

Keeping Up

A 2025 DEB MITCHELL RESEARCH PROJECT

The Dialogue



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**A Process for
Co-Creating Ecologically
Vibrant Landscapes**



ABOUT THE DIALOGUE

Ecologically vibrant landscapes do not emerge from design alone – they are shaped over time through care, adaptation, and the shared decisions of the people who steward them. Yet in many projects, limited collaboration and weak communication between designers, clients, and maintenance teams create mismatched expectations and management practices that undermine ecological goals.

This advocacy guide reframes maintenance as an integral part of the design process from the very beginning. It presents a **series of structured conversations** that can help align vision, resources, and day-to-day practices, supporting landscapes that are both ambitious in their ecological goals and grounded in long-term stewardship. The goals of this guide are to:

- › Foster early and ongoing conversations between designers, maintenance teams, and clients to support realistic, long-term ecological goals
- › Build a shared vision for success that guides everyday design and maintenance decisions
- › Empower designers to integrate maintenance approaches into their work and advocate for the resources needed to support long-term care
- › Elevate maintenance professionals as knowledgeable collaborators, strengthening agency and dignity in their role
- › Document a more integrated, collaborative process that moves beyond the traditional design–bid–build–maintain model



North Brooklyn Park Alliance

LAYING YOUR OWN GROUNDWORK

Preparing a pitch for biodiversity in a world of weedwhackers

WHO: Design team

WHEN: Before Conversation 01

- › How can **policy support** an ecological agenda?
- › What **state or local codes**, local agency goals or guidelines, certifications, or **client priorities** would align with design team goals for biodiversity?
- › Can you recommend **local skilled maintenance** providers or training resources?
- › Are there **local precedents** for the goal landscape?



Rebecca McMackin

BUYING INTO WILDNESS

Aligning ecological goals and client expectations

WHO: Design team, client, and other stakeholders

WHEN: Concept design through design development

- › Setting **realistic expectations**: High-biodiversity landscapes require different maintenance than conventional techniques (e.g. retraining of maintenance staff, horticultural work by specialized contractors, conservancy groups or volunteers)
- › **Client and design team goals** for biodiversity and habitat
- › What steps can support these goals if alternative maintenance isn't viable?
- › **Who will maintain** the landscape and what **horticultural training** will they have?
- › How much of a **wild appearance** is acceptable to the client? To the public?
- › Defining other **planting performance goals** (e.g. shade, cooling, wellbeing, stormwater management, carbon capture, food, recreation, aesthetics)
- › Will there be an **education or stewardship** program?

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UC Davis Arboretum and Public Garden

BRINGING MAINTENANCE TO THE TABLE

Calibrating design ambitions and maintenance approach

WHO: Maintenance team, design team, client

WHEN: Concept design through design development

- › **Maintenance team goals** for biodiversity and habitat
- › What **maintenance approach** will be used (e.g., ecological gardening, regenerative practices, adaptive management)?
- › **Who will maintain** the landscape and what **horticultural training** will they have?
- › What is the maintenance **budget and what does it cover** (labor, materials, equipment, training, replanting, arborist services, design walk-throughs)?
- › Will **volunteers** be used? How will volunteers be trained, and who will coordinate and lead volunteer days?
- › What **pest and weed management** is planned, and are chemical treatments acceptable?

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Rebecca McMackin

GROUNDED DESIGN

Ongoing dialogue to fine-tune design, documentation, and construction

WHO: Maintenance team, design team, client

WHEN: Construction documents through construction administration

- › Plan set review by the maintenance team at **each milestone**
- › What **questions, concerns, or practical insights** do maintenance staff have about the proposed design, and how can their feedback be incorporated before implementation?
- › Where will **plants be sourced**? Will any be contract-grown? Are local ecotypes or seed sources required?
- › **Soil-health:** existing soil protection, amendment, import, soil biology
- › Will the design team participate in maintenance staff **training**?
- › Will the design team provide a **maintenance manual**? How to document the design intent for the project to guide future decisions?
- › Will the design team stay **involved after construction** (e.g., seasonal walk-throughs, plant-replacement reviews)?



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UC Davis Arboretum and Public Garden

NOT JUST A HANDOFF

A collaborative transition from construction to long-term maintenance

WHO: Design team, client, contractor, maintenance team

WHEN: Construction and transition to long-term management

- › How long is the contractor's **maintenance period**?
- › How does contractor maintenance compare to the long-term **landscape management approach**?
- › Opportunities for **continuity** between construction maintenance and long-term management
- › What is the **design team's role** in the maintenance transition?
- › **Plant replacement** expectations: replace failures with same or different species? Who decides?
- › Are **irrigation changes** expected during the maintenance transition?
- › Has the contractor's maintenance team faced **weeds, pests, or invasive species**? How were they managed?



Haven Kiers

HABITAT PUBLIC RELATIONS

Engaging with public perception of wildness and care in the landscape

WHO: Design team, client, maintenance team

WHEN: Post-construction

- › What are **public expectations** for tidiness or highly manicured plantings vs. a wild appearance?
- › Is **outreach** planned (social media, educational signage) for public awareness about biodiversity?
- › How can landscape managers or **gardeners engage with the public**?
- › Opportunities for public involvement in landscape **stewardship**
- › Opportunities for **biodiversity-related programming** (e.g. site walks, school tours, engagement with birding or other wildlife groups, bioblitzes, or children's educational programming)
- › Are there planted areas with **limited public access**? What is the approach for edge protection, fencing, and signage?

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