

# Adventures of an Eco-Friendly Garden Coach Part I: Seeing the Big Picture

By Karen Bussolini

**O**K park somewhere. Where do I go now? Should I enter through that open garage door and wade through the jumble of boots and shoes by the inside door? (Ick – Why do builders always do this? It's so ungracious).

Front steps are crumbling and uneven, but I can sort of see stepping stones in the grass; the door must be behind those overgrown foundation shrubs – ouch that holly is prickly; maybe I'll try the skinny brick walk to the back door. It's slippery and threaded through with *pachysandra*, but looks like people use it.

Lots of bird feeders (but no native plants to feed the birds or the insects they depend on – I can think of lots of ways to feed birds year-round without attracting bears). Turn sideways to avoid getting poked by *pieris* – (Note to self: do a pruning lesson).

Ring the bell. "So glad to meet you. This is going to be really fun and creative and you're going to really like your yard. Let's walk around, show me what you'd like to figure out, and I'm going to ask a lot of questions."

Taking that walk around the yard together, or trying to experience the landscape as a visitor might, is the first step toward creating a more satisfying and livable landscape.

For starters, insecure footing (as I've learned the really hard way), bad visibility when pulling out of the driveway and branches that clobber you when you're not looking, are accidents waiting to happen. Identify what is uncomfortable, unattractive or a pain to maintain.

Consider the big picture; can you *read* the landscape as a coherent design, or story? Are there cues suggesting how to get from here to there, or is it a jumble of disconnected parts?

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## Ecological Thinking

Ecologically speaking, simplicity (typified by suburban landscapes dominated by a turf grass monoculture, with a limited number of plant species – often exotic ones that don't feed native wildlife – and mulch) is a setup for instability and lack of resilience.

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regulating, stable and resilient: complexity = low maintenance.

Let's consider streamlining the design (for legibility, easier maintenance and visual harmony) while increasing complexity by adding diverse structures and species. We can bring new clarity and order, support wildlife, add year-round interest, reduce maintenance, conserve energy and materials and reduce use of fossil fuels.

I've often wondered out loud if a person got dizzy mowing circles around isolated shrubs, trees and little random beds dotted around in the lawn. Why not join them together into larger beds with a mix of perennial plantings (not *pachysandra*!) that don't have to be mowed at all and provide much more pleasure and value to wildlife?

Existing plants would benefit from reduced turf-grass competition and distance from damaging mowers and string trimmers, mowing would be a whole lot easier and weeding out aggressive rhizomatous grasses would be much reduced if you cut a clean edge.

Let the lawnmower be your guide. If you keep hitting a rock, have to make a couple passes in an awkward space, need to move a bench every time you mow, or if you get nervous on a really-too-steep-to-mow slope or bogged down in a wet area, maybe these problem areas can be part of the solution.



Left: Hacked-at *Cotinus* in circle in lawn; rose of Sharon too big for space, awkward to mow. Right: Incorporated pruned *Cotinus* into larger bed, moved Japanese maple away from house to create intimate view from house, moved rose of Sharon to privacy border by road. Look at how it flows now, easier to mow, lawn is a river, a nicer shape now.

Consolidating disparate elements is an opportunity to smooth out any disjointedness, soften curves and create a sense of flow. As you consider the shape of the bed and how it sits on the land, remember that the lawn is a shape too, a strong one. Lawn is where you walk, so think of it as a river that widens and narrows, opens into still pools and fluidly draws you into and through the landscape. Long simple curves are easy to mow and easy to flow.

Now that we have an idea how to simplify design and maintenance, let's introduce structural complexity. Connecticut's Eastern deciduous forest is a layered, self-sustaining community with many kinds of plants occupying niches in time and space, both above and below ground. Canopy trees rise above understory trees, with understory shrubs and a ground layer below. If we can emulate this structure, we gain not just the inherently beautiful look of the forest, but wildlife habitat, functionality and ecosystem services.

Many yards already have oaks, maples, tulip trees and other native canopy trees. Often there's just lawn

below. What an opportunity to reduce your carbon footprint! Or the chainsaw and weed whacker armies have *cleared out the brush* – the shadblows, hornbeams, spicebush, witch hazels, maple leaf viburnums and other woody understory plants that feed and shelter birds and other wildlife.

**“Once established, a ground layer of densely planted weed-suppressing perennials will become living mulch, with little need for the purchased product.”**

In a small yard, smaller-scale understory trees such as dogwoods, fringe trees or redbuds will function as the canopy layer, with shrubs and a ground-covering carpet below. Think of the ground layer as a tapestry, with flowering plants and those with bold foliage contrasting with delicate textures, changing through the seasons, perhaps with early spring bulbs for a jolt of color and sustenance for early-emerging pollinators.

Once established, a ground layer of densely planted weed-suppressing perennials will become living mulch, with little need for the purchased product.

### Ecosystem Services

All these layers break the force of the rain, reducing erosion. Each layer shades the ones below, cooling the atmosphere and slowing evaporation. Keeping the ground covered gives weed seeds less light in which to germinate. Leaves fall to the ground; if you leave them in place, they decompose, enriching the soil, feeding soil micro-organisms and increasing water-holding capacity. Such a planting requires little or no inputs, cleans polluted runoff, sequesters carbon, filters the air and restores native habitat. So let's put back the layers – and then sit back and enjoy our bountiful, beautiful yards. ❁

*Look for Part II in a future issue for eco-friendly tips and techniques.*

*Karen Bussolini has a mission to replace the mow-blow-go-know-nothing suburban landscape model with thoughtful, sustainable, restorative landscapes that create habitat for people and wildlife. She is a photographer, writer, speaker, NOFA-Accredited Organic Land Care Professional and eco-friendly garden coach. Sign up for her newsletter at [karenbussolini.com](http://karenbussolini.com)*



**Karen Bussolini**

### SOLVING GARDEN DESIGN DILEMMAS

A day of problem-solving, inspiration and fun with three garden experts at Zion Episcopal Church in North Branford on Saturday, Oct. 20, from 9 AM to 4 PM. Three workshops and a panel Q&A. Features talks by Christine Froehlich – Gardening with What You Have, Karen Bussolini – Eco-Friendly Garden Coach Brainstorm, and Nancy DuBrule-Clemente – Garden Renovation. Bring a bag lunch. Beverages provided. Registration, book sales and socializing 8-9 AM. \$75. More information and sign up at [naturework.com](http://naturework.com)



**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

**Photos / Karen Bussolini**

Left: Narrow slippery walk, overgrown, boring plants that didn't do well and didn't like, pruning needed.

Right: Wider walk, got rid of boring plants, added shrubs and ground-covering perennials, also made crisp edge for walk where *pachysandra* had invaded.