10 Existing Plants

Why is this important:

Whether you are assessing a new property or one you have had for years, it helps to know what shrubs, trees, ground covers, vines and other perennial plants you have. In order to develop the site with changes and improvements, you need to decide the fate of plants that are already there. Some will be good mature specimens, others will be in poor condition and a liability in the long run. Some will be in good condition, but were planted where they cannot be sustained in the future. Probably a large majority will challenge you to make decisions based on preferences, maintenance needs and overall new plans.

Without going through this step carefully, you run the risk of overlooking, forgetting or being surprised at the presence of plants you have to take into consideration later. They will be in the way instead of what they are – one more factor in assessing the site.

Activities

1. What kinds of plants do we have?

MATERIALS:

- Marking tags
- Pencil, Waterproof marker or Paint pen
- Clear tape
- Clipboard with lined paper
- Wooden shish-ka-bob skewers or craft sticks (optional)

This activity is designed for properties or study areas within a property with about 50 permanent plants (trees, shrubs, herbaceous perennials). For places with extensive existing plantings, this method may not be practical. See the end of the activity for alternative suggestions.

It also needs to be done at different times of the year. Some plants are easier to identify at specific times of the year, e.g. herbaceous perennials can't be identified in winter and are easier to identify when in flower.

Walk around your property with a stack of card-weight marking tags (available at most stationery or office supply stores). The tags can be any size or color you want, but small, white ones (about an inch in size) with thin string to attach to a branch will do.

- Label everything even if you already know that you will be eliminating it in the future.
- Number each shrub, tree or vine with woody stems.
- For ground covers or herbaceous perennials, put a stick in the ground to hold the marking label. Wooden shish-ka-bob skewers from the grocery store or craft sticks (like tongue depressors) work well.

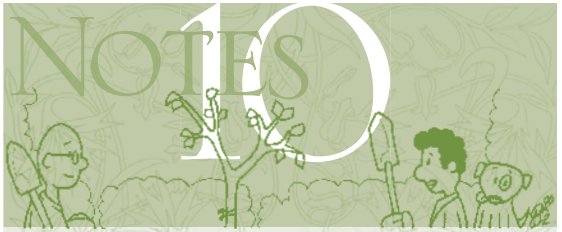
- For weather proofing, cover the label, after you number it, with clear tape. Rain and other kinds of inclement weather will quickly damage these labels and they may stay on the plants for months.
- **Create an *Inventory List*, by transferring the numbers onto lined paper on a clipboard.**
- Fill in the information for each plant. Use pencil -- it may change. On the paper, indicate whatever information you know at this point, including:
    1. common name of plant
    2. scientific name of plant, including cultivar name
    3. location – keep it brief (e.g. east side near sidewalk)
    4. size (trees only) - see activity 2 below
    5. condition of plant (**good, fair, poor**)
    6. decision on what to do about the plant (**keep, revamp, eliminate**)
    7. date of decision

Turning the list into a chart may make it easier to refer to and make comparisons in the future, but the format is up to you.

- Add information to the list as you get it. It might be easier to identify the plant when it is in bloom, for instance. You may want to get a second opinion on the condition of the plant later. *Consider this activity a "work-in-progress."*

Estimated time: Depends on the extent of the existing planting. Probably at least an hour to affix tags on an average yard. Identifying all plants, their condition and fate may take much more time, depending on your knowledge.

For properties or study areas too extensive for this method of documenting existing plants, draw a map to indicate flower beds and landscape sections, including their contents. Use numbers on the map to indicate plants and generate your list on the map itself. Supplement map with photos of areas. The information on these maps would not fit on the sketch you started earlier in the site assessment process, but you may mark on your overall sketch a code to remind you that you have detailed maps of existing plants.



You may not know the names and cultivars of many of the plants on your property at first. But at least the inventory will provide you with a list that you can work from.

Plants are usually named based on their flower and fruit structure. Leaf shape and appearance may be used in some books to narrow down large groups of plants with similar leaves. Each plant has a genus and species scientific name. To speed up this inventory, we suggest you seek the common name of the plants. Often a cultivar (cultivated variety) name also exists. If a nursery label is still on an existing plant, the cultivar name may be included.

With landscape plants, the difference in cultivars may make the difference between one that is dwarf, upright, horizontal or open in habit, disease resistant, hardy, or another important feature that may help you decide whether to keep it, revamp it or eliminate it. Sometimes cultivars indicate flower color differences, which are personal preferences.

Mark perennial noxious weeds such as bindweed, poison ivy, mugwort, wild violet, nutsedge, quackgrass, and healall that should be eradicated before landscape installation. You may need a guide such as "Weeds of the Northeast" to identify noxious weeds.

