

Dream, Plan, Do.

Make your water garden interactive by installing a series of "floating" stepping stones.

The best ideas always come during sleep. Like me, you've woken up in the middle of the night just to write down the million-dollar idea. But perhaps you were disappointed when you later discovered that the idea's true potential was lost somewhere between the excitement of the brain and the haste of the scribble.

For the gardener, fall can be a time of relative slumber, when quiet hours of cutting back perennials, mulching the rose beds, and turning the compost are enlivened by fantastic dreams of a glorious new landscape for the spring garden. But unlike the one-night dreamer who only has a few precious minutes to remember, the late-fall gardener has days to dream up, think through and write down a plan that maps out the perfect landscape. The following steps can help you empower your own creative process.

Simple Steps to Designing Your Dream Garden

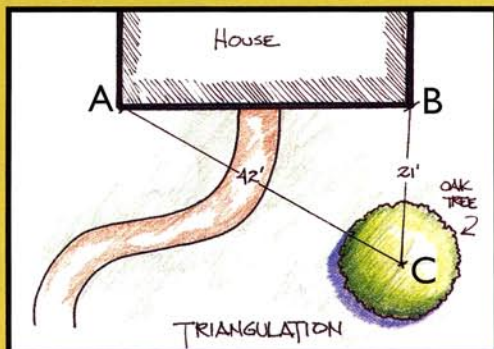
SITE INVENTORY

Before you begin to dream, you first must ask yourself, "What do I already have?" Make a list of everything in your landscape that you want to design or improve upon. If you have a new property, this won't take long. If your property has existing features and plants that you want to keep, then you must make precise measurements between them and other key points.

To quickly and accurately measure, use triangulation. If you're not already familiar with this method, it's less NASA than you think. First measure the distance between two key points (A and B) in the yard, such as the corners of your house. Then measure from both A and B to a third point (C), such as a big oak tree. These three measurements (lines AB, AC and BC) form the three vertices of a triangle that can be accurately transferred to paper.

With the aid of a ruler, scale line AB down to a piece of paper. Next, set the compass to the scaled length of AC, place the axis of the compass on point A, and then trace an arc. Repeat this step for line BC and point B, then trace another arc. Where the two arcs intersect is the exact location of point C (or the big oak tree) in relation to point A and B.

On your base plan, you can pinpoint all the significant landscape features in your property by triangulating them from the measurements (lines AB, BC and AC) you've already made. Be sure to also mark down everything that can affect your design. Such items include potential drainage problems (low areas and downspouts exits), location of utility wires (overhead and underground), soil conditions, water faucets, window locations and heights from ground level, HVAC units, etc.



SITE ANALYSIS

After you've mapped your property, it's time to figure out how you use it on a day-to-day basis. This "site analysis" not saves time down the road, but it helps you identify and avoid problems before they appear.

First, get your soil tests done early. If you discover that your lot sits over an old parking lot, it's time to add truckloads of soil amendments to your budget. How much soil preparation has to be done influences the time and money you have to spend on new plantings.

Secondly, use your base plan to map popular traffic patterns. If you frequently walk from your kitchen to the compost pile, the last thing you want to do is triple the distance by planting too much vegetative screening.

Thirdly, listen to the spots that cry about past troubles. A hot, south- or west-facing wall warns, "No azaleas or rhododendrons here again, pal!" When you start to accept the limitations of your landscape, you'll make better design decisions.

Lastly, survey the surrounding view and identify the things you want to highlight or conceal. If you cherish the view of the lake, you can keep the sightline open most of the year by planting seasonal bulbs. If you can't stand your neighbors' dog pen, then plant some tall shrubs.

Think of site analysis as a series of problem-solving exercises and come up with as many general solutions as you can. Don't start thinking about specific species

