

Slippery When Wet

The important cities of Guanacaste have nicknames derived from their respective histories or special characteristics. Liberia, the provincial capital is called La Ciudad Blanca due to the abundance of whitewashed adobe homes lining its roads. Santa Cruz is known as the Ciudad Folklorica for its fiestas, the marimbas and the pottery in nearby Guaitil. Nicoya, is the Ciudad Colonial due to the old church and the important role in the initial establishment of the Spanish presence here in Costa Rica.

As a friend of mine recently observed, Tamarindo, at least in the rainy season, will no doubt become known as the City of Mud.

On a visit during the rainy month of June, I was fascinated to see the omnipresent red-colored goop literally everywhere in the downtown area. Hand laid road bricks and cement sidewalks in front of chic stores and restaurants were well hidden under the ooze. Window-shopping tourists in the obligatory white tropical attire were being blindsided by their sandals, flipping and flopping the grime up the back of pants and, on occasion, shirts. Parts of town seemed like a skating rink as the unwary strived to cope with the consistency of butter in some spots.

The veranillo, a welcome break in the rainy season, brought beautiful days, starry nights and perfect beach weather--just what an oceanfront resort town wants. That's the good news, the bad news is that the mud turns to dust and the offshore winds manage to insert the silty substance into nooks and crannies even more efficiently than the most flexible flip-flops.

Friends tell me that the modest resumption of the rains has restored a coating of primeval slime to the streets of the muddy city. According to the IMN, the National Weather Institute, things promise to get ever more slippery as the rains increase. Rainfall totals for May and June, coupled with satellite imagery and whatever else they plug into their modeling, indicate that October promises to be a month of very heavy rainfall. (See Restoring the River in this issue.)

Logic, observation and or rudimentary physics would lead us to realize that the mud originally was up on the hills and moved down with the rains. To many-- if not the regional political powers who oversaw, regulated and derived revenues from, the development of Tamarindo and

similar beachfront areas along the coast—it would seem prudent to keep the soil up on the hills, that way it doesn't foul the streets, sidewalks, streams and beaches which draw tourists from all over the world.

How is this done?? At the risk of repetition, (Conservation Design—It's Nature's Way (The Howler Nov.'04), rainfall is best handled as a resource, not a waste product to be discarded into the ocean. As such, homeowners and developers should look for ways to infiltrate it into their property. Shallow basins--called "rain gardens" which are becoming popular in the US—allow water off roofs and other hard surfaces to pool on the property during rainy periods and then soak into the soil. This technique works great for lawns since it keeps them evenly watered, and in the dry season they will need less water since they are "recessed."

Depending on the location of the property, road runoff may be diverted into the property and infiltrated in a rain garden. There are abundant species of native plants which flourish in low boggy areas, including the colorful gingers and heliconias, broad leafed "patos", or elephant ears, and a number of flowering groundcovers. With a little planning and observation you can have a low maintenance, natural highlight in your landscape.

Landscaping approaches that keep soil covered by mulch and constantly add organic material to the soil help avoid runoff, increase infiltration and increase water use efficiency in the dry season. Herbicides and concentrated chemical fertilizers suppress the activity of soil organisms that naturally "open up" the soil. In addition, the runoff of these chemicals threatens the health of streams and coastal ecosystems.

Once water does get concentrated and moving, look for ways to spread it out and or slow it down. The faster it goes, the harder it scours away at road edges, carrying the sediment downhill and into towns. Some developments have installed "check dams", bumps along roadsides that stop the water, causing sediment to settle out before letting the water down to the next level. Properly vegetated these can last a long time and be an attractive border to properties.

Filtering runoff into streams is one of the best ways to keep our important watercourses and estuaries from becoming choked by sediment. The caymans, crocodiles and other estuarine fauna provide an added attraction to tourists, but their habitat is threatened by the same process that soils the trousers of sidewalk strollers.

Some regulations on grading, erosion and the protection of waterways do exist, but enforcement is obviously lacking. Concerned landowners, merchants who are tired of mopping, and responsible developers working on the hillsides are the best hope to insure that Tamarindo—and other coastal areas with burgeoning developments—don't have to weather the ultimate insult—instead of the “Gold Coast,” becoming known as Muddy Waters.

Tom Peifer is an ecological land use consultant with 12 years experience in Guanacaste. Phone: 658-8018. peifer@racsaco.cr

El Centro Verde is dedicated to sustainable land use, agriculture and development

Web site: elcentroverde.com/www1/