipment, they say, is more expensive and less powerful, which will likely increase labor costs because jobs will take longer. They are skeptical about residents' willingness to pay more for their services.

And yet, many workers also expressed concern that the fumes and noise produced by gas-powered equipment negatively impact their own health. "Not all companies protect us," said one worker. "We should be wearing masks and gloves. When we work with gas, every time we breathe, we are polluting ourselves."

Exploring Options

The Changing the Landscape project team is researching the comparative costs and efficiencies of various equipment options. They are also exploring funding options to help landscapers switch over to electric battery-powered equipment. One thing they've discovered is that while there may be significant upfront costs to investing in electric landscaping equipment, there are also savings to be realized in reduced fuel costs and different approaches to yard maintenance.



"We are all in this together – Princeton residents, the city, the workers, the landscape company owners," says Ana Paola-Pazmiño, Project Coordinator, Unidad Latina en Acción NJ. "We can all learn from each other. Together, we can build a sustainable landscaping practice for our city."

And there is optimism, including among the landscaping community. As one focus group participant said so passionately, "Having a better planet is a matter for everyone. Although we may come from other countries, if we live and work here, this is our home. We can do things together. Through our work, we know about the ecosystem and sometimes we can even teach and motivate residents to do things differently, instead of having laws to make us do it."



ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO DATE

The seeds of the Changing the Landscape project were planted when the grant was awarded in late 2020. Nurtured by the work of its Steering Committee over the past few months, results are beginning to emerge. To date, project partners have:

- Put together an impressive team of diverse stakeholders to work on the project
- Agreed on a set of Guiding Principles and Operating Procedures that ensure equity practices throughout
- Conducted monthly Steering Committee meetings to share information and plan activities
- Surveyed Princeton landscapers about their views, concerns and current landscaping practices
- Conducted research into the landscaping market, the health impacts of current practices, and the public policy issues involved
- Hosted several public webinars (with Spanish translation) to educate and update residents about sustainable landscaping and the project itself
- Created a survey that will go out to Princeton residents
- Conducted focus groups and workshops with landscapers to encourage them to share their ideas and concerns, and to discuss sustainable landscaping practices
- Began benchmarking with other towns and cities on sustainable landscaping policies and electric-powered equipment procurement requirements
- Drafted community outreach and public communication strategy plans to help ensure the project's success



NEXT STEPS

Keeping up the momentum, Changing the Landscape is currently working to:

- Get property owners to see their yards as part of a connected ecosystem
- Encourage the Princeton community to see landscape company owners and crew members as necessary and equal partners in change
- Achieve buy-in from the landscaping community to adopt more sustainable practices
- Continue listening to both landscapers and residents to find a path forward that merges the views of both groups
- Articulate a clear plan of action
- Develop educational materials on sustainable landscaping for residents, landscapers and property managers
- Co-host a workshop with the American Green Zone Alliance, a national organization committed to improving quality of life for communities, working conditions for landscape operators, and best practices for the landscape maintenance industry
- Host additional educational events for landscapers and residents
- Consider all approaches in helping to develop an ordinance that would phase out gas-powered landscaping equipment

THOUGHTS FROM THE PROJECT TEAM...

"This is really a paradigm shift, where we are considering how to sustain the health of the people who do our landscaping work as well as the health of our environment. It requires everyone thinking about the practices they use on their own properties and moving toward something healthier. If we each do our part, we can have a 'quiet' revolution, literally."

Eve Niedergang, Councilmember,
Princeton Council



"Powerful leaf blowers and other gasoline-powered lawn maintenance equipment have enabled the creation of 'plastic' landscaping, with artificially bare lawns and lifeless mulch beds, which are neither natural-looking nor appealing to birds, bees and butterflies. But change is possible. Homeowners can talk to their landscapers about steps they can take right now that will reduce noise and particulate pollution, and protect landscape workers. The birds, the bees, your neighbors and the planet will thank you."

Anthony Lunn, Co-founder, Quiet Princeton

"There are major benefits to going 'eco.' We invested in all new, electric-powered equipment for our landscaping company this year. Taking care of the environment is everyone's responsibility. We have children, and we want to pass on a healthy planet."

