

6 Simple Steps to a Pleasing Planting Design



This beautiful perennial border shows how some taller plants can escape to the front row.

Have you ever tasted a dish you were preparing to see “what it needs?” You sample a sauce once or twice, smack your lips and wait for your taste buds to tell your brain if everything is there. Creating beautiful and successful gardens is a lot like cooking. There are many ingredients needed to design and assemble a pleasurable landscape. A great garden needs to have special features and elements and a

creative way for a visitor to flow from one area to the next. Water features, art, lighting, site furnishings, pathways and land form must all come together to provide a pleasing and enjoyable outdoor environment. Let’s see. Are any ingredients missing? How about a few PLANTS!!!

There are some designers out there who may consider plants only as icing on the cake. After all, these perishable

products come and go as they grow, bloom, fade and die while the hardscape and permanent features stay there virtually forever. In creating our gardens, we need to give adequate consideration to these backbones of design. What follows are six simple steps to choosing, arranging and planting to create that well rounded, perfect garden recipe for your property.

SPATIAL DEFINITION

To design an inviting garden is to create a variety of appealing rooms or spaces. There should always be a dominant space (a large patio or green space) to which nearby rooms are connected via pathways and corridors. In order to rely on plant material to screen and divide these spaces, consider planting for both privacy and scale. While architectural walls and fences can give an instant feeling of enclosure, using plants such as emerald green arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Emerald Green'), Hicks yew (*Taxus x. media* 'Hicksii'), Schipka laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus* 'Schipkaensis') or an upright, narrow form of holly can do much to lend privacy while at the same time providing a softer, more organic texture than more dominating manmade materials may.

The ultimate or maintained height of these green dividers is also a factor to consider. A waist-high hedge of clipped boxwood (*Buxus* sp.) will provide separation from one area to the next, but a row of taller plants with the appropriate gap or gate will truly make someone feel as though they have traveled from one room to the next.

Don't fall into the trap of always planting monocultures. While planting a solid row of one species may be fine for an interior wall or divider, consider mixing the species when seeking to plant for privacy or screening on a larger scale between properties. Try a random mixture of dwarf magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem'), Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) and American holly (*Ilex opaca*) to add diversity and habitat for both people and animals. Plus, if you lose one plant in the mix, you won't have to search the world for a specific species and size to match adjacent plants.

FORM SELECTION

Ask any garden center employee and they'll tell you that the number one feature people are looking for as they seek plants to add to their gardens is color. Specifically, it's likely to be blooming color (sounds a bit British there, eh?). However, when you get right down to it, there is one plant attribute which trumps all others when choosing plants and that is form. When you think about it, the color of a bloom is fleeting compared to a

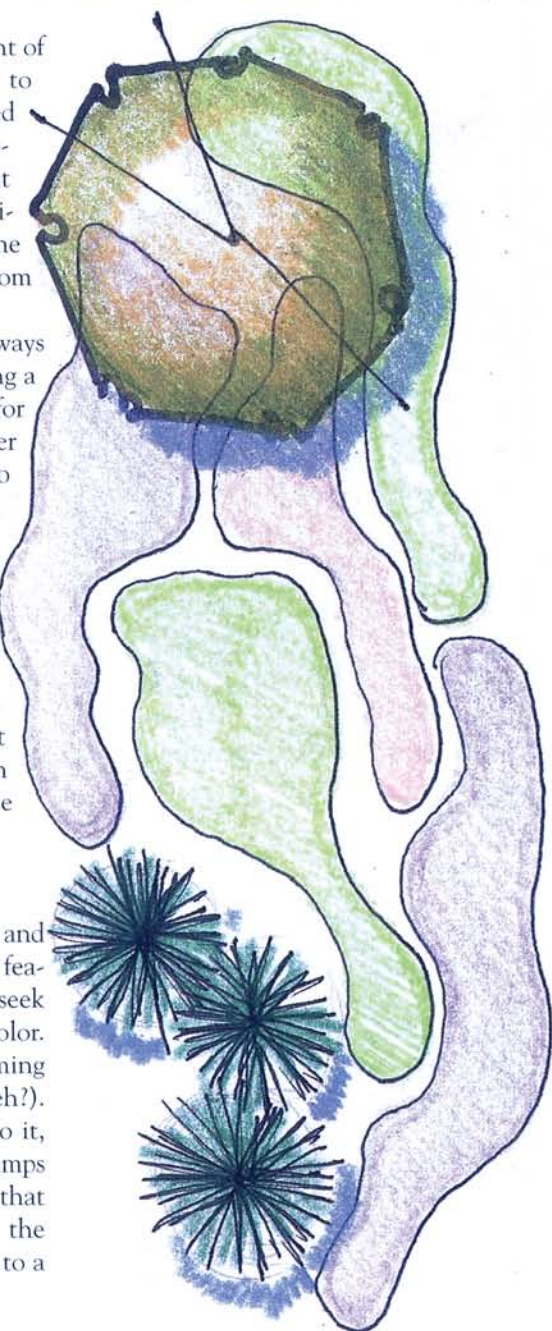
plant's overall shape. I know personally that when I design I immediately have an idea of the form I'm looking for even before I give any other attributes a thought. Tall and skinny, short and broad, prostrate, climbing, vase-shaped, oval, it all matters in the design process.

