

Landscaping

Introduction

Lawns, trees, flowers, shrubs and non-living landscape features, such as designed grades, paths, decks, patios, driveways, walls and fences all contribute to the character of heritage properties and neighbourhoods. Throughout time, landscaping and landscape features have been designed to complement the architecture of the associated building. As successive architectural styles evolved and became popular, so did the design of ideal gardens and landscapes.

This practical guide provides recommendations for property owners wishing to maintain or rehabilitate a landscape associated with a heritage property. Much of the advice in this guide was adopted from the District of Columbia's Historic Preservation Guidelines: *Landscaping, Landscape Features and Secondary Buildings in Historic Districts*.

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Evolution of Landscape Design

Your landscape should match the style and character of the primary building on the property. The following sections discuss the style of gardening associated with architectural styles common in a given era.

Victorian Gardens (1800s to early 1900s)

In the second half of the 1800s and early part of the 1900s the Victorian Garden landscape style was popular, emphasizing informal or natural forms and groupings of plants. Public space, such as the street and sidewalk were separated from the front yard by a low stone or brick wall or by decorative cast iron fences. Side boundary lines were marked by shrubs, trees and flower beds. Cast stone, concrete and cast iron lawn ornaments and statues were popular decorative elements.

Shrubs and dense flowerbeds were planted using a mix of available annuals and perennials sourced from neighbours and catalogues. Prior to 1850, native species of plants were almost exclusively used in gardens. However, the Victorian Garden often included exotic plant materials imported from Europe, Asia, South America and the United States.

During the second half of the 1800s, the design of back yards was more utilitarian than the design of front yards, especially for rowhouses. Generally, shrubs, trees, flowers or fences were used to separate yards, and many back yards would have vegetable gardens.

Landscapes in the Early 1900s

The designs of residential landscapes in the early 1900s were influenced by the architectural style of the associated building. For example, single detached houses built in the Colonial Revival style typically had front yards with a lined path and symmetrically placed trees. More generally, landscaping from this era included a limited number of trees, along with shrubs and flowers used for foundation plantings. Concrete sidewalks led from the street or sidewalk to the front door of the building. The front yard was often separated from the street by low shrubs, wooden fences or brick or stone retaining walls. Back yards were generally enclosed by wooden fences and contained garages that could be accessed from a rear alley.

The landscaping associated with modest buildings during the early 1900s, such as rowhouses, was usually simple and utilitarian. Front yards were often grass with some foundation planting and may have been separated from the public sidewalk with a cast iron fence or low stone or brick retaining wall.

Modern Landscapes (Mid-1900s to present)

Modern landscapes represent a shift away from the more “wild” garden aesthetic common to the Victorian era and focus on clean structured lines (termed “rectilinear” by landscape architects) and organized plantings. Both exotic and native plant species may be incorporated independently or mixed in a modern garden. Hard landscaping, composed of the construction materials used to improve a landscape like gravel, rock or stone, concrete, timber, bitumen, glass, and metals, focus more prominently in modern gardens than in previous eras following an increased desire for outdoor amenity space after World War II.

Conservation

Maintaining a building’s context and the surrounding landscape is an important aspect of conserving heritage buildings. Identifying, retaining, and preserving the existing organization and patterns of a landscape as they have evolved over time is key to landscape conservation.

Documentation

To begin a landscape restoration project, first document the features of your property that make it special and note its organization and pattern. Pay close attention to the size, proportions, configuration, and relationships in your landscape and the components that comprise it.

Planning

Similar to interior restoration projects, improving the exterior landscape is best approached with careful planning. Assess what your goals are for the landscape. Some helpful questions to ask before formulating a plan and prioritizing goals include:

- Do you want a true period restoration or a period appropriate recreation that reflects the past?
- How much time do you want to invest in the upkeep and maintenance of the garden and landscape?
- Do you want to reflect the home's original construction date in the landscape or another significant time in the property's history?
- Are there certain aspects of the landscape that you want to address, like highlighting a feature in the garden, or screening an undesirable view?

