



# TRANSFORMING THE LANDSCAPE ETHIC: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ILLINOIS LANDSCAPE CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION

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*The landscape industry is rife with environmental problems, but several big organizations are stepping up to change that. Prime among them is the Illinois Landscape Contractors Association (ILCA), a leading voice since 1959.*

It's no secret that the landscaping industry is one of the most problematic for the ecosphere, though it is sadly less talked-about than it should be. Even green roofing, ostensibly a purely environmental effort, adds to the issue. Among the leading troubles, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), are [higher pesticide concentrations in urban and suburban areas](#) than agricultural ones. (If you're gobsmacked by this, you're not alone.)

Pesticide exposure – affecting non-target plants and humans alike – is also a major concern. As the EPA says, “more than 31,000 pesticide exposure incidents related to the use of pesticides on lawns were reported from 1995 to 2002.” And because people don't know enough about these issues, they don't know what to do instead.

For decades, the [Illinois Landscape Contractors Association](#) has striven to be a voice of change, fighting for the rights of the environment. Today, that message is more important than ever. Recently, we were lucky enough to catch up with several members of the ILCA Sustainability and Ecological Landscape Committee to talk more about it.



# WHAT ARE THE MOST SERIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES LANDSCAPING POSES?

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According to its website, the ILCA's mission "is to enhance the professionalism and expertise of members by providing leadership, education, representation, and services while promoting environmental awareness and the value of the landscape industry."

Brandon Losey, Chair of the ILCA Sustainability and Ecological Landscape Committee and Sustainability Director for Ringers Landscape, is well-positioned to speak on such issues. When asked what the biggest environmental issues plaguing the industry include, he rattled off:

- Turf programs built on pesticides and synthetic fertilizing products
- Over irrigation of turf
- Destruction of native soils
- Gasoline-powered equipment



Mismanagement of pesticides and water, as well as the air and water pollution that come from machinery, can have disastrous consequences. [Algal blooms](#), [insect die-offs](#) and [greenhouse gases](#) comprise some of the most pressing.

Luckily, creating more awareness of these issues can go a long way toward fixing them. But how?

## WHAT CAN LANDSCAPERS DO TO HELP THE ENVIRONMENT?

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According to Cris Poggi, Associate Chair of the ILCA Sustainable & Ecological Landscaping Committee (SELC), the best thing we can do is to "Increase knowledge and understanding of alternative sustainable solutions, create a conversation with clients to educate and engage customers on environmentally aligned practices, [and] begin testing out environmentally aligned practices to incorporate into their practices."

One of the first steps is to reduce plastic.

"We transitioned to using PermaEdge for all our hardscape edging," says Losey, explaining that it is "Plastic free and a much better edge support!" [700% more flexible than standard concrete](#) and 40% more porous, it's definitely a non-plastic win.



That, and avoiding plastic fertilizer bags, are good places to start – and they accomplish one of Losey’s prime pieces of advice, which is to lead by example. As Poggi points out, “Contractors are consumers as well.” They can vote with their dollars and share their experiences through word of mouth the same way clients and customers can.

This is an excellent point to keep in mind when making decisions about the types of materials to buy and use. “Recycling programs should be first and foremost,” she says, adding that “Preferred products should be recyclable or compostable.”

Moreover, says Losey, it is each contractor’s responsibility to “Engage with your local grassroots community groups and be the voice of a true professional in the industry.”



## HOW DO WE GET THE WORD OUT ABOUT GREENER LANDSCAPING?

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Consumers also have a role to play when it comes to “greener” landscapes. Losey’s recommendation for customers and clients: “Demand a better/more thoughtful service that truly serves the environment and healthy humans.”

Again, contractors have a duty to encourage this movement toward environmentally friendly options. For instance, Poggi says, “Aligning and partnering with like-minded associations and groups will create synergy, a greater pool of resources and increased conversation/dialog.” Her suggestions include creating awareness through public entities – schools, libraries and nonprofits – as well as “partnering with businesses interested in sustainable initiatives that have an expansive reach.”

Press releases, marketing campaigns, appropriate SEO, blog content and other forms of media can also highlight initiatives and illuminate the issues.

Of course, events are important as well. The ILCA’s IMPACT CONFERENCE (October 22, 2019) is a good example. This year’s topic is “Resilient Landscapes: Redefining the Design/Build/Maintain Paradigm.” If you want to rethink landscaping and green roofing in terms of the environment, this conference is on-point. [Find out more here](#) or [register now](#).

Questions? Feel free to get in touch with the ILCA as a [consumer](#) or [professional](#), or contact us at Ecogardens to learn more about creating sustainable landscapes.

GET IN TOUCH TODAY!

hi@ecogardens.com  
312.550.5577

