

PLANNING AND SITING YOUR HOUSE

A Guidebook

Dutchess Land Conservancy
Millbrook, New York



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Introduction

Welcome to Dutchess County. Whether you are a longtime or new resident, or visitor of this area, you have witnessed the fantastically beautiful, bucolic countryside that everyone living here wants to protect and husband. This guidebook presents some guidelines to help you site and build a home to harmonize with our natural landscape. Following these recommendations can result in avoiding a highly visible mistake that detracts from the rural, scenic and visual experience that we currently enjoy.

General Considerations

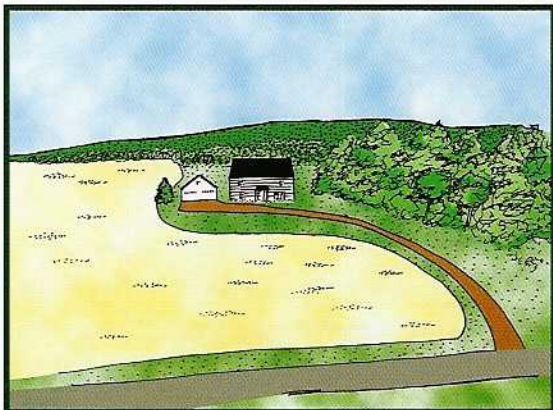
Choosing a site and designing your new house can be a daunting experience. However, if you respect the character of your surroundings and let nature guide your design you will find the task much easier.

The historic landscape consisted of village clusters surrounded by working landscapes such as farm and forestland. Take a look at the historic development patterns surrounding the area where you want to build before you plan your house. A suburban pattern of house siting is often monotonous - an equal rhythm of building and yard - whereas a more historic rural pattern clusters buildings together and surrounds them with larger expanses of open land.

Consider the contours of your land and try to adapt the buildings to fit within them rather than imposing your structure upon them. Consider the needs of those who will share your land with you so that habitat for existing species, both plant and animal, may be protected. Respect the rights of your neighbors so that you do not intrude upon their view. Remember, everyone may not share your taste. Consider the surrounding vegetation and site your structure so that it will blend with the existing trees and shrubs.

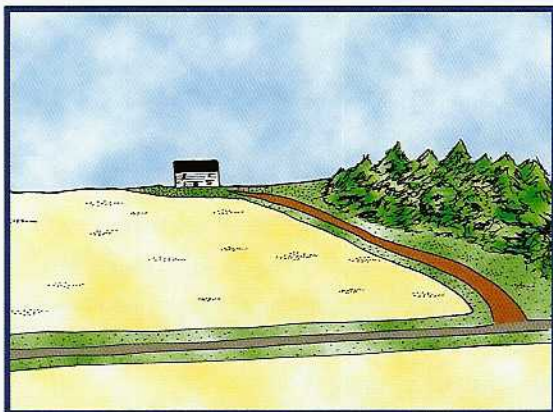
A good house site and design is one that complements its setting, its neighborhood, and its location.





Preferred – Hillside Siting

Consider reducing the prominence of a crestline siting by building lower on the landscape. Locating your house in the middle of the slope will still afford superior views while providing good natural drainage and easier access. A southeast facing slope will provide good solar orientation, enhancing winter warmth and protection from winter winds. If you take into consideration the natural contours of the hill, you will minimize grading and soil erosion and lessen the danger to the stability of the site. Choose a house site that is located on one side of a property rather than in the middle. Lower the building profile by choosing traditional rooflines.

