

Selecting a Garden Style

By Yvonne Kochanowski

UCCE El Dorado County Master Gardener

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Have you ever looked at a garden and thought, gee, it just doesn't look right where it is? It's a pretty garden, well cared for and full of interesting plants. Something's off though. Perhaps the style of the garden doesn't fit the location.

We can all think of the obvious examples of garden style violations – the ferns, cedars and maples of the Northwest in a Tucson suburb, or the prickly cactus expanse in a cool and foggy coastal region. There are many other garden style faux pas that we can commit, though, and not even realize it.

This article, the first in a 2011 monthly series on landscape design, will point out some of the garden style errors we can so easily make so that we can avoid them in the future. We'll discuss how you can plan your garden – and no, you won't have to make all decisions immediately! But you might want to keep some notes about your thoughts along the way.

Location

As we talk about often in this Master Gardener column, it's important to consider your location when you make just about any garden decision, and in landscape design, this is no different. Some subtopics here include the terrain, exposures, and soil.

The terrain of the area is the first component of your landscape plan. Is the ground level or on a slope? Will a style with upright plants look odd on the steep slope? Will trailing plants get lost on the level surface?

Next, think about how much sun this area gets. Is it eastern facing and only gets morning light, shaded the rest of the day? Will soft colored plants get lost in the shade? Will too many bright colors distract the eye rather than balance the landscape?

Soil, or sometimes the lack of it, also plays a big role in your garden plan. For example, rich fluffy soil makes a great location for tender plants that look great against soft mulch. The natural style of a rocky outcropping looks great with succulents or trailing vines. If you can't move it and you can't improve it, you have to work with it!

Harmonization

Now that you've considered the location, you have defined the foundation of what you have to work with. And I used the term foundation deliberately, because you're going to build the garden on this existing (or modified, if possible) base. What else has a foundation and a style that needs to be considered? That's right – the structure that this garden will highlight!

Let's assume that you're installing this garden around your house. What style is your home? Some of the common styles in our area include California bungalows, Victorians, log cabins, contemporary ranches and modern European villas. Whatever the style, you want the garden that you plan to be in harmony with the house itself, since not all plants look right with all styles of houses. (Are you taking notes yet?)

How can you figure out what harmonizes with your home? Paging through garden design magazines or searching online is a good place to start. I've clipped pictures of looks that I like and even searched travel guides for ideas from foreign shores. Sometimes holding a clipping up to a picture of your house helps too. For your own plan, the bottom line is to identify looks that you like and then consider what might look best up against your home.

Execution

Once your garden is in the ground, you will have to do something to it. How "much" depends on what you have to start with and what you install. Different looks mean different kinds of work.

For example, you love cottage gardens with lots of roses and perennials and it fits with the bungalow style of your house. But you hate pruning and deadheading. If you follow your cottage garden design, you'll be unhappy with the look for most of the year because the common plants used with this style of gardening need regular care.

Another execution malfunction occurs when you have existing plants that don't co-exist well with your desired look. Austere trees may not be suited for the addition of a Mediterranean style. Plants that need a lot of water won't work well with your existing drought tolerant landscape. At this point, you will need to make a choice – change the design or remove the plants that are no longer a good fit for what you want to accomplish.

Preparation

A final point is to document the style in the landscape plan itself. By now, you're probably thinking about a lot of different aspects of the garden you desire, but that's why a plan is important.

Remember that you don't need to plan everything at once, and you don't need to make all of your decisions immediately. Styles, like hemlines and neckties, change and evolve over time! Once you have documented your conditions, you have a place to begin.

And you can start wherever you want. Think about beginning in areas where you can realize the most immediate benefit. For some of us, this is next to the house and on the street side, improving the curb appeal of the property. Bare backyards might need a little something to get them started. We might select the site where we have to do the least to get things looking right – the most bang for the buck. Or, the plan might also start in the spot where we have the clearest style vision of what we want to do.

Whatever you learn and whatever decisions you make on the various points above, remember that your goal is to create a style that works for you and your home, and document that in a long-term plan for the garden. You probably won't execute it all right away and you might not even know what you'll do with some of it until years from now. But isn't that part of the reason we garden? It's the surprise in dreams unfolding and a new leaf unfurling everyday!

Next month, I'll write about working with what you have, as told through the evolution of my own massive garden! Enjoy those seed catalogs flooding your mailbox and the planning and dreaming you've begun!

Tomorrow, Saturday, January 15, UCCE Master Gardeners will offer a free class on "Rose Pruning." The class will be held at the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville, and is from 9:00 AM to Noon.

Master Gardeners will be holding their 2nd Spring Plant Sale on Saturday, April 16th in the parking lot of the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville. The sale benefits Master Gardener community outreach programs. Come check out the great selection of plants and garden art. Plan to stay for a demonstration on a popular gardening topic or bring your gardening hand tools to be sharpened by one of our Master Gardeners.

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/.