To better inform the plan for your landscape, you can also research what it might have looked like in the past and which appropriate plants are available today. Some useful sources of information available at your local library and/or archives include: historic photographs, illustrated magazine articles, local newspaper photographs, nursery ads, archives, garden club documents, personal correspondence and diaries.

Removing Elements

Heritage conservationists often caution property owners to "do no harm." In other words, avoid any interventions that may destroy original features that make the property unique and help to tell its individual story. One of the most common mistakes is to "clean up." Rather, carefully groom the landscape so as not to remove all evidence of what once grew there, leaving the property a blank slate. For example, work to incorporate 100 year old lilacs or remnants of a stone foundation that can help to root the landscape in the past. Allow one full year or growing season before determining the scope of alterations to undertake. Landscape architects recommend not only considering how you want the landscape to appear today but also when the plants mature.

It is also advised that new components not be added to a landscape without careful consideration. If you decide that it is appropriate or necessary to alter the existing landscape, you should consider the effect that removing or adding new plantings will have on the character of the landscape, its mature plants, the building and the streetscape. Contact local landscape architects or nurseries to gather feedback on the design of your proposed alterations.

Design

There are a number of design issues related to heritage landscaping and landscape features. As discussed above, existing features in front and back yards may have been altered, added or removed. Any additions or changes to landscaping associated with a heritage building should strive to create continuity among adjacent properties, and in the character of the neighbourhood as a whole.

Some general tips suggested by landscape architects include:

- Use plant material to soften building size, mass and edges to maintain a human scale for pedestrians
- Use landscaping to screen and buffer parking, open storage and other unsightly areas where required
- Use landscaping to buffer high density buildings from low density where required
- Incorporate native plants into the design as part of the planting palette
- Tour your neighbourhood to see how others have landscaped properties of a similar age and architectural style. Older parks, cemeteries, and gardens are other good places to get ideas

Front Yard Landscapes

The design of front yard landscaping is a very important character-defining element of heritage buildings, especially for single-detached residential structures and rowhouses. It helps to establish the context of a building as it relates to its neighbours through the use of common designs and plant materials. Pride of ownership is also evident in a properly maintained front yard. If your home is in or near an established Heritage Conservation District (HCD), there may already be rules or guidelines in place for appropriate landscape treatment. Refer to the Region of Waterloo's [Heritage Conservation Toolbox](#) for more information on HCDs in the area.

Landscape Features

Some common landscape features, often referred to as hardscaping, include:

- Sidewalks and paths
- Driveways
- Fences
- Decks and patios

When these features are located in a front yard or other area that can be viewed by the public, their design can contribute to the character of the property and streetscape.

Sidewalks and paths

Historically sidewalks and paths were constructed of concrete and laid at the same time that the main structure was being built. The design and location of these features in front yards can help to define the character of the landscape and neighbourhood. Most often a path will run in a straight line, leading from the sidewalk or street to the front porch, steps or door. Less frequently the path will be curved to accommodate a semicircular driveway, or to create a meandering path to the main entrance.

Existing sidewalks and paths should be maintained, and if necessary, repaired or replaced in-kind. For sidewalks and paths located in front yards and areas visible to the public, this is especially important. If new sidewalks or paths are added, they should be designed and constructed of materials that are compatible with the heritage building and landscape context of the area.

Driveways

The design, placement and material used in driveway construction contribute to the landscape character of a property. For paving, simple scored concrete, stone, paving brick or other historic materials are recommended over concrete block, asphalt or other modern concrete treatments. Where a particular material or style is documented or is still visible in the existing surface, it should be maintained if possible.

On historic properties, driveways typically lead straight from the road to a garage in the back yard. Historic rowhouses do not accommodate the inclusion of driveways in front yards, rather garages or parking spaces are accessed by an alley at the rear of the building.