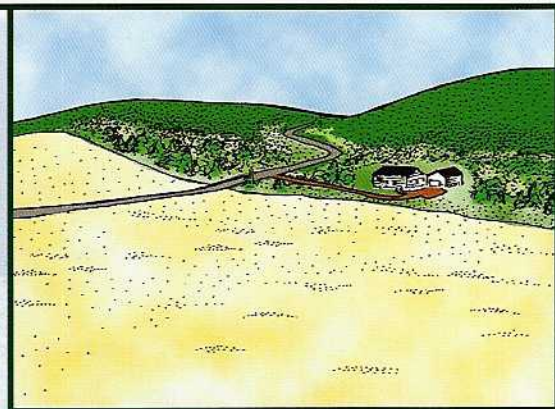


Avoid – Crestline Siting

Locating your house on the crest of a hill increases its exposure to winter winds, the strong summer sun, and disrupts the crestline and the neighbors' views. Soils are typically more shallow on ridgelines and construction of a basement may be costly, if not impossible. If you cannot locate a well at the crest, water will have to be pumped from a site lower than the house. A hill-top siting will increase the driveway length often requiring more extensive grading and utility work, thereby adding expense to the construction. During the winter, slippery conditions may force you to park your car at the end of the driveway. If you must locate your house on a hillcrest retain as many existing trees as possible. Paint or stain your house in a natural color and choose a design that fits into rather than on top of the landscape.

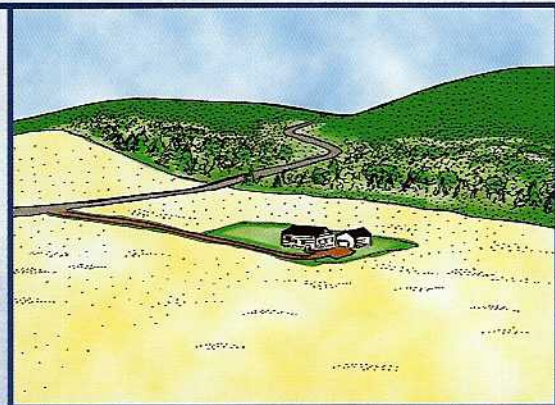
Preferred – Siting at the Edge of a Field

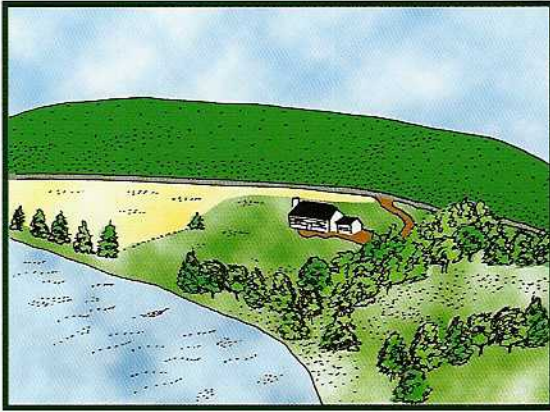
By siting the house at the edge of the field next to the woods you will acquire shelter from the wind, shade from the summer sun, and privacy. The woods and undergrowth provide valuable vegetation to absorb runoff and prevent erosion. Siting a house at the edge of a field frequently affords a picturesque view that is lost by siting the house in the field itself. The siting will retain as much agricultural and forest land as possible for future use and enjoyment.



Avoid – Siting in the Middle of a Field

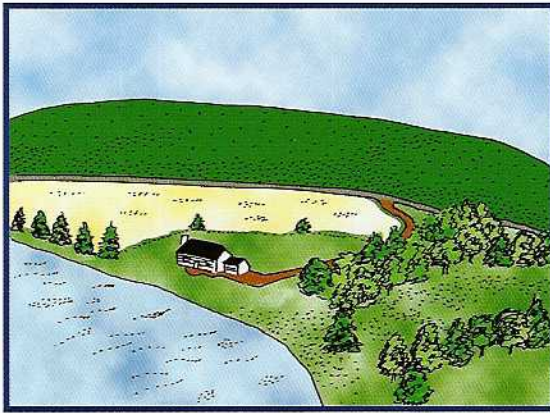
By siting your house in the middle of a field you lose any protection from the wind and sun that the landscape might offer, as well as any hope of privacy. As a result, you will eventually have to resort to extensive and expensive planting. Because your house will have no relationship to its surroundings, it will intrude on the view of neighbors and passersby. More agricultural land will be removed from production.





