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Proper landscaping helps keep intruders at bay

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Community Living

Landscape crews are spreading across community association grounds, clearing out winter's debris and readying for the verdant season. Their work does more than beautify. It also helps keep residents and property safe.

Landscaping is an important component of an association's overall security plan, said Chuck Sczuroski, a senior trainer at the National Crime Prevention Council in Arlington, Va., and a retired police officer. Plants, trees, rocks, fences and other elements work together to make a property attractive or unattractive to lawbreakers and mischief-makers, he said.

Sczuroski travels the country teaching an approach to reducing criminal behavior called Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design. It uses landscaping and site design to support four basic principles: natural surveillance, natural access control, territorial reinforcement, and image and maintenance. Some of the suggested strategies are psychological in nature, and many are low-cost.

Natural surveillance refers to keeping sightlines open so residents and passers-by can see and hear malicious activity.

"If you look at many condos or town houses, people have lovely bushes growing under their first-story windows," Sczuroski said. "When those bushes grow to be 5 or 6 or 7 feet high, they have enough hiding area for someone breaking into the home, and the average person driving down the street won't see them."

Low-hanging tree canopies, such as those of weeping willows and some fruit trees, are another offender.

You can create an adequate window to observe goings-on by maintaining shrubs at 2 or 3 feet in height and canopies no lower than 6 or 7 feet above the ground, he said.

Natural access control is about discouraging undesirables from coming onto the property, and directing them away if they do.

One common mistake is to plant young trees and shrubs too close to buildings without anticipating their growth, said Kevin

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Block, sales manager at ILT Vignocchi Landscape Architects and Contractors in Wauconda. As the trees mature, they not only can cause facade and structural damage, but also offer easy access to upper-story windows and balcony or deck doors, which homeowners tend to leave unlocked, he said. Another strategy is to install barrier plants — those with thorns, spines and other prickly growth — beneath windows and along perimeter walls, he said.

Plants to consider include barberry, holly, juniper and rose. Even gravel is useful, because it crunches when walked on.

Territorial reinforcement establishes boundaries. But you don't need heavy-duty fencing crowned with razor wire.

"Even a small fence provides a symbolic reminder that this particular area belongs to someone else," Sczuroski said.

Keep the lights on, Block advises.

"Low-voltage landscape lighting, which can be connected to a timer or motion control sensor, will expose potential predators and likely discourage thieves from even attempting to gain access to your home," he said.

A well-maintained property signifies community pride and concern, Sczuroski said.

"You send the message that if someone were to commit a crime, a small village is taking care of each other with extra eyes and ears on everyone's property," he said.

Here are a few more recommendations:

Let the board take charge. When residents are allowed to do their own landscaping, they may inadvertently trigger larger issues by creating hiding places for people or animals, said Mark Toms, general manager at Western DuPage Landscaping in Naperville.

Less is more. It's tempting, especially at newer associations, to fill skimpy beds and borders with an overabundance of plant material. Resist, Toms said.

"Allow plants time to grow," he said. "This keeps spaces visually and physically open. It also keeps plants healthier by allowing air to flow through them, which lessens the chance of disease."

Schedule regular trims. Heavily planted areas adjacent to garage doors provide coverage for someone looking to slip into your building through an open garage door as you drive in or carry out garbage, Block said.

Clip leaves and branches so they don't block light fixtures, Toms said.

Think like a thief. Evaluate your landscaping as though you were looking for a way to break in, Block said.

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