Fences

Fences are included in front yards to define property lines and enclose private space from the public. They also create harmony in a streetscape when included on numerous adjacent properties in a neighbourhood. Open fences were typically made of cast iron or wood. Fences in back yards are also used to define property lines but are generally taller and solid to provide privacy.

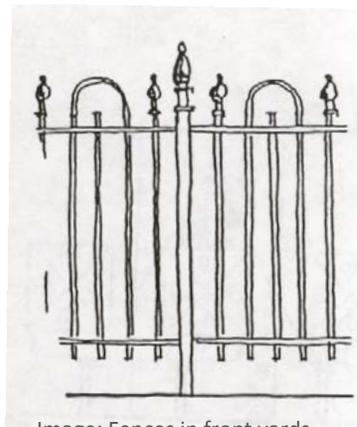


Image: Fences in front yards should have an open design (District of Columbia, 2010, p.6)

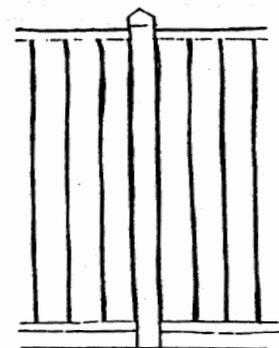


Image: Fences in rear yards are more commonly taller and solid (District of Columbia, 2010, p.6)

Many architectural styles had fences designed to enhance the features of the house, such as white picket fences accompanying Georgian homes. In some cases the architectural features were repeated in the fence designs, especially more delicate metal fences.

Existing fences that contribute to the character of the property should be conserved. If you are adding or replacing a fence that has been removed, it is advised that the fence be selected based on documentary evidence, such as photographs, plans or the design of neighbouring fences to guide the replacement's shape and material. In front yards, wood or metal picket-type fences found in a number of styles are often appropriate for heritage properties. Chain link, split rail and stockade type fences, however, are usually inappropriate. The addition of a fence or changes to an existing fence may require a building and/or heritage permit from your municipality. Refer to the Region's [Heritage Conservation Toolbox](#) for a list of contacts for municipal heritage staff.

Decks and patios

Most decks and patios included on heritage buildings in the Region of Waterloo are not original. They were likely added after World War II when outdoor recreation space became desirable. Most often decks and patios were located in back yards, although some may be located in the side yards of single-detached houses. It is uncommon for these features to contribute to the character of a property or neighbourhood due to their later addition and use of contemporary designs and materials that may be incompatible with the existing building and landscape.

Therefore, it is acceptable to alter existing decks and patios so long as the new construction is located in the back yard and the design compliments the heritage structure and landscape. The addition of a deck or changes to an existing deck may also require a building and/or heritage permit.

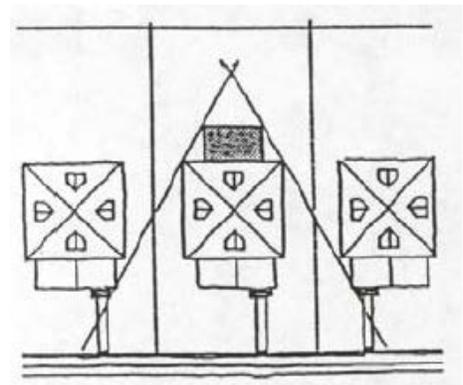


Image: Decks and patios should be placed so they are not visible from public property (District of Columbia, 2010, p.7)

Archaeological Discoveries

It is possible that while making alterations to your historic landscape archaeological material may be unearthed. These objects can include foundations of previous structures, cisterns, ceramics, bottles, coins and tools. Archaeological artifacts are important for the information they yield about past human activity on the property. If you find significant archaeological material on your property, contact the [Ministry of Tourism, Culture & Sport](#) for guidance on how to proceed.

Maintenance

There are two main components of a landscape that will require maintenance: the vegetation and the hard landscaping.