Preferred – Siting away from a Lake or Waterbody

By building your house at a distance from the water you will leave room for intervening planting to absorb pollutants and provide privacy from passersby on the lake. Locating the driveway, parking area and septic system on the house side opposite the lake keeps runoff and other pollutants from entering the water. During severe storms, the vegetation can also absorb significant amounts of water, reducing the danger of flooding. Finally, the planting softens the appearance of the house and shields it from those who use the lake.

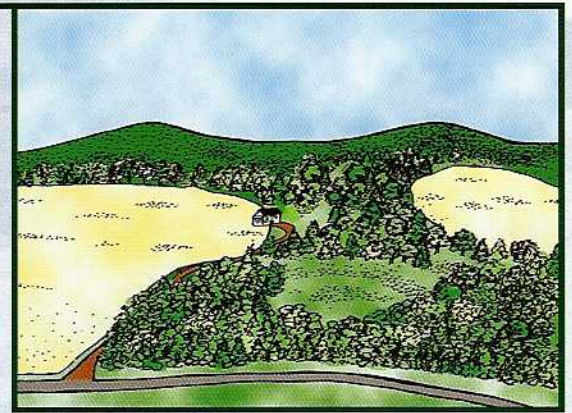


Avoid – Siting at the Edge of a Lake or Waterbody

Locating your house, driveway, parking area, and septic system at the very edge of a lake allows no room for intervening vegetation to filter pollutants from septic systems, car oil and gas residue, and salt and sand used on driveways that might contaminate the lake. Eventually, pollutants could cause eutrophication, rendering the lake useless for habitat and recreation because of overgrowth of aquatic plants. In addition, you will damage shoreline habitat that is essential for a number of species.

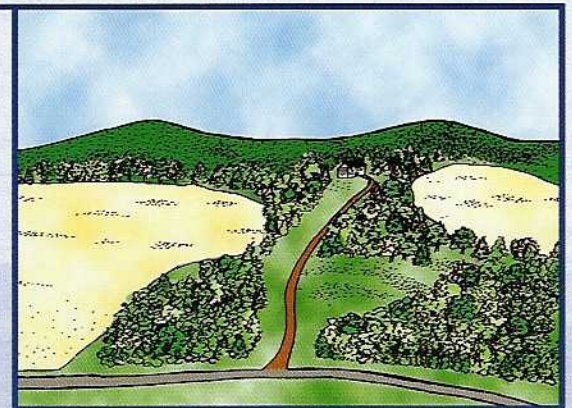
Preferred – Edge Siting

Edge siting is the least wasteful of resources and does not fragment or disrupt important habitat or other resources. Building at the woods edge at the west or north end of a clearing provides the best protection from winter winds and summer sun. Trees provide privacy and a buffer, and help to control erosion, provide habitat, and frame views. It is important to maintain the existing plant diversity and provide a transition from the built to the natural environment. By retaining existing vegetation, your landscaping is already done in a low maintenance, natural style. This will also provide cover and food for wildlife. The more you minimize changes to the landscape, the more wildlife you will enjoy.



Avoid – Forest Fragmentation

Siting a house in the middle of a forest may cause fragmentation of an important wildlife habitat or other resource. A simple road cut through a forest can effectively destroy an ecosystem by introducing new predators that may terminate a more sensitive species. This location uses more of the valuable resources for a house site than may be necessary. It typically requires more site work such as tree clearing for the driveway and house site. "Cleaning up" underbrush in woodland areas eliminates important habitat cover.



Planning For and Selecting a Site

PLANNING AHEAD

- Start with a good plan. Careful planning will enhance the value of your property.
- Remember that you are investing in your community - learn from existing settlement patterns. Rural areas have a special character; respect the past and be considerate of what currently exists. The more you take this into consideration when planning your design, the happier you may be with the results of your efforts.

OFFSITE VIEWS

- Look at your property from off site. A good design complements its setting.
- Try not to disrupt scenic views. Try not to alter the area's visual character from off site dramatically. Attention to the landscape will help to ensure the existing character of an area as a whole.
- Look at your property from a neighbor's to ensure that your house site won't disrupt their view.

