

Basic Principles of Landscape Design

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First, thanks to all of the people who supported our Master Gardener Semi-Annual Plant Sale back on September 18. Your purchases help us extend our volunteer efforts in the community. And plan ahead, because the Spring sale is scheduled for April 16!

Second, many of us realized that – once again – we bought more than we really needed or knew what to do with! Just as we need to select the right plants for the space where we plan to use them, we also need a plan to make sure we don't over-plant! Over the next few months, my contributions to our Master Gardener column will note some principles of landscape design that you can apply in your own backyard.

There will also be a free public education class on this topic next summer on July 23. This will be about the time that many of us are frustrated with the dry, tired look of our yards. Planning to rejuvenate or redesign an area is just what we'll all need right about then. Today, we'll look at the big picture and discuss the basics of landscape design.

What is Landscape Design?

Landscape design is a blending of architecture and sculpture of gardens. It includes both physical structures and growing things. Buildings and enclosures, pools and water features, changes in elevation, styles of pots and urns, seating, lighting, and even mulch all contribute to the ambiance of the yard. Growing plants are also discussed in architectural rather than horticultural terms, such as height and shape, color value, density, texture and style.

In addition to the visual and comfort values of the garden, landscape design also includes the care for that space once it's completed. Watering needs, fertilizing, pruning and regular rejuvenation also are part of the design.

And just because a space is large with lots of 'room for error' doesn't mean that a plan is not necessary! Plants and structures can get lost in big spaces. Small spaces require attention too, because a mistake in a design will be obvious when in close view.

What Style?

One of the first major points to consider is the style of garden you want. Like any other home style, there are plenty to choose from and some will work with your location better than others. When you look at public gardens or those of your neighbors and friends, make a mental or physical note about what draws you to them or what you don't like, so that this can inform your own plans.

What kind of space do you have to work with? Is it in dense shade? Textures and colors that pop in the dimmer light become more important. Are you in a noisier area and want to find some

serenity? Water features might help here. Do you have a great Victorian style house? A very modern garden would probably look out of place.

You will want to think carefully about what you're trying to achieve from the garden space. If your space is large enough, you may be dividing it up into garden 'rooms' or otherwise themed areas. Most people want a mixture of seclusion and calm, and they also want to take advantage of views from both the garden and the house.

Where to Start

As you can see, there are lots of considerations. Friends who have spent time in our gardens – and we have at least five distinct garden areas in our yard – like to ask for advice, particularly right after they move into a new home. Right after they put away the kitchen stuff and paint over that atrocious color in the bathroom, they want to turn the garden into an oasis.

The best place to start is with information, and that takes time. For example, the angle of the sun makes a big difference in determining whether there are enough hours to maintain plants that require full sun. Dappled light may be fine for some shade plants and awful for others. And some spaces make better seating areas than others, too. You need to look at the space in different seasons to make sure that your intended use still makes sense.

How to Sight a Site

Here's an example from our yard. Over the last three years, we have been building a shade garden under some pines. We have no dense shade unless you count what is right up against the north side of our house. It's a great place for a seating area too. The space gets the afternoon breeze all summer long and its sounds incredibly peaceful in those pines. But it took us 15 years to realize that this was the perfect spot for the kind of shade gardening we can do.

Dubbed the Japanese garden for the multitude of Japanese maples that are thriving there, we had to learn some hard lessons too. The beautiful pines drop lots of wonderful needles as mulch, creating a great layer of duff for planting and keeping out the weeds. Of course, it also changes the acidity level of the soil. Many of the plants we've tried here have failed because the conditions are not right for them.

We also had to consider where we placed the patio. We have a winery up the hill from our home and we did not want their tasting room deck to look out on this area. The road is down below, and while we want to enjoy the forest in between, we also don't want to be too visible to drivers going by. And did I mention it's on a steep slope?

To figure out exactly where a small patio would work best, we put chairs out in a spot and we sat there. Then we moved the chairs and examined the site lines again. We waited for the seasons to change with bare trees and different light. I think that it took us six months to decide on the final location. Then we marked it and moved on to laying out the rest of that garden based on the seating.

Yes, this takes time and patience, but if you garden, you're already trying to practice patience with everything you grow. A garden is a poem to nature and for your own peace of mind. Cultivate it carefully! In January, we'll talk about selecting a style, and in February, what you're stuck with in your dream garden area and how to make the most of it.

The next UCCE Master Gardener class will be on **Selecting and Planting Fruit Trees** and will be on Saturday, December 4. The class is offered at no charge and starts at 9 a.m. It will be in the Veterans Memorial Building at 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Gardener/.