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Science champions natural landscape design

By Durant Ashmore • May 26, 2010

In case you haven't noticed, the last four columns have all dealt with environmental issues. Today's column is the culmination of this series. I have saved the best for last.

The information in today's column comes from Rick Huffman, a landscape architect from Pickens. Rick is the owner of EarthDesign, a design/build landscape architectural firm, and he is the founder and president of the Native Plant Society. The Native Plant Society began as a regional association in 1996, and now has five chapters statewide. It is a nonprofit tax-exempt organization.

In his unpretentious and low-key manner, Rick has championed the cause of natural landscapes. Rick's entire philosophy is based on the ecological principles involved in developing sustainable plant communities.

Rick's designs are science-based. One of the first steps involved in his approach is to identify the type of plant community that he is dealing with. For instance, if he is designing a landscape for a subdivision that has been totally stripped bare of existing vegetation, he knows he is starting from the beginning with an early successional landscape.

He will install a design that depends heavily on plants that initially establish themselves in settings such as this and will produce a landscape that will in time evolve into a healthy and well-established environment.

Ideally, Rick can get involved in a project before it takes the drastic steps of clear-cutting and grading the soil down to red clay. If this is so, he may have a mid-successional or climax environment to work with. In this case, the communities of plants he designs for these areas will depend upon whatever developmental stage exists.

An example of one of Rick's designs can be readily seen here in the Golden Strip. Go by and look at Redfeam subdivision on Jonesville Road in Simpsonville. You will immediately be struck by its distinctiveness. When you view the layout of the

entryway at Redfeam, it will clearly illustrate this design style more effectively than any words I can put down here in this paper.

Although several of Rick's design projects, such as highway corridors, the National Forest Service, consultation with the city of Mauldin, etc., are done on a grand scale, his principles also apply to the everyday homeowner (like you!) who is reading this column.

The process Rick uses in his designs follows the same procedure that other designers use, but Rick brings a different perspective. He will start with a site analysis, such as determining which areas should be screened for privacy, which areas are public, which areas should be shaded, etc.

One of the first steps is to study the hydrology of the site. How is drainage to be handled? Is a rain garden or a bog garden appropriate? Should rainwater be collected and used for irrigation? The answer to these questions determines which plant communities Rick chooses to use as the palette for his design.

Pretend you are a homeowner who is part of a 200-unit, Bermuda lawn-clad subdivision. The subdivision drains through your backyard, and power lines mar your serenity when you are on your back porch. The 10 hollies and hawthorns that adorn your front foundation are what Rick refers to as the "foundation moustache."

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Rick would treat your drainage swale as its own ecosystem. He would plant plants that would withstand rushing water, while perhaps creating distinct areas that may collect a little water and thrive from the moisture. Communities of native plants would create interest and beauty.

The power lines could be screened with red cedar and sweetbay magnolia. The "moustache" would be removed and replaced with native plants, such as clethra and itea, or rhododendron, leucothoe, mountain laurel and native azaleas if there is enough shade.

The Bermuda lawn would be reduced to a ribbon connecting various points in the landscape. The outer informal areas of the yard would become beds for native plants such as beautyberry and butterfly weed. Wildlife would become an integral part of this landscape. An example of a residential design such as this can be seen at the Upstate Forever office at 505 Pettigru St., Greenville.

Subdivision yards designed in this manner would require much less maintenance, require fewer pesticides and use less water. It's a science-based philosophy. It's the science of letting plant communities do what they do best, and have been doing for the past several million years.

If you want to know more about Rick Huffman, you can contact him at www.earthdesignsc.com or the Native Plant Society at www.SCNPS.org.

Columnist Durant Ashmore, MLA, of Fountain Inn, can be contacted at 864-243-3446 or at durantashmore@aol.com.

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