Most plants, and shrubs in particular, may be placed in one of three very broad categories: flowering, foliage and structural. The structural plants are the ones we're talking about here. If you need some height in an area but are limited regarding width, you may want to consider plant forms which are more oval or pyramidal such as dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) or bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*). There are other times when the desire may be more for a structural plant

which provides a low, spreading canopy in order to help complete the room by adding a ceiling of sorts. For this case, Amur maples (*Acer ginnala*), broadleaf Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) or hornbeams (*Carpinus betulus* 'Fastigiata') might fit the space perfectly.

One of the most challenging tasks when searching for plant material for your garden is to visualize how a plant's form may change as it grows from small nursery stock to a mature specimen. Much of the guesswork should be minimized these days with all of the information available online.

This magnolia provides an upright, narrow form. Ideal for an area needing height without the width. ▽



◀ Notice how these plant drifts interlock and overlap to create a more flowing layout.

LAYERING

This one is pretty simple. Tall plants in back, medium in front of those, and low plants nearest the viewer. Or is it really that easy and predictable? For the most part you do want to allow the viewer to see the plant material stairstepped as the distance increases. It is also important to remember to allow this layering of vegetation to take place on both sides of a planting composition if it is seen from multiple directions. But what about allowing a few taller plants to come forward to greet and surprise the viewer, thus allowing less predictability? This is sometimes known as “the one that got away” style of planting design.

Also, you may want to consider the density and opacity of plant qualities where placement is concerned. There is no reason a light and airy plant such as a serviceberry (*Amelanchier* sp.) must always be allocated to the back row, especially since it is such a great four-season plant. It is also very important to understand growth rate and the yearly cycle of a plant. Some perennial grasses, such as pink muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*), start the season as little guys but by the time November rolls around, these tufted tallboys can dwarf many nearby neighbors.

One of the most beautiful and challenging aspects of planting design is the

fact that you’re creating on a living canvas. For this reason you may sometimes want to approach your planting designs by supplementing your permanent plants with some temporary fillers. If the size of your property is already pretty small, this may not be a factor. But if you have ample space, why wait years for a plant to reach its mature spread? Add some summer-flowering bulbs, annuals or even vegetables in those gaps. Take advantage of all of that soil preparation to make your garden more productive and attractive.

PUNCTUATION

Long runs of the same species or huge masses of monoculture may be effective in the eyes of the “less is more” crowd, but even here you should strive to occasionally drop in an exclamation point now and then. There’s always a fine line between simplicity and monotony. Break up those drifts of ornamental grasses with a dazzler. This may be in the form of unique garden art or a connoisseur’s specimen plant.

In every garden there should always be an attention getter during every month of the year. This is called successional planting. As one plant’s show-stopping attributes fade, another nearby species is just coming into its glory. Punctuating your planting design layout with not so subtle focal points will allow a viewer’s eye to read, pause, and interpret the composition before moving on to the next grouping.

One thing to strive for is to do your best to only choose good plants. This



This fountain grass shows that plant layering doesn’t always have to be placed in a strict order.

This drawing shows the plant layering that is needed when composition is viewed from all directions. ▽



means shopping for improved cultivars. Irises with longer blooming periods, sedums that are strong and won't flop over in the fall or viburnums that have both great smelling flowers and attractive foliage are just a few examples of premier plant qualities.

CONTRAST

One of my favorite terms in design is contrast. Using contrast in planting design is as easy as placing a pink-flowering dogwood in front of a white brick wall. Conversely, placing plants with white flowers or very light bark before a dark backdrop of evergreen hollies is equally impressive and will make blooms appear to float before a viewer's eyes.

