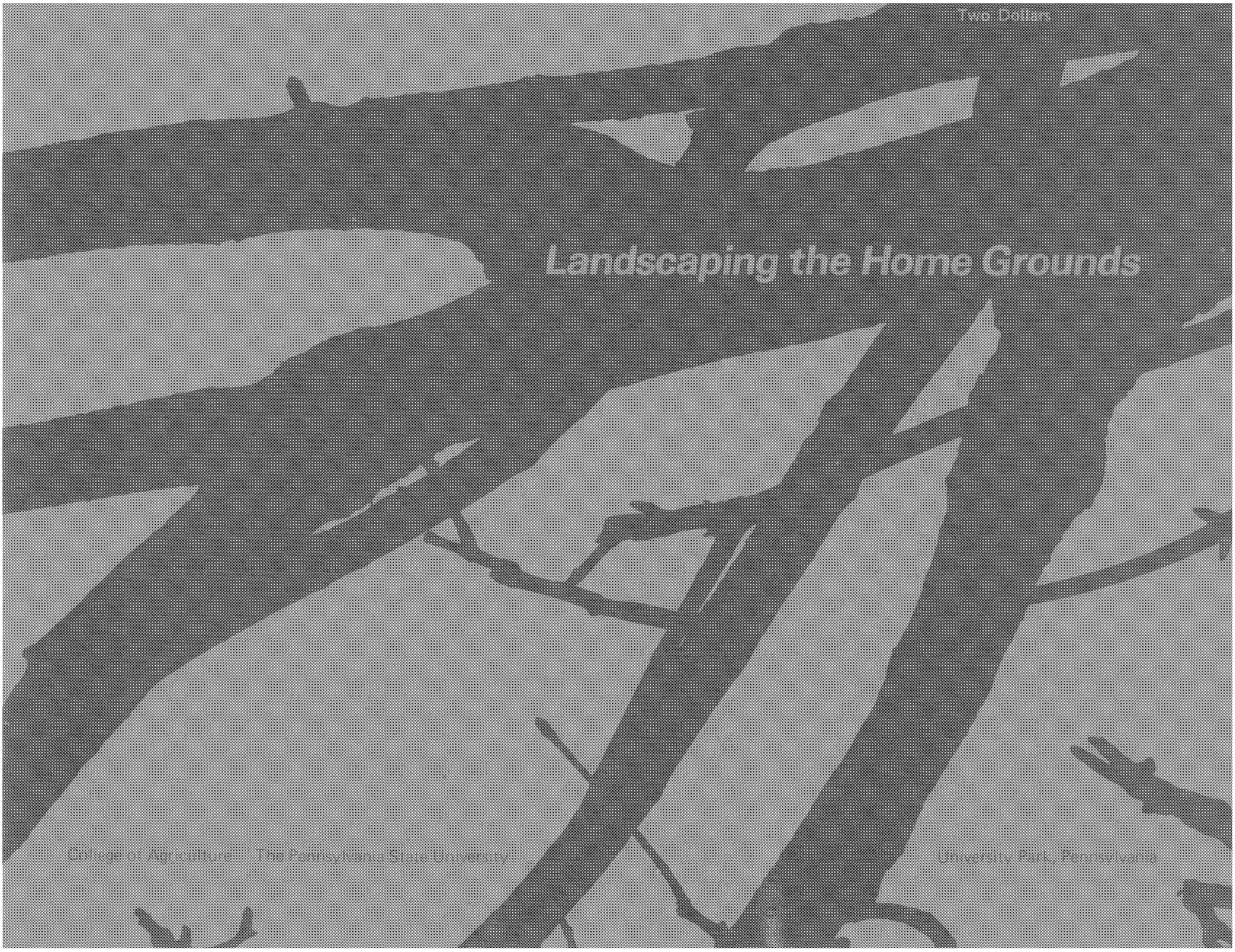
Two Dollars

Landscaping the Home Grounds



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Landscaping the home grounds plays an important part in man's environment. The concept of outdoor living has extended from suburbia to the rural environment where open space abounds.