SITING

- Consider building closer to the road. Historically house and farm compounds were located on the road out of necessity. A cluster of buildings separated by open land provides interest.
- Siting your house to effect the least amount of change to the landscape will protect the property's most valuable assets.

Crestline

- Consider building along the side of a hill rather on the crestline where the sun is hotter and the wind is colder.

Field

- Locate your house at the edge of a field to preserve the field's future agricultural potential, views, and to shelter the housesite.

Water

- Set your house back from a stream or water body to preserve its integrity and health - a 100-foot minimum setback is recommended.

Woods

- Try not to fragment the forest. Consider tucking your house into a woodland edge, screened by a few trees at the edge of the property.
- Partially hide your house using the existing terrain.

SITE WORK

- Let nature help guide your design. Minimize the degree to which the terrain is altered.

Site Clearing

- Do not over-clear a site. Start small and clear only what you must. Clear additional trees as you get to know your site.
- Look at your housesite from outside as well as your views from inside. Selective clearing for views is recommended. After all, it's much less costly to clear a bit at a time than to try to replant large specimens.

Preservation of Existing Features

- Protect existing unique site features such as stone walls, rock outcroppings, and mature trees. Mark the features you want to save during construction. Remember it takes only 6 inches of fill on a root system to kill or injure a tree.
- Consider not "cleaning up" (clearing the underbrush of) woodlands and fence lines which will eliminate increasingly scarce wildlife habitat.

DESIGNING YOUR HOUSE

Design

- The exterior architecture of buildings should be compatible with traditional buildings found in the general vicinity and should utilize traditional materials.
- The design should blend into rather than protrude from the landscape.

Solar Orientation

- Solar orientation for winter warmth should be a south to southeast facing slope. Orient the long face of the building to the south.
- Principal and gathering rooms such as the kitchen and living room should be located on the south and east side. Locate storage areas, closets, and pantries on the north side of a house.

Slope

- The architecture should complement and not dominate the landscape. Houses should conform to the slope. Don't level the land on which you are planning to build. It is much easier to design a building to step down the slope. Level areas are only necessary for parking areas and septic systems.

Size

- The size of a building should be appropriate to the site as well as the use of the structure.
- Large structures should be sited in areas that are not visible from the road or should be screened to fit in with the existing terrain.

- Allow the landscape, rather than the buildings to remain the dominant feature.

Height

- Buildings should not exceed the height of mature trees in their immediate vicinity and should not protrude above the treetops as seen from the road.

Color

- Consider color - natural or historic colors such as browns and grays tend to blend into the landscape. Brighter colors tend to stand out and contrast with the natural settings (especially on buildings set high on a hill).

LANDSCAPING

Buffers

- A buffer of mature trees at the north and west of the house site provide a windbreak.

Erosion Control

- Erosion control is very important. Stake haybales on the downside of construction to prevent silting of streams and ponds.

Plants and Lawns

- Stockpile plants removed from the construction site for later use. It could save a considerable amount of cost for plant material.
- Minimize the amount of lawn.

OUTBUILDINGS AND FENCING

Outbuildings

- Often larger properties require numerous buildings. Cluster these buildings (house, barns, sheds) together. Retain larger blocks of unbuilt land consistent with surrounding land use patterns.

Fencing

- Fencing that is normal and customary in the immediate vicinity, such as wire, three or four board, and post and rail is recommended.
- Chain link fencing should not be used on the perimeter of a property.
- Stockade or other privacy fencing should be limited in quantity and used only around those areas that require privacy. It is not recommended along the sides of the road which could impair scenic views.

DRIVEWAYS AND UTILITIES

Driveways

- Driveways should follow the natural contour of the land.
- Driveways should be located along the edges of fields and forests and at least 100 feet from ponds, streams or other water bodies.
- Avoid building driveways in wet areas.
- Well planned drainage will prevent erosion and washouts.
- Avoid paving a driveway. Let the water be easily re-absorbed into the earth.
- Keep the driveway on one side, rather than in the middle of a site.
- Retain trees along the driveway edge to keep it inconspicuous from off-site.
- Make sure that the driveway width is narrower than the road it accesses.
- Driveways should focus on the front door - "the entrance" - and then turn away.

