

Sustainable Urban Gardening

by Catherine McKeon

Growing native plant species in your garden is automatically sustainable because of the natural relationship already in place between such plants, insects and bird populations. Each region of the world has specific native plants which neither threaten nor exhaust the productivity of a garden whether it is naturally growing on an undeveloped site or in an urban backyard.

When you use native plants you are participating in this sustainable system and it is the first step in achieving a self-sufficient garden of your own. There are of course other steps which should be taken to ensure a healthy sustainable garden. Along with growing native plants, a garden's ability to retain water, and conserve soil also promotes sustainability.

Retaining Water: Retaining as much water as possible in your garden is highly sustainable as it saves water and saves you time. Native plant species require less water in general but a truly healthy plant starts with rich soil that holds water instead of filtering it down below the roots of your plants.

- 1.) The first thing you can do requires only elbow grease in which you break up any compacted soil already placed in your window box, planter or backyard. This aerates your soil making it more permeable allowing water to get through.
- 2.) What retains water in this permeable well aerated soil are clay-type particles, storing water for longer periods of time. Sandy or more appropriately "dusty" soil does not hold water making it dry out quickly.
- 3.) Having rich soil which neither dries out nor holds in too much water is easy to achieve. Building your own organic compost or purchasing organic soil is the fastest way to begin growing a sustainable garden that requires low amounts of water.
- 4.) Watering at a gentle drizzle directed at the soil prevents evaporation and saves water.

So overall, water retaining, rich, organic, and clayey particles will keep your soil from drying out. The main benefit in a low water sustainable garden is that you are not watering your garden four or five times a week in fear that your parched plants will wilt and suffer.

Conserving Soil:

Imagine soil along a riverbank being swept away during a flash flood. It happens quickly and the cause for the soil loss and sediment deposition is clear. The loss of soil in an urban garden is a much slower process but the affects are the same. If the soil cannot support plants, there is no garden. Along a riverbank however, plants are what actually retain the soil, which is why the plants themselves are so important in these situations. In an urban garden, the quality of soil plays an important role in its own conservation.

Therefore keeping your urban garden or window box soil stable and healthy will give you the best chance of achieving sustainability and near self-sufficiency among your plants.

For your urban garden, a reliable way to retain soil is to use purely composted materials without any artificial plant boosters. While fertilizers and plant boosters may act as steroids for your plants, the additives tend to strip the soil of its nutrients resulting in soil that you must constantly attend to with more additives. This is not sustainable urban gardening. Loss of nutrients often results in soil being slowly blown away by passing breezes as the structure, and richness of it is lost.

Sounds a bit like the riverbank doesn't it? In this case it is wind-borne soil loss as opposed to water-borne soil loss!

The care for soil is connected back to using native plants. Native plants quite often, do not need extras and additives. They are natural survivors although it helps when they are planted in a familiar habitat without synthetic additives intended to boost their appearance. Soil for native plants requires care as in keeping it rich in nutrients and well aerated. With these structures in place, you will ultimately have hardier plants and greater nutritious value for the insects and birds which rely on these native plants for their survival.