Vegetation

Undertaking regular maintenance of a landscape, such as pruning trees, trimming hedges, replanting annuals, raking, weeding and cutting the lawn will help to ensure that the landscape context of a heritage building is conserved. It also helps to ensure that trees, shrubs, vines and other plants do not become overgrown or cause additional problems for the building. For example, some plants can cause maintenance and repair problems if they are allowed to grow on or near the walls, foundations and roofs of a building.

Foundation plantings can lead to water entering basements and crawl spaces. Roots may clog weeping tiles, underground pipes attached to downspouts, or bore into cracks in foundation walls. Shrubs and other foundation plantings can shade the ground, inhibiting the speed of drying after rain and snow. Accidentally overwatering foundation plantings in the summer can also lead to water entering basements. See [Practical Guide: Foundations](#) for more information on how to ensure your basement or crawl space is watertight.

Roots of large trees on your property may cause foundation walls to crack or heave, especially if the house was constructed before the tree matured. Generally, this movement or resulting cracks will not affect the structural integrity of the building, but it could lead to water entering the basement, setting the stage for larger problems that may develop in the future if left uncorrected.

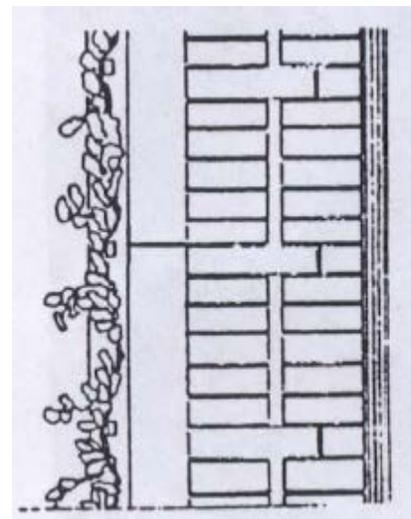


Image: Vines should not grow directly on walls but trained to grow on trellises (District of Columbia, 2010, p.11)

Vines, such as ivy, are often allowed to grow on the stone, brick or wood walls of a building. Although the appearance of these plants may add charm to a heritage building, their roots can cause a wall to deteriorate by trapping moisture, increasing the likelihood that stone and brick will spall, mortar will deteriorate, paint will peel and wood will rot. This type of vegetation also provides shelter for insects that may exacerbate moisture problems. As a solution, vines should be trained to grow on a trellis mounted in front of, but not directly attached to, a structure's walls. The growth of moss, lichen or other plant material on roofs shaded by trees, particularly low-pitched roofs, is another maintenance problem. These types of vegetation trap moisture against the roof membrane and should be removed. Overhanging tree limbs can also lead to growth of plant material in gutters, especially if they are not cleaned regularly, and they should be trimmed.

Regular landscape maintenance includes spring and fall cleanups. In the spring, the vegetation must be raked and winter debris removed. There are two approaches to the fall cleanup. One is to remove dead annuals but leave fallen leaves and perennials intact and wait until spring to cut them down. There are several advantages to this approach. The seed heads provide a winter food source for birds, the plant stalks trap snow and so insulate the garden below, and winter gardenscapes of snow on stalks, flower heads, and seed pods offer a pleasing sculptural appeal. The other approach is to cut down and remove the perennial stalks in the fall and rake the garden beds clean. The advantages of this approach are a cleaner tidier looking landscape, a reduction in the potential for pests and disease to be harboured by vegetative debris, and much less work the following spring.

Hard Landscaping

Hard landscape features are composed of a number of materials, including:

- Wood
- Stone
- Brick
- Concrete

For more detailed conservation advice relating to the maintenance of these materials please refer to the following Practical Guides: [Structural Woodwork](#), [Masonry](#), and [Metalwork](#).

Wood

Wood is susceptible to rot and insect infestation and is often painted or stained to protect it from the elements. Painted wood is subject to blistering, peeling, cracking and fading. Minimal rot can be repaired by treating the affected area with epoxy or another similar consolidant after the wood is properly dried, and should be followed by treatment with a sealer or preservative. If a portion of the wood is beyond repair it should be replaced using the same type of wood, and then finished and sanded to match the existing material.

