The Massachusetts Buffer Manual

Using Vegetated Buffers to Protect our Lakes and Rivers

Prepared by
the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

For
The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection

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About The Massachusetts Buffer Manual

In 2001 the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission was awarded a Nonpoint Source Pollution grant to conduct a demonstration and outreach project. The goal of this project was to promote the benefits of vegetated buffers. The three main objectives to achieve this goal were to 1) create a buffer guidance document, 2) plant five buffer demonstration sites and 3) talk about vegetated buffers to the public. This document, three of the buffers seen in Chapter 2 and several presentations made to lake groups and conservation commissioners are direct outcomes of this project. Russ Cohen of the Riverways Program was our partner and co-presenter for three of our "on the road" presentations. Many thanks, Russ.

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To our Partners:

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Introduction

Massachusetts waterbodies are some of our greatest natural assets. They provide us with swimming, fishing, boating and relaxing. Most everyone dreams of living along the water. But as we live out our dreams and develop our shorelines, we threaten the health of the waterbodies that we have chosen to live on. Our traditional development practices removing natural vegetation, creating impervious surfaces and designing stormdrain systems have made it easy for stormwater runoff to carry pollution into our water bodies. It has also destroyed wildlife habitat, displacing animals that were once plentiful.

The Term "Water Body"

The intent of this manual is to help all waterfront property owners understand the benefits of maintaining or restoring vegetated buffers along our shorelines. This includes land along rivers, streams, lakes and ponds. For simplicity, we will use the generic term "water body" to refer to these four resources. Although this manual is written with freshwater resources in mind, the concepts discussed are also applicable to salt water resources.

Traditional development practices removed shoreline vegetation and displaced wildlife, as in this lakefront property.
Source: BRPC archive, 2002.

The new trends in landscaping are now creating a new, more natural look for waterfront properties. Recognizing that traditional development patterns have negatively affected the health of our waterbodies, landscape professionals are maintaining shoreline vegetation on newly developed lots. They are also adding a new mix of vegetation and color to old lots to create a fresh look. In both cases, these new trends help to protect water quality, provide wildlife a refuge and ultimately maintain or increase property values.

The main body of this manual is intended to help you look at your waterfront property in a new way. First we will explain what a vegetated buffer is and how it benefits the health of your water body. Next we will examine a few examples of buffers at work. Then we will offer creative new ways to help you landscape your shoreline without losing your yard, your view or your access to the water. An extensive list of native plants, which also includes the conditions (soil type, sunlight level, etc.) under which each plant will grow the best, is included in Appendix B.

Appendix A of this manual describes in more detail how pollution enters our water bodies and how vegetated buffers function to intercept that pollution. It also describes how important buffers are to wildlife. We hope it helps you understand your property and its direct connection to the water.