

Landscape New Year Resolutions

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It's the season for new year resolutions. Don't overlook making some for the landscape. There are many ways we can be better stewards of our outdoor environment to help with current and emerging environmental issues.

A good resolution would be to run automatic irrigation systems only when needed. Many are left on a set schedule and rarely turned off during summer. This is a waste of water as lawns do not need continuous watering. Water is a limited resource we need to conserve.

To assist with this goal, and better understand your irrigation system, consider doing an irrigation audit during the growing season. While these take a little time, they are simple to do. To help, the Extension office has audit kits to check out. Instructions are provided and I would be happy to answer questions before and after the audit. Give me a call at 402-563-4901 or email kfeehan2@unl.edu about the kits.

Another way to protect water resources is resolve to keep the pavement on or next to our property fairly clean. Important practices include sweeping grass clippings and fertilizer granules off of pavement and placing them on the lawn or other planted area.

If left on pavement, plant debris, soil and fertilizer granules are eventually carried to surface water by rainwater running into storm drains. Runoff pollution is the number one source of water pollution and leads to impaired rivers, streams and lakes. Don't forget to rake and recycle trees leaves in fall.

Make a resolution to positively identify plant problems and explore different ways to manage them before turning to a pesticide. After 41 years of visiting with people about plant problems, pesticides are very often used when not needed or at a time when they have no effect. This results in unnecessary applications that can harm the environment and beneficial arthropods, increase pesticide resistance in plants, and even lead to an increase in pest problems.

Many plant problems are not caused by a pest and so pesticides will not help solve the issue. A good majority of problems are due to poor plant selection and care, or environmental stress. When an insect or disease is present, the damage is often aesthetic only and does not cause long term harm to plants. Find the true cause of plant issues before applying pesticides. Nebraska Extension can help with diagnostics.

If you recently planted a shade tree, resolve to prune it correctly for structural stability. Good structure will help trees better withstand storm events. For structural pruning, start one to two years after planting and continue for about 10 to 20 years, depending on the trees rate of growth.

If you're unsure how to prune, hire a tree care service knowledgeable in training young trees to assess the tree every two to three years for pruning needs. Purdue University also has an excellent publication titled Pruning Essentials. It can be found at <https://go.unl.edu/treepruning>.

A needed resolution is to resolve not to overfertilize landscape plants. While plants require nutrients for growth and function, fertilizing more than needed leads to water pollution, stressed plants, and an increase in insect and disease problems.

The recommendation is to fertilize lawns less than 10 years old a maximum of 4 times a year. On older lawns, two applications can be sufficient. For trees, who only have one growth spurt a year compared to lawns that grow all summer because they're mowed, most Nebraska soils have sufficient nutrients without fertilizing. Trees growing in a lawn that is fertilized should not receive additional fertilizer.

Finally, resolve to pay closer attention to soil. It is the foundation of good plant growth but is often ignored. A few tips include avoiding compaction, using organic mulch, and incorporating organic matter like compost. It's also important to avoid overwatering. Happy New Year!