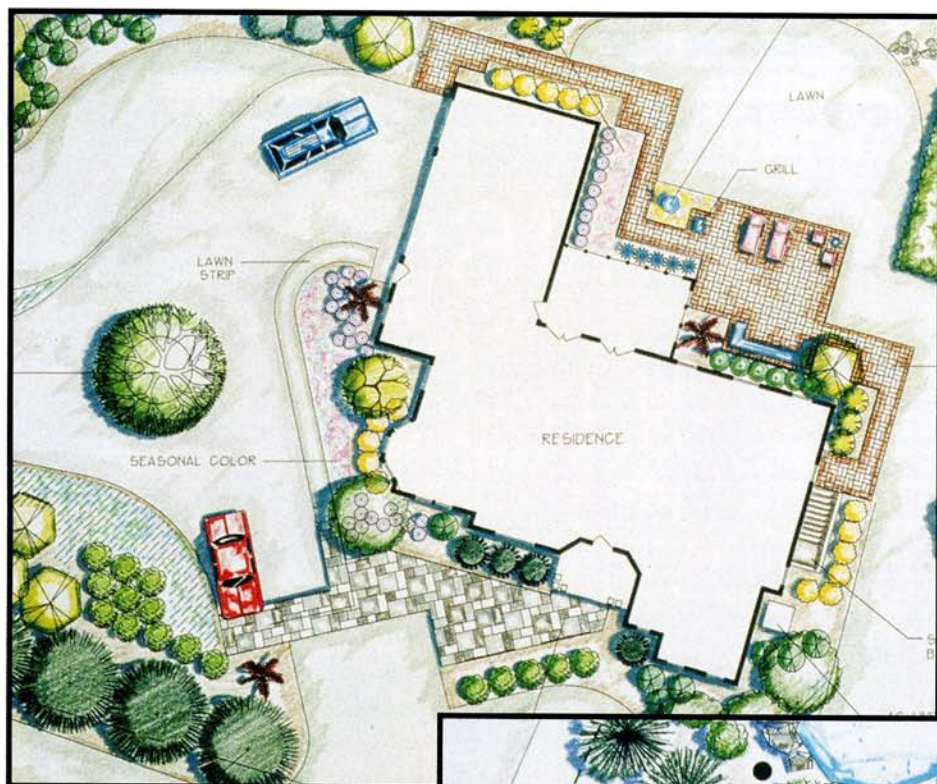
at this stage, because you might build your entire design around one species that is in itself extraordinary, but fails to relate to the rest of the garden.



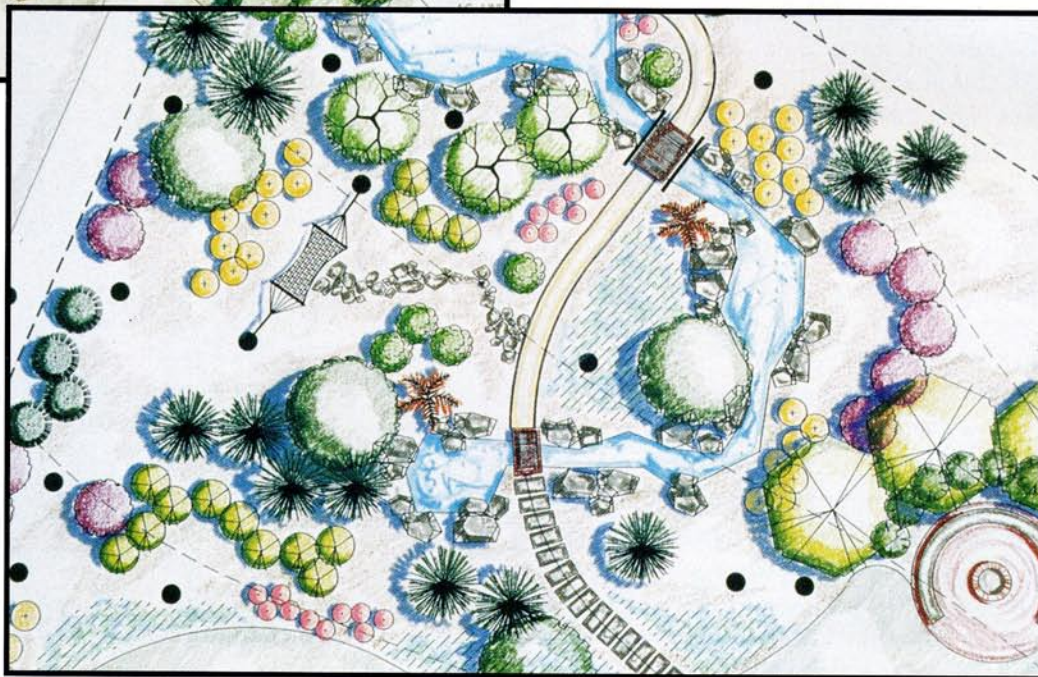
Top: Bisect your rose garden with a curving flagstone path.

Below: Decorate your water garden with this artful leaf, which was made of concrete.