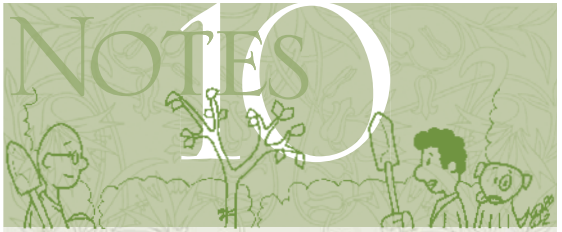
Annual flowers, herbs and vegetables need not be recorded. If you don't know if something is an annual (temporary for a year), include it. You can cross it off your list and remove the label in the fall if it's an annual

It isn't necessary to provide information on each woody or herbaceous perennial plant at this point. You may go back later and add information or change your mind about the decision on what to do with it. Make sure that the plant's marking tag is securely in place on the plant to key it to the paper record.

In determining the condition of the plants, consider:

- small, off-color leaves that drop early in the fall. Stress conditions are often confused with a disease caused by an organism.
- obvious evidence of disease

DISEASE ON FIR



- degree of overgrown character
- broken branches
- excessive suckers or string trimmer damage at the base of tree trunks
- tree bark that has been split or stripped
- whether a tree trunk flares at the base as it should. Tree trunks without the flare may have been filled in with soil, making the tree susceptible to decline.
- marginal leaf scorch

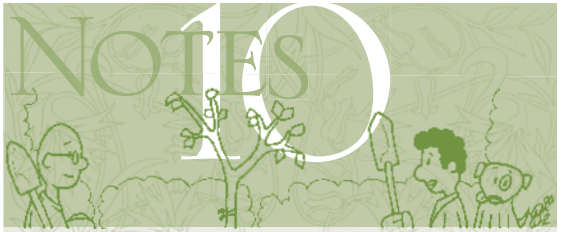
- branches with tip die-back. If there is significant die-back, is it all on one side of the canopy or is it on both sides? Where the same plant is in multiple places on the site, note whether they all exhibit the same symptoms.
- excessive surface rooting and girdling roots on trees. These may signify poor drainage, too-deep planting, and/or compacted soils.
- excessive movement on tree trunks; they may have root problems, or the roots were never able to establish after transplanting. Test the stability of newly planted trees by gently rocking them.
- abnormal growths or abundance of twigs from common starting points

There is no right or wrong way to assess condition, except to try to be consistent in what you call good, fair and poor.

Do not try to diagnose the cause of the condition you notice. Noting the visual characteristics is enough. Local extension office horticulture personnel may be able to advise you on your observations. A specialist may help you determine if the cause is stress, disease or insect related.

In making improvements or inheriting someone else's landscape, remember that not all plants are worth saving. On the other hand, removing perfectly good specimens may be wasteful, expensive and difficult.

NOTES



2. How big are the trees?

MATERIALS:

YARDSTICK

PENCIL

Place a yardstick against the trunk. Step back so that the whole tree is in your sight.

While holding a pencil at arm's length, line up the top of the yardstick with the tip of the pencil.

Using your thumbnail, mark the base of the ruler on the pencil. Sighting up the tree, determine how many 'rulers' fit into the tree.

Multiply this number by the length of the yardstick for a height approximation.

Use the same method to estimate the spread of the tree's canopy or shrub horizontal mass.

ESTIMATED TIME: 3 MINUTES PER TREE.

Estimating the height of existing trees is not an accurate measurement, but it does give you an indication of approximate size that is better than guessing. If you have too many existing trees to measure each one, measure the tallest, the shortest and one in the mid-size range. From this you can estimate the height of the others. You can do the same to estimate width of trees and shrubs.

Finding the ultimate height and span of a tree or shrub is important to evaluating its place in the landscape. Tree branches may interfere with walls or roofs; shrubs may overwhelm a space.

Using what you found in this step

Once you have made a final decision on which plants to remove, develop a reasonable schedule. Some have deep roots and will take the better part of a day to do. Others may need professionals with specialized equipment.

For those that you decide to revamp, they may need extensive pruning, staking, trellising or reshaping. Some of the work you can do yourself, but you may hire a professional with specialized equipment. Your prior planning will help the professional estimate a cost.

Poorly placed plants may have to be removed. As trees grow to mature sizes, they may create a shadier condition than you currently have. Factor that in as you plan. To investigate the ultimate size of a mature tree species, refer to a book or internet reference.

For further reading

Use every resource you can to complete this step, including book and internet readings with good photographs, as well as knowledgeable friends. Visit a botanic garden, arboretum or garden center/ nursery display garden with labelled plants. No one resource may be sufficient, but here are a few to get you started:

Botanical Society of America, Herbaceous Perennials, www.infography.com/content/246155002734.html

Know Your Trees, by J. A. Cope and F. E. Winch, Jr, revised by E.A. Cope, Cornell University, http://bhort.bh.cornell.edu/tree/trees.htm

Herbaceous Perennial Plants: A Treatise on their identification, culture, and garden attributes, by Allan M. Armitage, Varsity Press, Athens, Ga., 1989.

The Shrub Identification Book, by George Symonds, HarperCollins Publisher, New York, 1963.

Tree Finder: A Manual for the Identification of Trees by Their Leaves, by May Theilgaard Watts, Nature Study Guild Publisher, Rochester, NY, 1998.

Weeds of the Northeast, by Richard H. Uva, Joseph C. Neal and Joseph M. DiTomaso. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1997.