Parking Areas

- Parking areas should be to the side of the building rather than directly in front.

Utilities

- Locate utilities next to the driveway and underground when possible.

PERMITS AND TAX EXEMPTIONS

Permits

- Check with your local building department about building codes that govern the construction of buildings and driveways.

Local Tax Exemption Programs

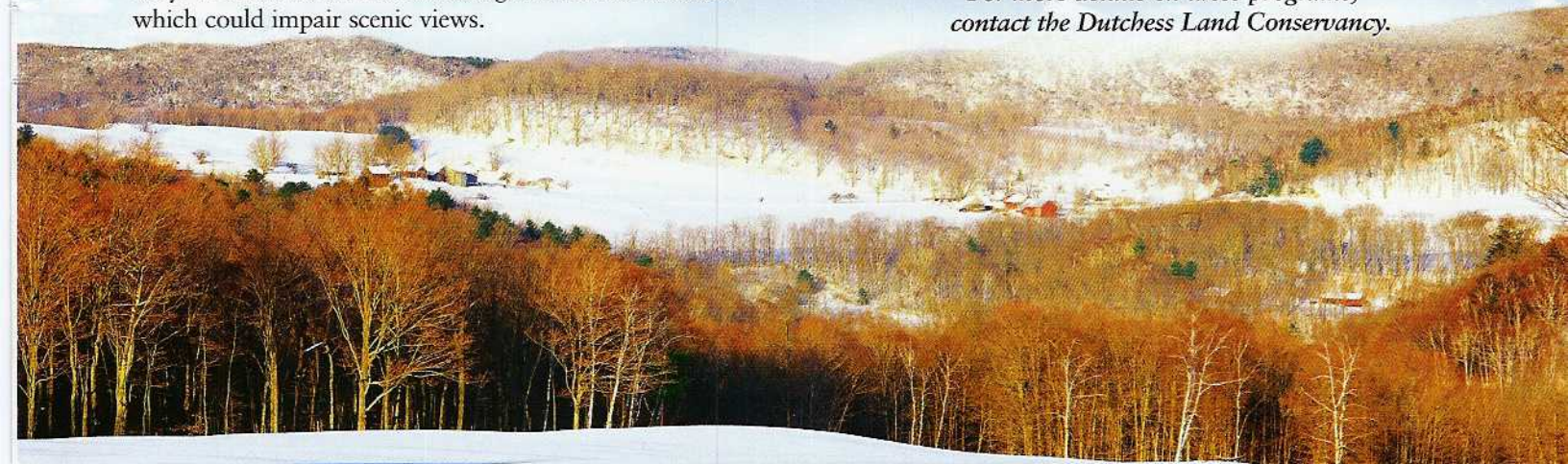
Agriculture

- You may be eligible to receive a local tax exemption for keeping your property in agricultural use under the Agricultural Districts Law.

Forestry

- You may be eligible for a local tax exemption for keeping your property intact and in forest use under the Forest Tax Act - 480 A program.

For more details on these programs, contact the Dutchess Land Conservancy.



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Dutchess Land Conservancy is a private, non-profit land conservation organization dedicated to preserving the rural countryside of Dutchess County, New York. The Conservancy was formed to protect the county's unparalleled scenic resources, agricultural heritage, historic settlement patterns, and diverse natural ecosystems.

The Conservancy fosters the belief that the public has a legitimate interest in Dutchess County's cultural heritage, agricultural productivity, biological diversity, and its recreational and visual resources. It is the public interest in these resources that the Conservancy attempts to protect for present and future generations. Through voluntary land transactions with private landowners, land planning assistance, and public education, the Conservancy helps to channel new development in ways which reinforce natural and working landscapes and create balanced rural communities.

credits and acknowledgements

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