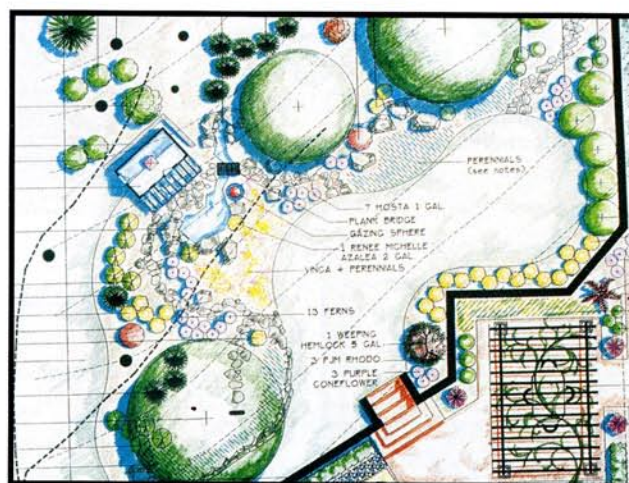




Accent the pre-existing trees of this woodland landscape with azaleas, Japanese pieris and a hammock.



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3

BEGIN TO BRAINSTORM

Now the real fun begins. Recall every feature that you've ever dreamed of adding to your landscape. Perhaps during one of your more decadent moments you considered adding an enormous koi pond to your backyard, covered by a retractable glass dance floor. Or maybe you once dined at an exotic restaurant on a crushed stone terrace covered by a rustic arbor that was adorned by fragrant wisteria. As a child, you might have even gotten lost in a gigantic garden maze at a plantation museum.

Whatever you fancy, write it down. Don't think about budgets, space constraints. Brainstorming isn't the time to think about limitations. It's a time to dismiss reality and think big. You'll later discover that small elements of those impossible landscapes can be easily incorporated into your own design.

4

PRIORITIZE WHAT YOU CAN ACHIEVE

You've let your imagination loose and it's given you a list of 20 new major additions for an already full landscape. Perhaps a garden maze is a bit extravagant for your quarter-acre lot at the end of the cul-de-sac. It's time to start eliminating the impossible and considering the can-do's. I often use the analogy that garden designs are like puzzles with too many pieces. There are times when all of them together don't make a very pretty picture.

This doesn't mean that you have to ditch every idea you thought of during the brainstorming stage. Think about the additions that were too big for your property and see if you can modify them to fit your site. You might have time and money to install a cozy crushed stone patio, build a small koi pond or put up a modest arbor.

Manipulate your base plan in a computer design program to examine the benefits of different additions and arrangements. Or just cut out the additions from construction paper and shift them around the paper site plan you already have.

Whatever hardscape project you choose to do, take your time to do it right. Ease these features into your garden's overall design. Work around the good plantings you already have. For horticulturists and gardeners alike, landscape design is an art. It can and should remain subjective. There will always be eclectics who plant one of everything and minimalists who opt for the "less is more" aesthetic.

My designs constantly swing back and forth between the two extremes. In general, it's good to have enough well-spaced specimens or focal plants to maintain balance. If you want to tie everything together, use groundcovers or low masses. When selecting and locating plants, restraint is important. You might want to see some plants from more than just one vantagepoint.

5

FINALIZE AND DECIDE ON A PLAN OF ACTION

This is a difficult step. In my opinion, change is constant and no landscape is ever finalized. That being said, you've got a manageable and affordable list of improvements at this point. Take the rough diagram out to the garden and envision what you've drawn so far. Use photos, marking paint and objects of approximate size to help you see the changes in the landscape. Move outdoor furniture to the place you desire a stone patio. Use small children as markers for new shrubs. Do whatever you need to do to imagine your new landscape in three dimensions. Make sure the color, form and texture of the new additions will match the new site. Ask yourself if new additions or improvements are accessible, large enough, level enough or too exposed. If changes or adjustments are needed, do them before you make the trip to the nursery or gardening center.

6

MAKE IT HAPPEN

When you've made your final decisions, implement the design. If your plan offers too much work for a single season, tackle it in bits and pieces. Consider installing the hardscape framework of the design first (walkways, paths, fencing, water features, patios, etc.). Install the "sleeves" – or underground open PVC pipes for irrigation and lighting – before you lay stone, brick, or pour concrete. Next, put in any new shade or flowering trees. Larger shrubs are next followed by the installation of groundcover, perennials and small accents. Your garden oasis is complete (for this year, anyway).

Though I may have left out the part about applying for a home equity loan, these six steps can help you transform your landscape dreams into a backyard reality. Remember: Just dream big, plan responsibly, and do it well. 🌿