



Closing the Loop

Ideas for turning parks and green spaces into sustainable landscapes

By Suzanne Leenders

Turning your base housing and lodging green spaces and parks into sustainable landscapes is easier than you think. With so many recycled content products in the current marketplace, developers and managers can make a very conscious choice to provide their visitors and tenants with attractive and environmentally friendly areas to relax and play. By making a simple choice to purchase recycled content products, you are showing the world that your

facility cares about sustainability and giving back to the environment.

By doing more with less, plastic products help promote energy efficiency, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and conserve resources. Manufacturers make plastic from crude oil derivatives or natural gas, so making more plastic consumes an increasing amount of non-renewable fossil fuel. The amount of oil needed to produce a plastic bottle is enough to fill a quarter of the bottle. Recycling plastic cuts back on

oil consumption, thereby helping to extend the lifespan of our remaining fossil fuel reserves.

Statistically, people in the United States throw away 2.5 million plastics per hour. Many waste plastics that can be recycled are filling up landfill sites. If we recycle the plastic, we can reduce toxic pollutants in our environment and save space for waste disposal.

There is a vast array of recycled plastic products in the marketplace from which to choose. Ones that offer a sus-



tainable alternative to other materials that might harm our environment. By purchasing recycled content products you are contributing to the preservation of our planet.

Here are a few ideas of where to begin to close the loop.

Site Furnishings

One of the easiest ways to provide recycled content products is with park benches or picnic tables for your visitors. A majority of site furnishings contain 100 percent post-consumer recycled plastic high-density polyethylene (HDPE) made from recycled milk jugs or soda bottles and is forever lasting. Most companies have high-end design models, but usually offer budget-friendly designs in their inventory as well. Recycled plastic lumber is the perfect alternative to traditional wood and steel products.

Colorants and UV stabilizers are added to protect the finished products from the damaging rays of the sun. This results in a maintenance-free product that will provide many years of carefree service for your facility. Furnishings made from recycled plastic lumber will not harm the environment in any way and are eco-friendly to your users. Not to mention the fact that they are an extremely attractive and durable option to standard steel and wood furnishings.

Most companies use time-tested wooden furniture construction techniques in the design of their HDPE furnishings products. Mortise and tenon joinery and stainless steel hardware add to the craftsmanship to create solid and sturdy outdoor patio and park furniture from the heavy, wood-like lumber boards. The HDPE furnishings can still relay warmth, beauty, style, and comfort for the consumers. The boards are readily available in earth tones, pastels, and vibrant hues to match any outdoor setting. With a look, feel and texture of real lumber, recycled plastic lumber is better than wood.

Recycled plastic will outlast steel



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and wood furnishings by not peeling, chipping, splintering, cracking, or requiring painting/staining on an annual basis. Recycled plastic lumber does not absorb water, so it will not attract insects. Your residents will appreciate the fact that you have chosen to place recycled products on your base and showing them that "being green" is a way of life.

Playground Equipment

Sustainable playground equipment, fitness equipment, and early childhood development play sets are a fantastic idea for housing and lodging parks at your installation. This equipment would even be a great fit for preschools and educational areas on base. Playground areas are more important than ever to increase motor and social skills in toddlers and young children. Kids have to play, move, and explore their world

for at least 60 minutes per day to grow up to a healthy weight according to Michele Obama's Let's Move initiative.

Recycled plastic playgrounds are designed to develop healthy, motivated, adventurous children. Most companies design their products and engineer materials based on the impact of the children's world where they will grow up. By providing an environmentally responsible product in your base playgrounds, you are offering a durable alternative to other materials that rob our environment of valuable natural resources. Most recycled plastic playgrounds come with a lifetime warranty that rivals the steel constructed play sets offered by competitors.

Play Mart Playgrounds sets many of the commercial trends in playground design and the materials used within. Owners Dennis and Rebecca Beach as parents and grandparents and care extensively about giving back to the environment and leaving a small footprint on the Earth. Their designs enable youngsters to learn about recycling and make it personal by actually playing on a product that has been created from the milk jugs that the kids have actually used. Every play set comes with a sign that educates the families using it about how many milk jugs were used to create the play equipment they are enjoying. Parents and teachers alike can educate their children about the process of recycling. What better learning tool than to play on something that you could have possibly helped to create by drinking your milk?