Today, unfortunately, many homes are landscaped more for benefit of the passerby than for enjoyment and comfort of the homeowner and his family. As a homeowner, you can utilize the potentials of your lot to a much greater advantage simply by striving for three primary objectives of good contemporary landscaping--increased beauty, increased use, and increased value.

Most homes differ considerably in the physical features of the lot, structural features of the home, and orientation of the home to sun and wind. Since these differences do exist, there are no common arrangements or planting plans that fit all homes. Likewise, there may be several different solutions to landscaping any particular home. Because so many considerations enter into the development of a landscape plan, there are few rules to follow. However, several important factors contribute to the success of any landscaping--whether it is planned for a suburban property, a country house, or a farm house.

Good landscaping is an art of shaping spaces and a blending of family needs, physical features, and existing exposures into a functional design. All who are able to do so should employ a professional landscape architect or landscape nurseryman to plan and develop their home grounds. Some may prefer to have the planning done by an experienced designer but do the actual work themselves. Regardless of the procedure, good planning is essential in landscape development.

The purpose of this publication is to assist the homeowner with the development and improvement of his home grounds. One objective is to develop a greater sense of pride in home grounds and surroundings. This may be accomplished by making changes in the environment that will make it more beautiful, more useful, and more easily maintained. Another objective is to develop an even greater appreciation and love for natural beauty of country and to stimulate an interest in the planning of the broader environment that affects all our lives.

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Numbers appearing in parentheses in the text refer to the drawings.

Whether we are dealing with an existing house and property or we are selecting a house site and making plans accordingly, a survey of the factors affecting the use of the property begins the planning process.

Each property must be evaluated in terms of the proposed use and the existing conditions. If the uses intended to be made of a property were entirely incompatible with its physical characteristics, we must seek an alternative site or, through study of our requirements, set up a new series of use-requirements appropriate to the site. This making of value judgments will direct the development of the landscape plan. A plan is prepared on the basis of these value judgments and is appropriate even if it will not be carried out in its entirety for a long time to come.

The factors which affect the usefulness of a site for residential purposes can be grouped into three areas - community site factors, physical site factors, and family needs. In the development of home grounds, the ultimate result depends largely on the ability to exploit the natural advantages and qualities of the site. Each site presents its own particular opportunities and its own particular problems.

The design process is different when the house is in the "thinking stage" than when the house is already existing on the lot. If the house exists on the lot, the owner is committed to a set of circumstances which cannot be changed or manipulated. The lot owner planning to build has the freedom to locate the house to maximum advantage of the site.

The site itself often dictates certain design aspects such as the desirability of a split-level house plan, driveway location, the feasibility of a basement, and so forth. The orderly development of residential land depends upon the influences of external factors and upon regulations for land use and building requirements established by local governments.

Community site factors

Community site factors are considerations largely outside of the property itself, and usually are man-made. Even more significant, some of these factors may be changed.

Roads. Adequate, all-weather roads and streets are important to any homeowner. Any potential site should be examined with respect to the routes to and from employment, shopping, and so forth. Equally important is the feasibility of access to the house itself. Is direct access available and permissible? Sometimes a permit is required to open a driveway to a public road or street. Does the slope of the ground prevent a satisfactory entry road or driveway? Who will provide maintenance for this access? Who will plow the snow in the winter?

Facilities. The availability of community services, convenient shopping and schools, will, in many ways, determine the suitability of a particular property for a house. When you consider a proposed location for your home, ask yourself how far is it to a hospital or medical assistance, what kind of fire or police protection you can expect, and how will your children get to school.

Utilities. If it is impossible to provide a property with electricity or water, it is virtually useless as a homesite. If providing these utilities is feasible, but only at considerable cost, such a property is a potential homesite, but of less value than one which has immediate, inexpensive access to such utilities.

Similarly, the absence of a municipal sanitary sewer requires study of the feasibility and costs for on-site sewage disposal. The usefulness and cost of a site are normally proportionate because it costs money to install and provide such services.

