

September 30, 2017

Sustainable Landscaping Website

Focus Group Summary

This Sustainable Landscape Website is being developed by Sue Blake, WSU Extension, and Susan Taylor, Gardening Green coordinator, with the support and collaboration of Cathy Craver, Whatcom County Public Works and Cynthia May, City of Bellingham Public Works Education and Outreach Coordinator, to meet the community need for information about making their landscapes more sustainable and less impactful on water quality and conserving outdoor water use.

This summary of the focus groups' feedback and the procedure for incorporating that input into the design and content of the website was compiled by Susan Taylor.

SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPING WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT: Focus Groups Summary

OBJECTIVES:

This website will be utilized as a resource for inquiring residents to learn about sustainable landscaping practices, as a resource for Whatcom County Public Works programs (e.g. regarding water quality, such as the NPDES/Storm Water programs, as well as the Homeowner Incentive Program (HIP)).

To provide on-line resources that people can use to learn about sustainable landscaping (knowledge increase) and to provide tools/incentives/tips that will motivate them to actually make changes in their landscapes (behavior change).

To increase understanding of the likely community audience's knowledge about the concept of sustainable landscaping and what would motivate participants to visit a website on sustainable landscaping.

The Focus Group design included both verbal feedback/discussion and a written survey. Topics were presented and each participant was given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions and provide input. The meetings were recorded to ensure that all responses were captured. To maximize the opportunity for each participant to respond, they also completed a written survey of the topics covered.

IMPLEMENTATION

Two focus groups were held on September 7 and September 14 from 5:00-7:00. Sue Blake, WSU Water Resources Faculty moderated the focus groups. Susan Taylor, Gardening Green program coordinator, assisted.

Invitations were sent to eighteen community members representing varying levels of sustainable landscaping training and experience as well as diverse age groups. Fourteen community members volunteered to participate in a two-hour focus group:

- 5 people who previously took Gardening Green: Sustainable Landscaping training.
- 4 people who previously took Master Gardener training.
- 5 people who were interested in sustainable landscaping but had not participated in any landscaping/gardening training program.

Staff from Whatcom County, Bellingham, and WSU Extension joined the second focus group:

Cathy Craver - Senior Planner, NPDES Program Whatcom County Public Works

Cynthia May - Environmental Education and Outreach Coordinator City of Bellingham

Beth Chisholm - WSU Extension Master Gardener Coordinator

Vincent Alvarez - WSU Extension IT

FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK AND PREFERENCES:

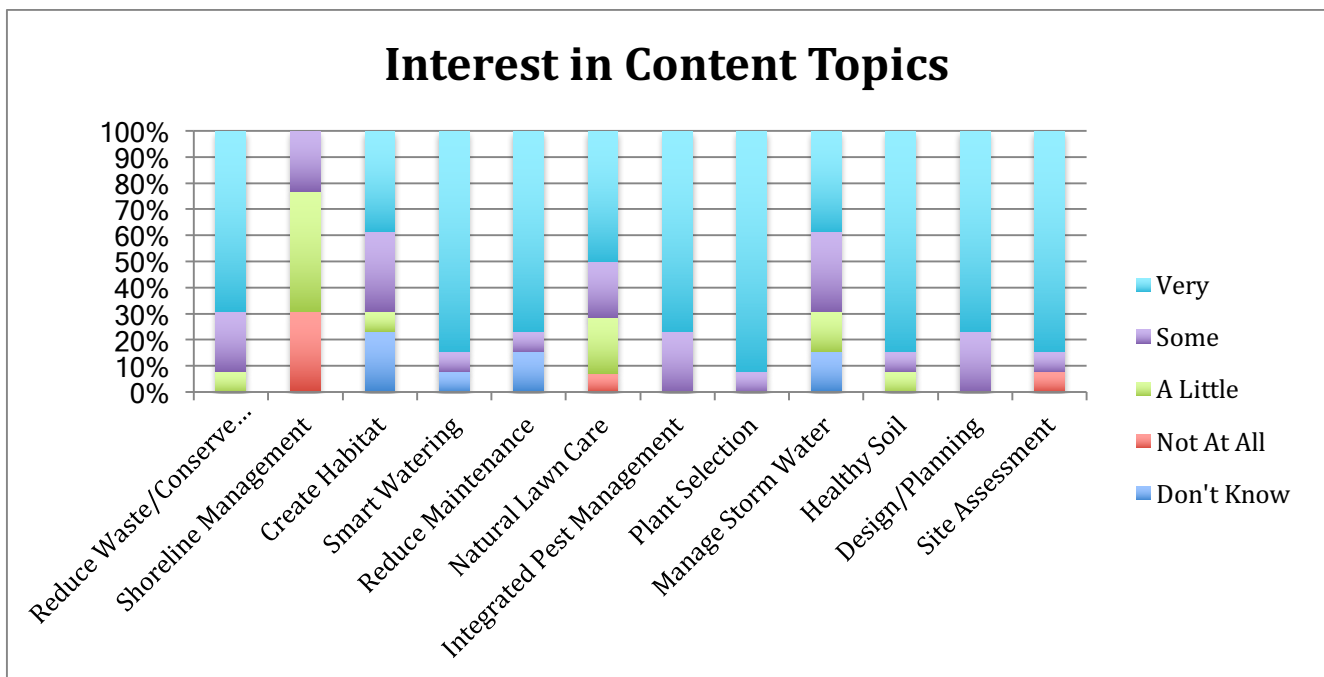
Baseline data regarding where people currently go for gardening information was gathered. Participants stated that information on local resources is highly desirable on a website. They also wanted to have links to vetted information that can be trusted developed for our county.