Blistered, cracking, flaked or peeled paint is best removed by hand-sanding before repainting. If paint layers are too thick and obscuring details they may be stripped using chemical strippers. Power sanding, heat guns and sandblasting should be used rarely, with caution, and only by trained professions to prevent damage to the wood. After the wood has been properly prepared it can be repainted in an appropriate colour (see [Practical Guide: Paint & Colour](#) for more information).

Brick and Stone

Many landscape features are constructed of brick and stone, like sidewalks, paths, steps, retaining walls and patios. Although these materials are durable, they are subject to spalling and may lean or crack as a result of mortar deterioration, if not properly maintained. When mortar joints erode a ½-inch or more they should be repointed. This involves removing all of the loose mortar by hand and adding new mortar in the joint that is compatible with the existing mortar and masonry. Using new mortar that is harder than the existing can cause the surface of brick or stone to spall and should be avoided. The new mortar joint should be profiled to match the existing joints. The use of power tools to cut out old mortar from joints is not advised as they may damage the surrounding brick or stone (refer to the [Practical Guide: Masonry](#) for more information.)

Concrete

Sidewalks, steps and some patios are constructed of concrete. This material is susceptible to spalling, powdering, cracking, settling and heaving. Spalling and powdering is usually caused by a poor initial mixture or by salt and chemicals used to de-ice in the winter. Cracking, settling and heaving may stem from tree roots, freeze-thaw cycles and loss of ground water.

Spalling or powdering concrete should be removed and replaced with like material, coloured and finished to match the existing concrete. Badly cracked, settled or heaved concrete may require removal and replacement. Minor cracking can be successfully patched using patching cement. Concrete slabs that are moderately heaving or settling can often be lifted intact and laid again on a new base of sand and gravel.

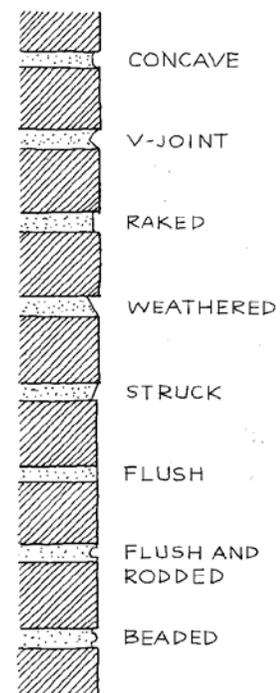


Image: Brick mortar joint profiles (Betty Anderson, 1983, p. 101)

Summary

Historically, landscapes and landscape elements were used to enhance the view to or from a heritage building. They represent character-defining elements that contribute not only to the significance of an individual heritage property but also to the character of entire historic neighbourhoods. The advice provided in this practical guide highlighted the aspects of a landscape to be conserved, common construction materials, associated conservation advice for each, and strategies for planning a landscape restoration project. By adding even one traditional element to your heritage home's landscape you will increase its authenticity and the richness of your neighbourhood.

References

If you would like to learn more about conserving your property's landscape, please refer to the following primary sources:

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Alternate formats of this document are available upon request. Please contact Bridget Coady at BCoady@regionofwaterloo.ca, 519-575-4400, TTY 519-575-4608 to request an alternate format.

Disclaimer

This practical guide contains useful information on restoring and preserving heritage buildings, but it is intended as a general resource only. Content from third parties with specific expertise has been heavily relied upon and their original works have been acknowledged in the list of references included at the end of this document. The Region of Waterloo has taken all reasonable steps to ensure the accuracy of the information in this publication. However, it is recommended that building owners consult with trained specialists, such as contractors, builders, plumbers, heating and air professionals and electricians, before undertaking any renovations, repairs or construction on their properties. The Region does not assume responsibility for any loss or damage resulting from adherence to the information in this practical guide.