What Does ‘Sustainability’ Mean?

The concept of sustainability gained prominence in 1987 with the release of the UN’s Brundtland Commission report on environment and development, which addressed widespread concerns about economic and social development, particularly in the developing world. It defined sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.

Since then, concerns about environmental degradation and loss of natural resources have led to the widespread adoption of the sustainability concept, but for many it seems that it’s just a buzzword that’s used for everything, and everyone has their own definition of what it means. To attempt to address this confusion, APLD’s Sustainability Committee has proposed the following definition to address our sector:

Sustainable landscape design is the design, installation and management of landscapes and landscape features which:

a) Encourages, creates and maintains a healthy and thriving environment, including providing habitat and ecosystem services, both within and outside the particular landscape, and

b) Uses energy and material resources appropriately and efficiently, and contributes to conservation so that future generations will have options for the use of those resources.

This definition was crafted to reflect APLD’s environmental policy which specifically supports environmental stewardship. Our definition focuses on how we design and manage landscapes to ensure that they don’t pollute or otherwise damage the environment, and how they promote conservation of energy and resources.

There are a host of good practice elements which can address sustainability in our designs. For example, preventing water-borne pollution can be addressed through minimizing soil erosion with groundcovers and organic mulches, as well as by promoting water infiltration with permeable hardscape or vegetated swales. Appropriate lighting fixtures can reduce energy use as well as prevent light pollution. Construction with certified timber and other reclaimed or reused materials can contribute to conserving natural resources. The use of native planting materials contributes to conservation of biological diversity in the broader ecosystem as well as by providing preferred habitat for pollinators. Eliminating alien invasive species also addresses our conservation goal.

What’s important is that you as a designer actively consider how to achieve sustainability in your designs, and select those elements most appropriate to achieving the results described in the definition above.

There are two important points to remember:

1. Achieving sustainability is a process, not a fixed endpoint. You need to select sustainability practices and features which are appropriate and applicable to your situation, and will move you closer to sustainability.

2. There is no single type of garden which is sustainable—all gardens can have sustainability elements which are appropriate to their specific geographical area, whether it’s a formal Italian-style garden, an English cottage-style garden, a new American naturalistic garden or whatever mixture of styles your client wants.