Sometimes a particularly desirable location or a spectacular view may justify extra effort in acquiring necessary utilities, but in no case should a property be purchased without first studying the availability and costs of all utility installations.

Neighborhood. A thorough investigation of each of your possible future neighbors is hardly practical in the course of considering a property purchase. Some general observations can be made from the character and appearance of homes, their grounds, and the neighborhood.

Zoning and other controls. The community itself affects the value of land and how it may be used. Zoning may prescribe very specific requirements in the building of homes. Such requirements may protect your property investment and keep out nuisances or may be regarded as a handicap and restriction on the development of a particular property.

Through zoning regulations, the community can achieve orderly development with only compatible activities in association with each other, with acceptable population densities, with proper spacing of buildings for adequate light and air, and other useful purposes. Does your property have protection against the intrusion of an activity that would create noise, or odors, or block the view? Can your neighbor build a shack along your property line or keep pigs in his yard?

Sometimes where zoning does not exist or where additional controls seem desirable, a large property owner may establish regulations of his own as he sells off lots. As a condition of the sales contract, the buyer is obliged to accept these regulations. A violation of these regulations requires a civil suit to be brought by the injured party, whereas zoning is enforced by the local government.

Physical site factors

The physical site factors are the characteristics of a particular property which determine its usefulness for a given purpose. These are the natural characteristics of the property itself. Man cannot normally change these physical properties, although he may modify them to suit his needs.

Topography. The surface undulations of the land constitute the topography. Obviously a very steep slope requires different treatment than a very gentle slope. There are practical limits as to how steep a driveway, walk, or grass bank can be. There are many alternative solutions that can be considered in solving unusual property undulations.

Table 1. Maximum grades and slopes for various use areas

Use	Ratio (Horiz. to vert.)	Degree from horizontal
Entrance walk	10:1	5.7
Driveway	6.7:1	8.5
Ramps	5:1	11.3
Grass bank	3:1	18.6
Planted bank	2:1	26.6
Steps	1.5:1	33.6

Space. To park a car requires a certain amount of area; similarly, a tennis court requires a particular amount of space. For each use that we might wish to make of a property there are appropriate space requirements. Use of the property to serve these requirements is fixed by the actual physical dimensions of the property. If the space requirements which you anticipate exceed the amount that the property under consideration actually has, you will obviously have to find a larger property or adjust your space needs. Some increased efficiency may be possible under some conditions by using an area for more than one purpose if the uses do not interfere with each other.

View. The residential property is frequently developed in such a manner as to utilize an existing view, or a view that is artificially created. If the property has a view, then the direction of the view must be taken into account if its best use is to be made. If the off-site view is unattractive, an effort to avoid or to screen the view may be justified.

Drainage. In most parts of the country one can expect some rainfall. The provision for the discharge of surface run-off, water from roof gutters, and from adjoining properties must be provided. Drainage and particularly the interaction of water and soil can have great effect on the usefulness of a particular property. A building site should be examined for signs of poor drainage. Cracked dry soils, aquatic vegetation, water marks on structures, and puddles indicate drainage problems. Poor drainage does not necessarily eliminate a property as a building site, but it does require that the drainage problem be resolved in the development of the property. Similarly, the ability of the soil to absorb water and the depth of water table can adversely affect on-site sewage disposal systems.

Orientation. The relationship of a property to the sun is more important than is generally realized. The amount of heat gain or loss of a house depends directly on the exposure of window areas. Heating and air-conditioning costs can therefore be directly affected by a change in orientation of a building. Effective use of trees and shrubs will also depend upon the orientation.

Vegetation. Plants which exist on a site can tell us something about the orientation, the soil, and moisture, but they further serve to protect the

earth against erosion and may provide shade and shelter. A tree needs many years to reach mature size and to effect an improvement in the appearance and protection of a property. It makes sense, therefore, to make use of trees which exist on a property when possible. Wooded lots typically bring higher prices for this reason. At the same time, trees and shrubs which are improperly located can ruin future landscape development. Unless existing trees and shrubs can be incorporated into future development, they should be removed.

