



Urban Harvest

Growing gardens. Enriching lives.

## Don't Run Off

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Don't allow runoff, because your yard just might be contributing to the decay of Galveston Bay and surrounding bayous. That's right, your yard.

Runoff pollution is now recognized as the major form of water pollution damaging our bayous and bays. Runoff pollution is pollution that storm water picks up on its way to the bay. It includes everything from grease and oil in parking lots to garbage to pollution coming from your yard. That nice green lawn in your front yard is difficult to keep up. It requires constant doses of fertilizers and bug and weed killers. And if those chemicals are not used up in your lawn, they end up in the runoff and then in the bay. Excess fertilizers in bayous and bays result in fish kills every year because of over fertilization of the algae in the water. And pesticides are directly toxic to aquatic wildlife and can accumulate in the food chain and sometimes end up right back on your plate.

Keeping our lawns green is a lot of work. Our green suburban single-species lawns are not natural. We have to mow and fertilize constantly to keep them up. And the more we fertilize, the more we have to mow. And the more pesticides we put on our yards, the more out of balance the ecology gets, and the more pesticides we have to keep putting on our yards. Homeowners typically apply ten times the amount of pesticides to land, as does the typical farmer. This is not healthy for the homeowner or for the bayous where the runoff goes.

So what's a person to do? The answer is simple: work less! That's right, work less. Start by cutting back on lawn fertilizers and the amount of times you fertilize your lawn. Most lawns can get by with very little fertilization, often less than once a year, and still look pretty good. Mow the lawn as high as you can, and leave the clippings on the ground. The clippings are fertilizer, so leave them where they can do some good. Apply weed and bug killers only when you see a real problem. And water only when the grass starts to wilt. Over half of our municipal water supply in the summer is used strictly for watering lawns. This past summer saw rationing in several parts of Houston. What will we do when we have a real drought?

Reducing lawn care is really only the first step. If you really want to reduce your yard work (and your contribution to pollution), then reduce the amount of lawn that is in your landscape. Single species lawns are unsustainable in our region. Choose plants that are adapted to our area, that can take both a drought and a flood every other year and still look good. Native plants, or other adapted plants, don't require the fertilizers and pesticides that lawns do, and require very little water after the first year or two.

But don't these landscapes look like gravel and cactus gardens, or worse yet, like an overgrown jungle of weeds? Not at all. We have many, many beautiful plants to choose from in our region, such that a non-lawn landscape can look very lush. And these kinds of landscapes can look just as manicured as any other landscape, depending on what the homeowner wants.

Native groundcovers are a good substitute for grass. These are plants that spread out and cover a lot of ground. Some of them can be mowed occasionally, but most require little maintenance, other than perhaps some yearly weeding. Two excellent plants to consider are Palm Leaf Eupatorium and Zexmania. Start by planting just a few areas. You don't have to make the changeover all at once. Do 100 square feet this year, a few hundred square feet next year. In a few years you'll have little grass to maintain, and you can stop yard work in the summer. With these kinds of landscapes, you can do the yard work in the spring or the fall when it's much more enjoyable. There are also many hardy and beautiful shrubs and trees to choose from.

But aren't these landscapes illegal? Not really. Some subdivisions and municipalities still have outdated "weed" ordinances, but these are quickly being replaced by more enlightened measures. In most cases, just planting inside borders eliminates any problems of perception.

Watersmart landscapes are friendly on the landscape and friendly on the homeowner. In the long run, they cost much less than the typical lawn, and are much less work to maintain.

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