Rubber Mulch and Borders

Recycled content rubber mulch for playgrounds is a rubber granule manufactured from recycled vehicle tires. The playground mulch is designed specifically to make playgrounds safer for children of all ages from all fall heights. It is available in a multitude of cheerful colors that will enhance any playground setting and equipment you might have in place. It has been studied that 90 percent of all playground struc-

tures have been deemed unsafe due largely to the poor surfacing in place, and more than 20,000 playground injuries will result in Emergency Room visit this year. By providing recycled rubber mulch, which has been proven to significantly decrease the chance of a serious injury, you are making your playgrounds twice as safe and providing the maximum shock absorption for the children using the equipment.

To keep your investment inside the playground area, many site managers use recycled plastic playground borders. These borders resemble the popular wooden railroad-ties that folks use for wood mulch. However, this version is 100 percent recycled plastic. It is a solid, routed, 4" x 6' piece of recycled plastic that is permanently secured with a steel spike so the kids can't move it out of place. It is durable since it never rots or decays, has a low maintenance factor and most manufacturing companies offer a substantial warranty on this product.

Poured in place surfacing made from recycled rubber, is a product that will withstand the rigors of heavy play and will last longer than any similar product. It usually has a top surface/wear that is double or triple the thickness of other conventional products. Compact, stable dirt is required for installation and it can even be installed on top of crushed stone. No laying of a water-tight asphalt or concrete slab is required for preparation. While it is an expensive option to commit to, you will find that this product will provide your base with environmentally friendly, longer-lasting, and LEED-credit qualifying benefits. Rubber playground mulch, rubber poured-in-place, and rubber curbs and mats should meet CPSC and ASTM safety guidelines when they are used as part of a playground setting.

Recycled rubber landscape mulch is a very sustainable option for your shrubs, trees, and planted areas to keep them clean, fresh, and manicured. This type of mulch is usually a rubber gran-



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ule made from 10 percent scrap tires (similar to the playground mulch). It does not decompose like wood mulch tends to do. Rubber mulch is good for the environment and your lawn. It will allow you to mulch without getting your hands dirty, since it contains a toxic-free colorant that will not stain or run when it gets wet.

It will protect your greenery from the hot rays of the sun during the summer and from the frigid temperatures in the winter. Rubber mulch will enable rainwater to bypass it by passing through and invigorate the soil. It will not soak up liquids like wood mulch, and therefore trapping the needed water for the plants. Recycled rubber landscape mulch is non-toxic, odorless, and cost effective, as it reduces maintenance time and expense. It reduces weed growth and does not

float or blow away. It is not a food source for pesky insects that might inhabit your park areas.

Recycled content mulch, borders, and playground surfacing is a cost-effective option for your green spaces and parks. It is an environmentally responsible product that can enhance the safety of your children at play and provide a practical solution to landscaping.

Recycling Receptacles and Educational Program

Being green should be a way of life at your installation housing and lodging. You should have a base-wide recycling program for paper, cans, bottles, and batteries. An education program for your residents should be put into place to let them know the correct method of how and where to recycle on base.

Recycling receptacles for all items need to be dispersed throughout all living areas such as housing in neighborhoods, parks, public spaces, commissaries, and gas stations for all residents. Many manufacturing companies provide green design multi-family and single unit recycling receptacles that also contain recycled content materials, which will enhance any green space. If you make it easy for your residents, they will recycle even more.

By using recycled content products on your base, managers and developers are showing residents their concern about conserving landfill space and reducing the carbon footprint. Providing attractive sustainable recycling receptacles, site furnishings, playgrounds, and recycled content mulch and borders in public spaces promotes good environmental stewardship while reducing waste and increasing recycling awareness and participation rates. Close the loop, reduce your carbon footprint, and go green! ■

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