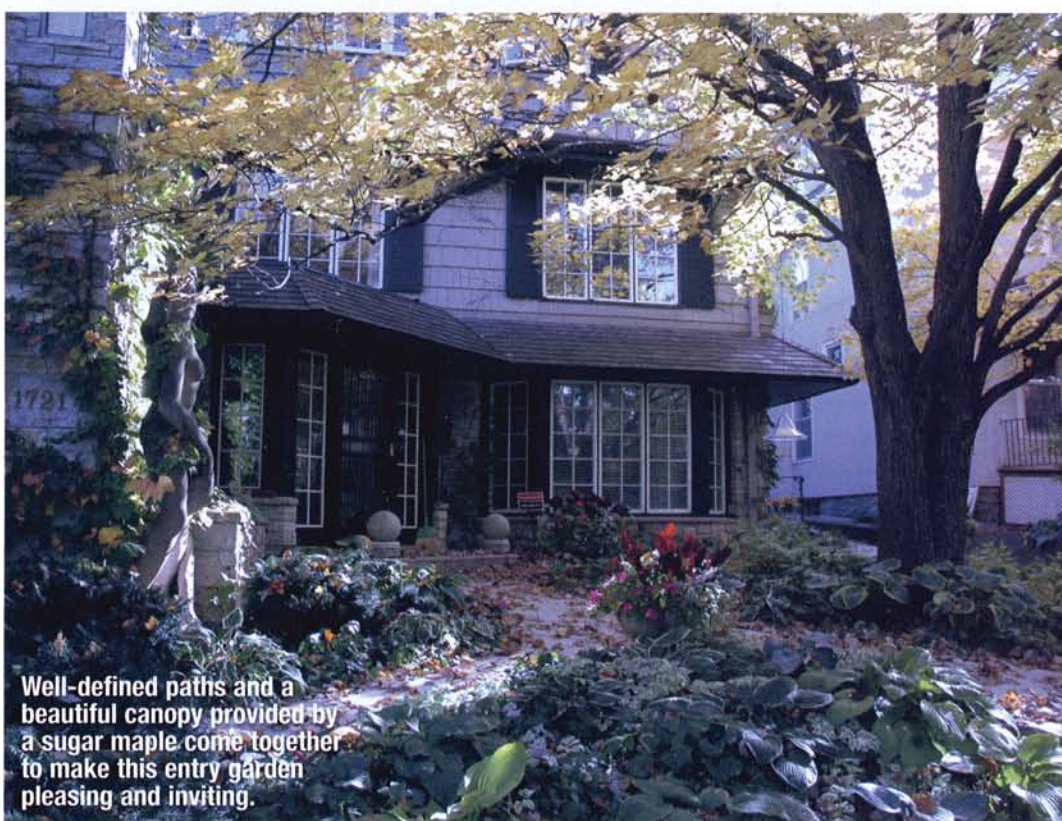
Contrast doesn't always have to utilize color. A wonderful contrast occurs when a fine-textured sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*) surrounds the coarser foliage of hosta. To understand textural contrast you need to also be aware of foliage size and shape. Since this type of contrast depends on the interplay of light and shadow, it is usually best observed when the viewer can get closer to the planting composition as opposed to viewing from a far distance.

Color contrast and theory is an entirely separate article on its own and won't be discussed here, but suffice it to say that when choosing and placing plant material, it may sometimes be worth taking a look at an artist's color wheel, found at any art supply store. This will at least tell you which colors go together and which don't.

BLENDING

Much of successful planting design has to do with transitions. How one grouping or drift of plant material flows into the next may be just as important as the plants themselves. When a stone mason builds a wall, they are very aware so as not to stack the stone so that all of the joints align. This would make for a very weak structure. The same thought process should be considered when locating groups of plants. If the breaks between species all occur in the same place, the composition can look visually weak. Allowing these breaks to stagger and overlap is a better solution. Nineteenth century English perennial border designer Gertrude Jekyll was a master at blending multiple plant varieties within a single

Beautiful color contrast occurs when providing a darker backdrop against a complementary foreground.



Well-defined paths and a beautiful canopy provided by a sugar maple come together to make this entry garden pleasing and inviting.

composition and may be worth studying.

Blending of plantings may also be interpreted as how one incorporates both woody (trees and shrubs) and herbaceous (perennials and annuals) plant material. It would make for a very boring garden if these two types of vegetation were always segregated. Mix it up a little. As was mentioned earlier, go ahead and fill some of those gaps in your plantings with filler or temporary plants.

While many of the previous ideas are important in creating a successful garden, one must always remember the gardener's

mantra when making final plant selections: Put the right plant in the right place. Exposure, hardiness, mature size, soil type, moisture and disease resistance are just a few of the criteria which must also be investigated when making final plant selections. So go out there and make a planted paradise. Understanding and remembering these basic steps should help guide you as you build beautiful beds and contemplate creative compositions. 🌿

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