



Assessing a New Landscape

Paul James, master gardener and host of *Gardening by the Yard*

When you buy a new house, you're also buying a new landscape. Whether the home is in a new subdivision or an established neighborhood, it's worth checking out the landscape in much the same way you would inspect the house. The property could be infested with poison ivy or polluted with motor oil or have soil that won't grow anything. Paul James offers the following tips:

- Begin by strolling the property to get the big picture, including views from various angles. How does the property look from the street? What about the reverse angle from the house back to the street? What about the views of your neighbors' houses?
- Now walk the property's fence line. This will give you a chance not only to inspect the fence but also to get a different perspective on the property.
- At this point, you should have enough information to decide whether this is the kind of yard you want by taking into account the things you like and don't like. You should know how much time, effort and money it might take to fix the things you don't like.
- Now it's time to inspect things in detail, beginning with the soil. If plants in the landscape appear to be healthy, the soil must be healthy. Make a more thorough examination of the soil by doing a little light digging at several spots in the landscape.
- The next thing to consider is drainage. In the case of new construction, there will almost certainly be at least a gentle slope away from the house because building codes require that water drain away from the foundation. If the home is older, the homeowner may have made changes to the grade when adding a flower bed and inadvertently caused water to flow back toward the house. If it's difficult to determine which direction water is likely to flow, come back after it's rained or ask the homeowner or agent for permission to turn on the hose or sprinkler system and let it run for several minutes. Wander about other places on the property, especially in low-lying areas, to see whether there are any signs of standing water.
- Getting a feel for the overall health of the plants in a landscape is pretty easy during the growing season, but it can be more difficult to gauge during winter. The density of the turf will tell you the shape it's in. Check for serious weed infestation. Patches of moss here and there suggest shaded, compacted and perhaps slightly acidic soils, but that shouldn't be a huge concern, especially if you like moss gardening.
- Inspect the trees on the property to make sure they are in good shape. Have they been pruned recently? Do they show signs of serious pest or disease problems such as

borers or rot? Tree work can be expensive if some need to be trimmed or removed. Remember too that trees increase maintenance chores in the form of raking and pruning. Determine the sunny and shady areas of the landscape and see how those will affect the type of garden you want to plant.

- Examine paved surfaces of the property thoroughly, especially those near mature trees, for signs of cracking and lifting.
- Automatic sprinkler systems are great when they work properly, but they can be a real pain when they don't. The good news is that nearly all mortgage companies ordinarily require that they be inspected as part of an electrical, mechanical and plumbing report. The inspection will determine only whether the system works, not whether it works the way you want it to. For that reason, you should have a look at the system too because you may discover heads that need to be repaired or replaced or you may see poor choices in terms of the locations and types of emitters, the layout of various zones and so forth.

