

Landscape Design



Adding a Portal to Your Garden

Linking Garden Rooms with Passageways
Can Complete the Design

Story and Photos by
Garry L. Menendez, RLA

As a whole, we Americans possess more gardening savvy and gadgetry than previous generations. I can recall a time in the not too distant past when only the elite had the “magical” ability to water their lawns automatically when they were asleep or on vacation. Today, irrigation systems are almost common. There was also a time when a garden with a tub that held water, a plant, and maybe even a goldfish (gasp) was considered progressive. Today, water features are showing up in gardens everywhere, as ponds, streams, waterfalls, and even refurbished sinks.

Comparing the landscape designs of today with those of the past is like trying to jam a DVD into betamax player. They may offer similar sights and sounds, but the plant materials and hardscape items of today are much more durable and much easier to use than those of the past. Yet despite these advances, gardeners are still creating gardens that lack one essential element: a portal. A garden without a portal (or portals) ends up being just an expanse of green space – with a nice-looking plant here and there, but no overall design to bring out the garden’s true splendor.

◀ *These garden gates frame one another when viewed from this angle. They help to add an element of depth to an otherwise flat landscape.*

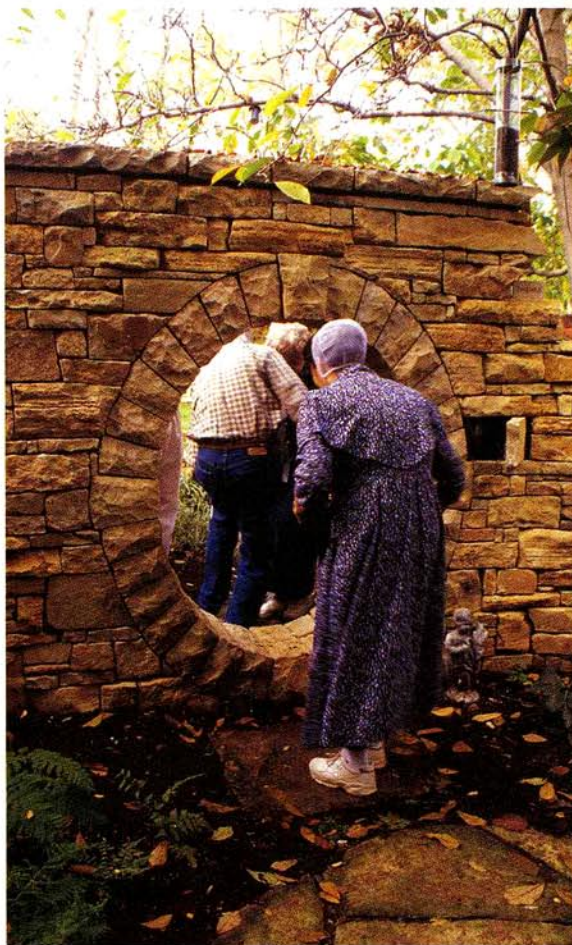
A portal, simply put, is a passageway. It can be a door, gate, crevasse or any opening that you can squeeze your body through. One of the simplest ways to transform a run-of-the-mill suburban lot into a beautiful and intriguing garden is to subdivide a larger space into smaller, more intimate rooms. Portals not only link these spaces together, but they also serve as wonderful frames for views into different areas of the garden.

The mere idea of breaking a large lot into smaller compartments may seem risky. But if you’re not obsessed with standing on your back deck or patio and viewing your estate from property line to property line, portals and garden rooms can make your landscape more beautiful and more inviting. In my opinion, the benefits of adding portals and garden rooms outweigh any perceived risks.

When designing a portal, you must think in terms of human scale. I personally believe that in order to create a memorable transition from one room to the next, you must walk not only between vegetation and a structure but also under and therefore through them as well. Put another way, you do not create a portal by passing over stepping-stones and through a bed of knee-high greenery. The portal must function as a passageway to another area of the garden.

An arbor is a perfect example of a portal. Whether it is newly constructed or well established with trumpet honeysuckle draping the canopy (in either case make sure there is an extension of walls or vegetation on both sides), the effect on the landscape is similar. You have passed from one zone into another.