- Websites and books were the most frequently used options.
- Friends and family and classes were sometimes used.
- Blogs and list serves were utilized much less frequently.
- Retail nursery staff and the workshops they offer are a resource utilized by several participants.
- Website - Pinterest.

SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPING WEBSITE CONTENT

Participants indicated a strong interest in the topic of sustainable gardening. They defined sustainable landscaping in similar terms including: less reliance on resources, regenerative, part of a system, environmentally and habitat friendly, wild, and responsible gardening. Several people described storm water management, reduced maintenance, and reduced costs as the long-term by-products of sustainable landscaping.

The general feedback from most participants stressed the need to carefully select the terms used for topics titles. There was strong agreement that terms should focus on benefits to the homeowner.



Additional comments and suggestions offered:

- I want information specific to Pacific Northwest and Whatcom County. Lots of times when searching the internet it's hard to know what applies to my area.
- I want information on aphids, fruit tree pests, and raccoons.
- Reducing lawns and good options for grass types to use in this area.
- Easier watering via drip hoses or similar. Lawn alternatives.
- Like having bees, birds, and plants for them. Don't like having raccoons, voles, moles, etc.
- What to do when – what time.
- I don't have any shoreline and don't anticipate having any in the future.
- I hate lawns but neighbors need help and/or encouragement to tear them out.
- Local is important.
- Links to other sites.
- Alternative lawns (grass, clover, thyme, flowers, etc.).
- I'd sign up for one of your classes
- I live on South Hill and there is quite a slope to our yard. I'd like to find a way to do w/o grass. (At least I don't water it.)
- I don't think I have an issue with [storm water]. So I probably DO need that class!
- [Natural Lawn Care] Reduction of lawn, native grasses, low mow, low water, meadow.

WEBSITE LAYOUT

The Homepage was viewed as very important. People said that their impression of the homepage often determined whether they would further explore the website. The focus group inputs:

- It should be searchable by key words
- Have a dichotomous type problem search
- Use synonyms as tags
- Photographs showing a variety of sustainable landscaping possibilities that define what sustainable landscapes means are necessary.
- Before and After photographs
- Short downloadable lists for quick references such as 10 Top Trees for Whatcom County were suggested.

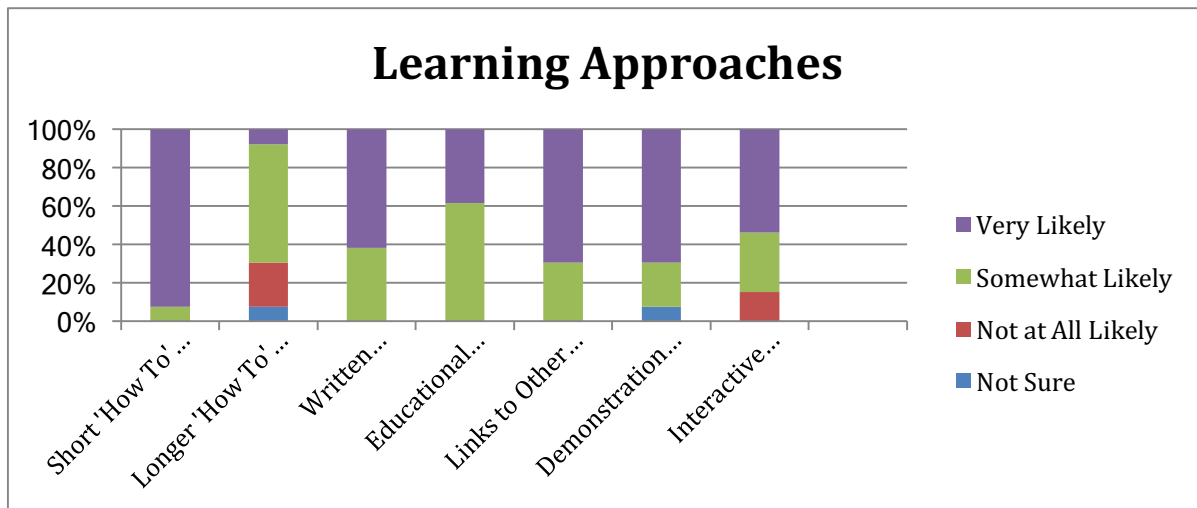
The focus groups recommended the 'process or activity based' organization of the content and also wanted tips for implementing quick, simple actions to make the landscape more sustainable.

