Landscaping on the New Frontier

Schultz, Bettina, Varga, William A., Morrison, Darrel G., Kjelgren, Roger K., Meyer, Susan E.

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Big skies filled with dramatic clouds and magnificent sunsets....vast expanses of dry desert, monumental mountains, fantastic red rock formations and canyonlands that fade into a purple and blue infinity.... meandering streams lined with red osier dogwoods, willows and cottonwoods that turn brilliant red and yellow in the fall.... dry mountainsides blanketeted with golden grasses, silver-green rabbitbrush and sage, dark dots of pinyon pine and juniper drifting down their steep faces; dense, dark spires of white fir covering north-facing slopes and cascading down drainage ways.... groves of gambel oaks with twisted trunks and branches blanketing lower slopes; October mountainsides seemingly on fire with the flame-like foliage of masses of bigtooth maples that trail down ravines; ancient groves of cinnamon-barked mountain mahogany; multitudes of quaking aspen with luminous golden leaves fluttering in the fall breezes; undulating mountain meadows richly patterned with a tapestry of grasses and sedges with sprinkles of the jewel-like colors of wildflowers drifting through them.

All of these are memorable images of the Intermountain West. It is a rich and varied landscape, one that attracts visitors from all over the world and has attracted a parade of settlers over the past century and a half who came to live, work, and play in this magnificent landscape. Ironically, in the areas where these settlers “settled”—where they built their homes, schools, churches, business places, and even their city parks—they replaced the richly diverse, distinctive native landscape with one that has its aesthetic roots in England or the eastern United States. This “new” landscape has been one of green lawns, clipped hedges and shrubs, imported shade trees, and beds of dark green “ground cover.”

The demise of the native landscapes in the urbanizing Intermountain West is an understandable phenomenon. Nostalgia plays a role; we take comfort in bringing something from our past when we settle in a new and strange place. This familiarity also means we know how to manage the imported landscape, even if that management requires substantial inputs such as fertilizer, fossil fuel, and water in order to make the landscape acceptable. People do love the
wild, native landscape as a place of retreat and even solace, but they’ve never been shown how to experience it “up close and comfortable” in their daily lives. They have somehow been led to believe that they should control nature and the native landscape, that they should “improve” on nature. This feeling is stimulated by social pressure (“Whose lawn is the greenest, the most weed free?”) and is reinforced by powerful advertising that promotes a standardized, generic landscape all across the country.

This standardization brings with it a number of costs. There are, first, the direct, out-of-pocket economic costs: the resources necessary to create and maintain a lawn, for example, feeding and irrigating the turf to make it grow in an environment very different from the moist environments of England or the northeastern states, then expending energy to regularly cut that turf to a short, uniform, “neat” height, once it has grown. There are environmental costs as well: drawing on increasingly limited water supplies that might better be used for drinking and for food production, using supplemental nutrients that can later become pollutants to support lawns and introduced ornamental plant species, using fossil fuels to mow vast areas of lawns, to clip hedges, and even to blow fallen leaves from one place to another.

But perhaps the biggest costs lie in the ultimate impoverishment of the landscape: the systematic replacement of a biologically rich tapestry of adapted native vegetation with a very simplified and species-poor landscape of plants from other places. Along with the diminution of plant species that occurs in this process, there is a parallel loss of richness from other living things—songbirds, and butterflies and bees, for example. And from our standpoint as living human beings, there is an experiential, aesthetic impoverishment that accompanies this ecological impoverishment. If the designed-and-managed landscape looks essentially the same wherever we are, we lose our sense of place, of knowing where we are. When we homogenize the human-dominated landscape everywhere, “there is no ‘there’ there,” to use the words of Gertrude Stein.

The winds of change are blowing, however, here in the Intermountain West. This is stimulated in part by a growing recognition of the need to conserve water. Existing or potential water shortages associated with an expanding human population, combined with the possibility of increasingly frequent years of low rainfall,
raise serious questions about the flagrant use of water to support an English-inspired landscape (average annual precipitation of thirty to forty inches) in a region with an average annual precipitation of only ten to fifteen inches.

The winds of change are blowing too, with people’s increasing awareness that there are positive alternatives to long-practiced landscape habits. To further that awareness, it is our intent in this book to make it very clear that it is possible to design and manage landscapes that are experientially rich for their occupants, ecologically and environmentally sound, and aesthetically pleasing. We want to show that it is possible to distill the aesthetic qualities of the richly diverse native landscapes of the Intermountain West and incorporate them into our designed landscapes, landscapes that will restore the sense of place that has been too widely eradicated.

In this book, you will learn how to use natural landscapes to inspire your designed landscapes—how to translate the spatial structure and plant community patterns of the natural landscapes of the Intermountain West into landscape designs that celebrate its difference. We’ll show you examples of what some people have already done to convert traditionally-designed landscapes into alternatives that are more expressive of the place, and at the same time more experientially rewarding. And we will discuss an approach to irrigation that
minimizes the use of supplemental water, yet ensures the survival of plants during unusually dry periods. Thus you will learn how to combine ecological principles with design principles to create beautiful, low-maintenance landscapes that require only minimal resources.

The West, including the Intermountain West, is a region where rugged individualism has been valued, from early explorers like Lewis and Clark, who traveled here two centuries ago, to the pioneers who came westward in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to those who are still arriving in the early years of the twenty-first century. Perhaps it is time for a new kind of pioneering to take place in our approach to the landscapes we create for ourselves. Rather than continuing to mimic or imitate the English landscape in our settlement, and spend substantial resources for maintenance, maybe it’s time to celebrate the unique attributes of the West, to advance a landscape aesthetic that is of the place, in both its ruggedness and its subtleties. The starting point, the inspiration, lies in the natural landscape itself. It lies in the rich array of plants, the patterns and the process: on the mountainsides, in the deserts, salt flats and canyons, in the valleys and along the meandering streams.