

Landscaping guidelines to keep your home happy

The desire to add beauty to other wise normal looking yards and flower beds is a God given trait that allows us to enjoy the majesty of nature and creation. Landscaping has become a multi-billion dollar business in this country alone. Our own ideas of what to plant are only limited by our imaginations and budgets. As you plan out landscaping details this year, keep a few things in mind with regards to how this affects your house. The affect of unruly vegetation and improper grading on houses can range from minimal to destructive. To keep your house happy now and 20 years from now, keep a few things in mind:

- 1. Plan for the future when planting near the house.** A great majority of the homes I inspect have shrubs, trees, and plants that are plastered up against the sides of the exterior walls. At the very least, the branches from this vegetation can loosen siding and shingles. It also holds moisture against the siding, particularly on the north and east sides of the home. Moisture allows mold and mildew to form on shaded areas because they never dry out. This is especially harmful to homes with wooden siding. (One of the key elements in attracting termites is moisture). Also, in some cases, the roots of maturing trees press against the foundation walls and cause serious structural problems.

Tip: Plant items so they have room to grow without having the potential to damage the structure in future years. An innocent little shrub or tree may look cute planted 2 feet away from the house, but in 5 years it will be a major problem.

- 2. Keep mulch and other ground coverings below siding level.** Some professionals in the termite field recommend never having mulch within 20 feet of a house. I don't necessarily follow that line of thought, but it is something to think about. Conventional wisdom is that the combination of wood and moisture is a bonanza for termites. Regardless of the type of covering, the flower beds near the house should be graded to slope away from the foundation. Frequently I see mounded areas on corners of houses with trees or shrubs planted in the middle. This looks nice, but also funnels water directly toward the foundation. This is especially important in houses covered with brick or stone. If installed properly, brick facings should have weep holes at the bottom of the walls that will allow condensation and other water behind the walls to drain. If these weep holes are covered, moisture will be a fixture between the house framing and the brick. This can lead to rotted framing, interior leakage, and mold.

Tip: If possible keep mulch, stone, and rubberized ground coverings 4-6 inches below the bottom course of siding. If the house has brick, keep it 6-8 inches below the bottom course. Never cover up the bottom course of brick with any type of ground covering.

- 3. Plant anywhere you want-except near the air conditioner.** Unnatural items in the yard such as electrical service boxes, pumps, well-heads, cleanouts, and air-conditioners are usually unsightly, and creative homeowners typically try to hide these items with stunning arrays of vegetation. In most cases this is perfectly legal and safe. However, air conditioning units are specifically designed to operate properly only when they can draw air from all available sides. Planting anything near the unit will interfere with its designed airflow and cause it to overwork. This will cost you more in utility bills and shorten the lifespan of the unit.

Tip: Keep all vegetation at least 3-4 feet away from all sides of the air conditioner. Small little flowering plants such as begonias will probably not interfere with the airflow, but any permanent item of any size will eventually have a harmful effect.