Edgar & Kim González,
Owners, Green Life Lawn
Maintenance, Hamilton
Township, NJ

"We've worked with a number of communities on eliminating fossil-fuel-powered landscaping equipment, and Princeton is the first one that has taken a comprehensive, community-first approach by involving landscapers as well as residents in the discussion. This is really the right way that things should be done to create change."

Dan Mabe, Founder, American
Green Zone Alliance (AGZA)

"You can do so much in your own yard. Look around your property and consider the options - maybe you can add native plants, a rain garden, a meadow, or groundcover plants to your lawn. You might not have much influence elsewhere, but you do have it in your yard, so use it!"

Jenny Ludmer, Community
Outreach Manager,
Sustainable Princeton



above: Sustainable Princeton's Jenny Ludmer educating a resident on what they can do to encourage more sustainable landscaping at their home.

MINI-EXPO HIGHLIGHTS BEST LANDSCAPING PRACTICES

On April 24, in the courtyard of the Princeton Shopping Center, approximately 150 people gathered for a Sustainable Landscaping Mini-Expo to learn more about electric- and battery-powered landscaping equipment, native plants, proper mulching, and organic lawn care techniques. The event was hosted by Sustainable Princeton, with displays from local individuals and organizations, including Quiet Princeton, the Watershed Institute, D & R Greenway, the Shade Tree Commission, and Judith Robinson, a native plant garden designer.



above: Residents shared their experiences of owning electric lawn care equipment at the Sustainable Landscaping Mini-Expo.



above: Tony Lunn of Quiet Princeton explains sustainable landscaping practices at the Mini-Expo, which was held at the Princeton Shopping Center.

Will Princeton Ban Gas-Powered Landscaping Equipment?

While hundreds of municipalities throughout the country have already banned gas-powered leaf blowers, Princeton is taking a slower, more collaborative approach and learning from others' experiences. By bringing both residents and landscapers to the table, they're confident that they can devise a fair and socially just solution that doesn't disadvantage one group over the other.

"Whatever we do, we want it to be successful," says Eve Niedergang, Councilmember, Princeton Council. "We'll never get 100 percent agreement, but we want all voices to be heard and all concerns to be addressed. That may not be the speediest way to do it, but we think it's important to do it right."

Based on input from homeowners and landscapers, along with information collected by the Princeton Environmental Commission (PEC), a proposed ordinance will be drafted, introduced to the Mayor and Council, and then presented to the community for public comment, according to Tammy Sands, PEC Chair. "We want to choose what works best for Princeton," she says. "It's an educational process. We are communicating with all stakeholders to really hear what the concerns are and what impact the proposed solutions will have."

Any gas-powered equipment ban is likely to be phased in, to minimize its impact on homeowners and landscapers, Niedergang adds.

In addition to attending an upcoming public hearing, people can express their opinions about sustainable landscaping policy issues in Princeton by contacting the Princeton Council or the Princeton Environmental Commission.

FRAN & WILL PRICE: SUSTAINABLE YARD VISIONARIES

If Shakespeare were promoting sustainable landscaping in Princeton, he might begin by asking, “How dost thou gaze upon the dandelion?” And it would be a good start to a larger discussion – one that Fran Price, Princeton resident and passionate sustainable caretaker of her own small yard, believes we need to have if we are to preserve and nurture our local ecosystem.

“We need to change our mindset about plants like the dandelion,” she says. “Is it a weed or food? Dandelions have an important role to play in our ecosystem. Though not native, they provide a good source of nutrition for birds and pollinators early in the spring when food is still relatively scarce. By contrast, manicured lawns provide very little nutrition for most wildlife.”

Just three years into establishing a sustainable yard on their one-eighth of an acre, Fran says she and husband Will are still in the beginning stages. It takes time, patience, and a certain tolerance for disorder, she explains.

