

Improving Lake Water Quality with Vegetative Buffer Strips

“Nothing is as unchanging as change itself.” “What goes around comes around.” A dozen clichés all tell us the same thing. Changing fashions – in clothing, cars, music and more – generate millions of dollars in sales each year for the companies which produce them. It may be less obvious, but changes also occur in landscape design, whether done by the homeowner or a hired service or a nursery. In many areas, manicured acres of lawn – costly in time, labor, gas, and water – are being replaced by nature-scaping. This is the re-introduction of native plants, shrubs and trees which are hardier, less prone to disease and need little or no fertilizer/chemicals.

Bryan Swistock, Cooperative Extension’s Water Specialist, spoke at the first Lake Preservation Seminar on July 27. In a very interesting presentation, he assured us that the water quality challenges at Lake Latonka are being faced by “aging” lakes all across the state. While he gave many suggestions to improve the water quality of our lake over a period of time, he said the easiest and faster way to *begin* this process would be to establishing buffer strips along the lake.

Riparian buffers – also known as vegetative buffer strips – are buffers between a lawn and the lake of at least 3 to 4 feet in width. These buffers slow down storm water run-off from lawns before it reaches the lake. This run-off water carries excess nutrients into the lake from fertilizers, lawn chemicals, goose dropping and pet waste. These excess nutrients are a major cause of excessive algae growth and depleted oxygen in the lake.

Establishing a buffer on your property can be as difficult or easy as you want it to be. As you boat around the lake, look at the many buffer strips already in place. In some cases, native plants have just been allowed to grow with a little judicious pruning. On other properties, beautiful and colorful gardens exist. The only requirement for a true buffer is that it is fairly dense, at least 3’ to 4’ feet wide and hopefully contains native or hardy plants that need no fertilizer or chemical applications close to the lake. All properties with swales, gullies, ditches and other areas of storm run-off can also help to slow water. The longer water can sit and soak into the soil before it reaches the lake, the better our water quality will become. There are numerous interesting websites that address lakefront landscaping and vegetative buffer strips; put your search engine to work.

And a major bonus for establishing a lakefront vegetative buffer? **Geese will not come onto your lawn** if you have a barrier of plants 18” to 2’ tall. That would be a win-win situation!