Climate. There is very little we can do to change the climate of a property. However, we can manipulate small portions of a property for control of extremes in climate. Special climatic factors will often govern the landscape design and plant materials used. For example, "sun traps" hold winter sun and protect against winter winds so that a terrace is useful during colder months. Conversely, a shade tree can make the terrace more useful during hot months. It is apparent that there is considerable difference in climate within a region and even on an individual homesite. These differences are caused by the topography, existing vegetation, and the surrounding structural features. In many cases, landscaping can be used to modify these features.

Family considerations

Family needs are important considerations in landscape planning. The size of the family, hobbies, and special interests of the homeowner may greatly influence the design of the landscape. A family with one or two small children may require an open play area for the location of a sand box and swing. However, as the children grow, the requirements change. A patio for cook-outs or an area for badminton may be essential. Mother might need an area for hanging clothes and dad an area for his vegetable garden. These needs and desires will be different for each family, and will change over the years. But they can be programmed and seriously considered with compromises worked out before the plan is made.

The following checklist can assist you in developing the program for your property improvement.

Socioeconomic patterns. List the kinds of activities and degrees of formality preferred for entertaining, family use, and recreation.

Budget. List budget considerations which will determine what development can be afforded and the realistic time schedule for its realization.

Time of season. List activities and considerations which will change the use of the property at different times of the day or year.

Optimal orientation of facilities. If certain facilities requiring particular location with respect to sun and wind are to be provided, the best orientation should be determined. Second best or third best may be listed if optimal orientation later proves not feasible.

Space requirements. List the area required for the various activities. This may suggest whether it is, in fact, possible to have all of the activities programmed on the property.

Access, storage of vehicles. Automobile and truck service and parking may require a great deal of space. Make a realistic estimate of the driveway and parking requirements for your property.

Utilities. Consider the various utilities and service desired. Combining your requirements with the site limitations will disclose the possible arrangements of the property.

Site analysis checklist

The checklist will assist you in identifying possible problem areas requiring special landscape attention. Most of the questions can be answered "yes" or "no." After answering each question write down alternative solutions to the problem if they exist. You may further expand on this checklist by adding landscape needs unique to your situation. To have a well-planned landscape, all site factors must be carefully evaluated before beginning to design the landscape.

Walks and drives

1. Does a walk or drive need to be constructed or altered for greater convenience and attractiveness?
2. Does the driveway permit sufficient off-street parking? Is a turnaround needed?
3. Is an access walk needed from the front of the house to the rear yard?

Existing vegetation

1. Are there bare areas in the lawn that need to be reseeded?
2. Do dandelions, plantain, and other common lawn weeds present a problem?
3. Does the entire lawn need renovation?
4. Are the existing trees and shrubs in good physi-

cal condition?
5. Can the existing trees and shrubs be utilized in the future landscape development?

Drainage
1. Does surface water puddle in areas of the yard?
2. Does the soil need modification before establishing trees, shrubs, or lawns?

Views
1. Is there a view you wish to accent?
2. Is there an unattractive off-site view you wish to screen from your property?

Family needs
1. Do you need a patio constructed in the rear yard?
2. Do you need trees to shade the patio?
3. Do you need open lawn area for recreation (badminton, horseshoes, tetherball, sandbox, swings, slide, or swimming pool)?
4. Do you need equipment storage?
5. Do you need an area for gardening (vegetables, flowers, fruit trees)?
6. Do you need an area for family pets?
7. Do you need an area for clotheslines?
8. Do you need boat or trailer storage?
9. Do you need trash storage?
10. Are sound buffers required in any special areas of the property?
11. Do you need an area screened for privacy?

Climatic conditions
1. Is drifting snow a problem?
2. Are windbreaks required in any special areas on the property?
3. Are there unusual climatic factors that should be considered before selecting plants for your landscape?

Topography
1. Are there any unusual terrain features that require wall or step construction?