

Evaluating the Landscape of a Prospective Home

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This NebGuide discusses facts to consider when examining a prospective home's yard and landscape.

Often home buyers hire an inspector to evaluate the roof, plumbing, heating system and structure of a prospective home. Seldom, however, does the landscape receive similar scrutiny.

Buyers should consider investing time and, perhaps, even money in careful evaluation of the landscape they might be purchasing. A healthy, well-designed, well-managed landscape adds significant equity (15 percent or more) to a property's value. In a climate such as Nebraska's, characterized by hot, windy summers and cold, windy winters, lawns, trees and shrubs play a major role in moderating a property's microclimate. This, in turn, influences comfort, as well as the cost of heating and cooling.

Properly sited trees and shrubs also add beauty to the landscape. However, unhealthy trees with weak limbs can seriously damage property and threaten human safety. Trees are expensive to remove, so adequate inspection of a property before purchase is a good investment.

Following are guidelines for evaluating the landscape of a prospective home.

1. A planting plan or plant list developed by the present occupant will assist your evaluation. The existence of such information suggests the owners have been interested in planning and caring for the landscape.
2. If possible, look at photos of the landscape taken throughout the year. Photos may show such indicators of problems as early leaf drop, standing water, thin or off-color turf and incorrect pruning procedures. Photos can help the buyers evaluate the seasonal change of color, texture and density. The presence of flowering plants and plants with interesting fruit, bark or branching patterns adds aesthetic value to the landscape.
3. Does the landscape use groundcover other than turf? In our climate, it's difficult to grow grasses in heavy shade. However, play areas should be covered with healthy turf. You can't play football, croquet or tag on groundcovers.
4. Evaluate the soil. Most Nebraska soils range from silty clay or clay to sandy. Most soils benefit from the addition of organic matter for good plant development. Because many plant problems are due to poorly drained soils, check the property for indications of standing water.
5. Is the soil compacted, rocky or riddled with construction debris? Does it appear the topsoil was removed during construction and not replaced? Dig several holes to evaluate the depth and quality of the topsoil, and whether there is an impermeable layer of subsoil beneath it. A soil test will identify soil composition and nutrient deficiencies.
6. Identify the turf species in the lawn, and how much labor and what materials it requires. For example, if Kentucky bluegrass is present, does it have excessive thatch?
7. Check the lawn's condition and color, as lack of uniformity may indicate improper application of fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides or soil compaction. However, turf composed of different grass species will not have uniform color. Small, broadleaved, shallow-rooted weeds (such as knotweed) may indicate soil compaction, which is common along sidewalks and driveways. Another indication of compaction is the effort required to plunge a screwdriver into moist, but not wet, soil. If a great effort must be expended, the soil is compacted.
8. Ask the current owners for records of fertilizer/pesticide applications and other cultural practices, such as aeration, dethatching, overseeding or renovation. Last, are all areas of the lawn accessible and of a size appropriate for your mowing equipment? Otherwise, you will need to hand-trim many areas, or convert these spaces to shrubs.
9. Evaluate how plant material has been located. For example, a weeping birch shouldn't be located on a southwest slope, and an evergreen won't survive long if it's growing in a low spot subject to flooding. You may need to hire a landscape architect or

designer to help evaluate the landscape's aesthetic and functional qualities, including placement of driveways and sidewalks, design of planting beds, and suitability of plant selections.

10. Evaluate the spacing of existing plants in relation to one another, and to the home and other structures. Crowded plants may not be healthy, and plants placed too close to walls make access for simple tasks such as washing windows difficult.
11. Estimate how plant spacing and plant types will affect the time required to manage the present landscape. For example, formal hedges of rapidly growing plant material, such as privet, require more maintenance than an informal hedge. Plants that require acid soils, pest control or winter protection also demand extra time.
12. Have materials been planted properly? Planting trees, shrubs and perennials too deeply can result in root death and eventual loss of the plant. Plants should be mulched with an organic material such as woodchips. Make sure the mulch is not too deep, or mounded against the trunk or crown of any plant to reduce the potential for damage by pests or diseases. Check for landscape fabric beneath any mulch. Removal will require time and effort.
13. Trees and shrubs are important in a landscape and may take many years to reach a size that significantly impacts the design. Therefore, it's important to know their health and structural integrity. Here is a list of factors to examine:
 - a. Look for rotting areas on the trunk and limbs. These often are associated with improperly removed limbs. Fungi (mushroom) growth along the trunk and limbs may indicate rot or weak wood.
 - b. Check the base of trees for bark damage from mowers or other equipment.
 - c. Evaluate how pruning has affected the framework of trees and shrubs. Has it been properly done? Will more pruning need to be done soon? If so, deduct this cost from your purchase offer or get written assurance that the owner will have pruning done satisfactorily by a professional.

- d. Are there indications of excavations for sidewalks, driveways, gas lines or other utilities that may have caused root damage? Dieback on terminal branches is an indicator of root damage.
 - e. Has the soil level of the site been changed? Most having trees are very sensitive to fill being placed over their roots or soil removed from the area within the dripline. If this happens, dieback of branches, or of the tree, may occur.
14. Does the property have an irrigation system? Is it zoned to allow for watering different plant types separately? Is it efficient and in good working order? If no irrigation system is present, are faucets located to minimize moving hoses and sprinklers?
 15. Is there a patio, path, walkway or other paved areas? Are these surfaces in good repair, free of settling and cracks? Are they located properly to encourage their use?
 16. Fences, raised beds, stone or concrete retaining walls, arbors and any other built structures should be evaluated for placement, soundness and function. If they are in disrepair, can the materials needed to fix them be easily obtained? If you don't want them, the cost and effort of removing them, including disposal fees, will need to be considered.

A home is the largest purchase most Nebraskans ever make. If your decision to buy a particular house is at all influenced by the building's site and plantings, be sure to give these the same careful scrutiny you give the house itself.

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