The preferred content organization divided the process into three main categories:

1. Getting Started
2. Planning And Creating Your Sustainable Landscape
3. Care And Maintenance Of The Sustainable Landscape

LEARNING METHODS AND PREFERENCES:

Preferences for website tools and approaches to presenting information were explored. Photographs were mentioned as a preferred method. The following chart shows the focus groups' written survey results.



Additional comments:

- Short *How to Videos*, without long introductions and limited to the demonstration of essential skills.
- Complex information should be presented in small steps on separate videos.
- Printable documents or workbooks that can be taken outside are helpful.
- Multi-modality options, including slideshows that include audio, should allow the user the option of reading the information without the audio
- Before/after photographs and local examples of sustainable landscapes
- Interactive features including augmented reality for smart phones
- Downloadable links [*associated*] with videos
- Deer and moles
- Attracting pollinators is a better name [*than creating habitat*] because it seems more friendly and intimate term than I think of with 'wildlife habitat'
- More emphasis as eco-turf as lawn materials
- Want to know how healthy my soil is
- Not sure if I have adequate drainage on my property
- I removed our lawn
- Not at this time [*shoreline*]
- Before/After photographs
- Interactive features including the ability to post project photos and stories

MAKING ON-THE-GROUND CHANGES: Small Steps – Medium Steps – Big Steps

Participants agreed that it is more useful to guide the user through the process than to just offer concepts and goals. The process should focus on the big picture, a master plan that can be divided into phases.

- Offer suggestions for small, quick and easy steps so it's easy to start.
- Cover options for dividing a big project into multiple steps that can be implemented over time.
- Concrete steps to implement changes empower the user.

WEBSITE STRATEGIES TO INCREASE MOTIVATION

Participant provided perspectives on what tools/incentives might motivate them to make on-the-ground changes. The written survey indicated that the most helpful tool would be seeing successful project photographs posted by others and being able to post their own success stories with photographs.

- One-stop-shopping for all the classes and workshops being offered around the county with the ability to register on the spot.
- Access to certifications such as water-wise landscape and wildlife habitat.
- Pledge programs might encourage people.
- Coupons for discounts are great.
- Posting your own story with photographs is useful.

SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPING WEBSITE: Incorporating Focus Group Feedback

THE NEXT STEPS

The most appropriate Word Press theme that will support the objectives of this effort and the integration of the feedback provided by these focus groups will be selected in consultation with Vincent Alvarez, WSU Extension's IT who will be providing technical assistance.

Then construction of the website will begin. The core content has been developed and utilized by the Gardening Green classes since 2009. Extensive documentation of its effectiveness has been collected in program evaluations, the implementation of on-the-ground best management practices, and follow-up surveys and on-site visits of the participants. Work has been done during the last few years to identify the most important concepts and processes for inclusion in a website. The focus groups' feedback of preferences and priorities will provide the framework for organizing and presenting this information in a website format.

Focus Groups Feedback that will guide development:

- Selection of a website theme that supports desired search options
- Construction of a home page to capture user interest and encourage further exploration of the site
- Organization and prioritization of content
- Utilization of preferred learning approaches
- Development of terminology that emphasizes user benefits
- Use of suggested strategies to increase motivation of on-the-ground changes
- Provide sound information that has been vetted by WSU as appropriate for our region

Getting Started

Learn about the characteristics of your property and how they impact gardening choices and plant health.

Partners in this endeavor will have opportunities to participate in all levels of review and modification to ensure a final product that meets the needs of inquiring residents to learn about sustainable landscaping practices and serve as a resource for Whatcom County Public Works programs (e.g. regarding water quality, such as the NPDES/Storm Water programs, as well as the Homeowner Incentive Program (HIP)).

The final product will be vetted by WSU to ensure that the information provided is based on sound horticultural and water resource management research and practices.

MAIN MENU

The majority of the focus groups preferred organizing content areas based on the process involved in developing and implementing a sustainable landscape. Users will be able to easily get to the phase of landscape activity they need.

Plan And Create Your Landscape

Design a landscape that is easy to care for, meets your needs for outdoor living and supports our environment.

Landscape Care And Management

Practical strategies and techniques for landscape management that protects human and environmental health.