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G94-1209 Evaluating the Landscape of a Prospective Home

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Evaluating the Landscape of a Prospective Home

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

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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-maintained landscape adds significant equity (15 percent or more) to a property's value. In a climate like Nebraska's, characterized by hot, windy summers and cold, windy winters, lawns, trees, and shrubs play a major role in moderating a property's micro-climate. 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 your property and threaten human safety. Trees are expensive to remove, so adequate inspection of a property before purchase is a good investment.

Below 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. For example, early leaf drop, standing water, thin or off-color turf, and pruning procedures aid in evaluating a site, as well as the health of plants.
3. Photographs will also help the buyers evaluate a landscape's fall color. For instance, hard maples and oaks may be in the landscape, but not all of them will produce vivid colors. A beautifully colored tree adds pleasure for the owners and value to the property.
4. Evaluate how plant material has been located. For example, a weeping birch shouldn't be located on a southwest slope, and a cherry tree 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 check the landscape's aesthetic and functional qualities. A specialist also can evaluate placement of driveways and sidewalks, design of planting beds, and suitability of plant selections.

5. Find out what grass species is in the lawn, and how much labor and what materials it requires. For example, if Kentucky bluegrass is present, does it have excessive thatch?

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 (like 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.

Ask the current owners for any records of fertilizer/pesticide applications and other cultural practices, such as aerification, dethatching, overseeding, or renovation. Don't forget to ask if a lawn service has been used; it may have good recommendations. Lastly, 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.

For more information about evaluating a lawn, consult the following NebGuides:

G1016 Cool Season Turfgrasses for Nebraska
G751 Thatch Prevention and Control

6. Does the landscape use groundcover other than grass? In our climate, it's difficult to grow grasses in heavy shade. However, play areas should be covered with healthy grass. You can't play football, croquet, or tag on groundcovers.
7. Evaluate the soil. Most of Nebraska's soils are silty clay or clay. These soils require the addition of organic matter for good plant development. Has this been done? Because many plant problems are due to shallow, poorly drained soils, check the property for indications of standing water.

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. If so, is the remaining subsoil suitable for healthy plant growth?

8. Have materials been planted properly? Planting trees and shrubs deeper than intended can result in root death and eventual loss of the plant. A consultant can determine if this was done on your site. The lower portion of the tree trunk should not be covered with mulch. This will injure the water-conducting tissue of the plant.
9. Estimate how plant spacing and plant types will affect the time required to maintain the present landscape. For example, formal hedges of rapidly growing plant material, like privet, require more maintenance than an informal hedge. Plants which require acid soils, pest control, or winter protection also demand extra time.
10. Does the property have an irrigation system? If so, does it work well? Does it allow for watering different plant types separately? If no irrigation system is present, are faucets located to minimize moving hoses and sprinklers? For more information on evaluating an irrigation system, see

11. 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 are often associated with improperly removed limbs. Fungi (mushroom) growth along the trunk and limbs may indicate rot or weak wood.
 - b. Check at 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.
 - d. Are there any indications of excavations for sidewalks, driveways, gas lines, etc. that may have caused root damage? Die back on terminal branches would be one indicator of root damage.
 - e. Has the soil level of the site been changed? Many trees, such as oaks, are very sensitive to fill being placed over their roots. If this happens, die back of branches, or of the tree, may occur.

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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