

## **Garden Update**

**Week of July 11, 2022**

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### **The Intersection of Landscape Design and Call Before You Dig**

The request to the 811 center was like many received—locate the utilities because the homeowner wished to DIY a new privacy fence. Once the utilities were marked, the homeowner began to dig holes for the uprights, thinking each flag marked where he SHOULD dig, instead of where he SHOULD NOT dig. After severing the utility in multiple places, a hefty fine, and costs to reinstate the utility, the homeowner came away with a new appreciation for all that goes on below the soil surface. He was lucky because none of the damaged lines affected people or property. Things could have been worse because what goes on below ground, overhead (think electrical lines), and nearby (houses, outbuildings) all impact the projects we undertake to have safe and beautiful outdoor space.

This story may cause you to shake your head, but the reason for sharing is to foster an understanding that many landscape dangers and mistakes are preventable. Failures at the functional level of landscape design include:

- Planting an evergreen that will grow or has grown to block the home's entrance (“Where’s the front door?!?”)
- Plants placed too close to utility boxes that may require excavation to service them, destroying valued trees and shrubs.
- Installation of raised beds around trees. (A good way to kill trees.)
- Planting grass on slopes too steep to mow safely.
- Retaining walls that fail because they were improperly built or too tall to withstand soil expansion.
- Not locating underground utilities before digging. (Nebraska811)
- Trees that grow into overhead electric lines because little care was given to how tall the tree species grows.
- Planting trees over septic lines, resulting in root invasion and back-up of flow through pipes.

Pretty and artistic outdoor spaces may seem the only focus of landscape design, but when I educate Nebraska Extension Master Gardeners on the topic, function is emphasized with a focus towards preventing costly landscape mistakes and holds equal importance to aesthetics. After all, what good is a beautiful landscape if rainfall causes soil erosion or standing water increases mosquito populations? No one plants a tree with the intention of having to remove it because it's dead or a hazard but opportunities to make corrections at the beginning when solutions are easier are too often ignored.

Implementing these cornerstones during planning and installation are hugely important to successful landscapes that will stand the test of time:

- Safety first.
- Landscape design is a problem-solving process, not a problem-creating process.
- Form follows function. Get the technical stuff right first before tackling the pretty.
- Right plant, right place.
- Call before you dig, Nebraska811.
- Enlist the help of a professional to answer questions and troubleshoot potential problems.