

Greenbelt Gardens Protect Water Quality

“We encourage the planting of a greenbelt when lakeshore owners come to us for a soil erosion permit,” says Heidi Lang, Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Officer in Antrim County. “We work with builders and excavators, urging them to work a greenbelt into the design and landscaping of a new home site.”



Greenbelts are buffer areas of vegetation between the water's edge and a waterfront owner's lawn. They help protect water quality by filtering stormwater and controlling sedimentation flowing into lakes, rivers and streams. Lang says many Chain of Lakes property owners care deeply about water quality and want to do everything they can to help. “It is a constant process of education, and it's beginning to really pay off, as we are seeing more and more of the shorelines turned into buffer areas and greenbelts.”

Lang also points out that greenbelts replicate the beauty of northern Michigan, and also use much less fertilizer and less water than ordinary grass. She said a greenbelt can be 10 feet wide to 20 feet wide. “Property owners can still have a pathway going down to the water, but a large portion of the waterfront can be planted with native plants like River Birch, Black-eyed Susans, Juniper, Dwarf Lilacs or other native species.”

“One of the most encouraging things is that our local nurseries like Pine Hill and Messiah's emphasize the planting of native plants and also have those varieties available for purchase,” she continued. “More and more landowners want to do the right thing to protect the beauty of our lakes.”

One way to begin a greenbelt is to allow the grass along the shoreline to grow six to eight inches tall, and to reduce the size of lawns running all the way to water's edge. “Greenbelts also serve to provide privacy to shoreline owners and will encourage more wildlife,” Lang says. “They help purify and hold stormwater before it enters the lake or stream.”

Some local townships on Torch Lake have adopted greenbelt ordinances, which provide for a 30-foot buffer along all waterways. These townships include Elk Rapids, Milton, Helena and Forest Home. Lang says she tries hard to keep a good working relationship with these townships and is hoping additional townships on the lakes will consider adopting greenbelt ordinances.

Lake experts say one of the benefits of greenbelts is a movement back to a day when shoreline areas were much more natural, which encourages fish spawning, acts as a noise control area, and attracts unusual birds and butterflies. Lang says, “Keeping the shoreline natural makes a lot of sense and is much less expensive to maintain than a huge turf lawn. We're hoping to see more and more greenbelts in the next three to five years in an effort to restore natural shorelines along the Chain of Lakes.”