“It’s a different aesthetic. Things will not always look perfect, and your neighbors may raise an eyebrow now and then, but the bugs and birds will appreciate it. Birds love flowers after they go to seed, and we love watching the whole process and seeing the diversity of pollinators we attract. They call it ‘rewilding’ in the UK, which is a great term for it. When you let even small patches of your yard grow wild, you would be amazed at what kinds of insects, birds and mammals come back.”

Fran and Will’s yard is a mix of raised flower and vegetable beds, a few trees, some shrubs, and a small meadow that Will has been seeding with wildflowers and typically mows once a year. They grow grapes near the front porch, in addition to blueberries and blackberries, all mostly for the birds.

Thinking of converting a section of your lawn to meadow this summer? Fran has a tip for those starting out. To first clear the area of grass and unwanted plants, put down a few layers of cardboard and top it off with six inches of soil. You can plant in the soil, the cardboard will decompose, and the grass will die off. It’s less labor intensive than rototilling and better for the environment than using chemicals to kill the grass.



above: Will and Fran Price’s front yard meadow in Princeton, NJ

“We did some rototilling to establish our meadow,” Fran admits, “but in hindsight, I would have used the method described above.”

With the time saved, and free from the din of leaf blowers and mowers, you just might find yourself sitting in the yard more often, listening to the sounds of nature, and contemplating a few Shakespearean sonnets.

(Fran & Will Price bring a passion for sustainability to all aspects of their lives. In addition to their yard, their house is completely sustainable. They met in graduate school and have spent their careers protecting and improving forests around the world – he currently as President of the Pinchot Institute for Conservation, and she as an 18-year veteran of The Nature Conservancy and, more recently, as Global Forest Lead at World Wildlife Fund International.)

TOOLBOOK FOR SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPING CONVERSATIONS

Discussion points for
you to share with your
landscaper

GO NATIVE. Beauty and fitness wrapped up into one.



☐ **I want to add native plants to my property.** Native plants filter water, attract butterflies, and reduce the need for fertilizers.



☐ **I want to remove invasive plants from my property.** Invasive plants outcompete native species and create “food deserts” for local birds.

PLANT A TREE. Add a native tree and you'll get so many benefits for free.



☐ **I want to plant a native tree or bush.** Check Princeton's Native Tree list and avoid trees and bushes on the Do Not Plant list.



☐ **I don't want mulch volcanoes.** To prevent rot, mulch should not be piled up like a volcano. It should be spread around a tree like a donut.



☐ **I want to leave my leaves.** Instead of piling them by the curb, create a compost pile, use them as mulch, or mulch them with a mower.

GREEN YOUR LAWN. Your yard is a part of the local ecosystem.



☐ **I want to reduce the use of fertilizers on my lawn.** Synthetic fertilizers contribute to algal blooms, threaten wildlife, and pose a health risk to workers.



☐ **I want to use more natural products to treat my lawn.** Compost reduces fertilizer run-off and feeds plants naturally.



☐ **I want to support a healthy & sustainable lawn.** For example, mow at 3-4", overseed, and water both infrequently & deeply.

SOAK UP SOME STORMWATER. Don't let it wash away.



☐ **I want to investigate a rain garden.** A shallow depression with native plants can add beauty and filter stormwater.

☐ **I want to capture water.** Use a rain barrel or downspout planters to collect water for use on lawns or cars.

☐ **I want to explore permeable options.** Use gravel or pervious pavement for driveways or sidewalks.

CONSIDER EQUIPMENT ALTERNATIVES. So we can all breathe a little easier.



☐ **I want to discuss electric options.** Battery-powered machines are quieter, reduce air pollution, and improve conditions for lawn workers.

☐ **Can we skip the blower?** To protect your health and mine, let's grind our leaves with a mulching mower, rake them, or just leave them.

☐ **I want to convert some lawn to a meadow.** A field of native flowers reduces mowing, soaks up water, and attracts pollinators.

Questions to ask your landscaper:

- ☐ Do your workers use gloves, masks, goggles, and ear protection? Please protect them.
- ☐ Are you registered with the Municipality? All landscapers are required to register.

Find resources and additional information about each of these actions.
www.sustainableprinceton.org/yard/

PROJECT PARTNERS



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