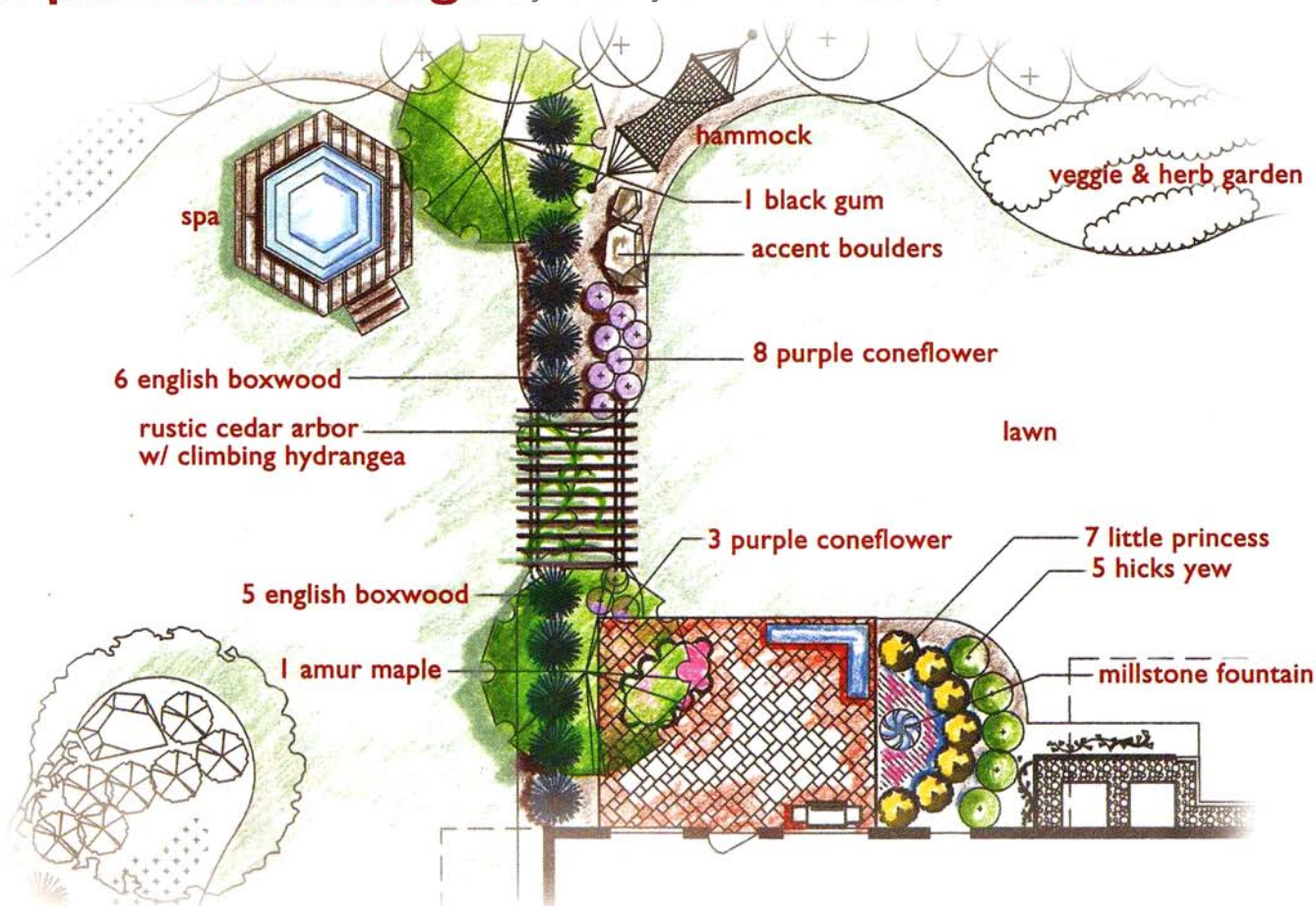
Other examples of garden portals may be a free-standing stone or brick wall which incorporates an arch or gate, or an opening in a tall hedge in which the vegetation is trained to grow together at the top of the break. If you do not have the opportunity to create a ceiling or beam in the portal, make sure that the walls or side elements are of suf-



◀ A visitor to this garden must do a little work when moving through this secret passageway. The obscured view makes the visitor wonder what's on the other side.

Adding a Portal to Your Garden

Sample Portal Design by Garry L. Menendez, RLA



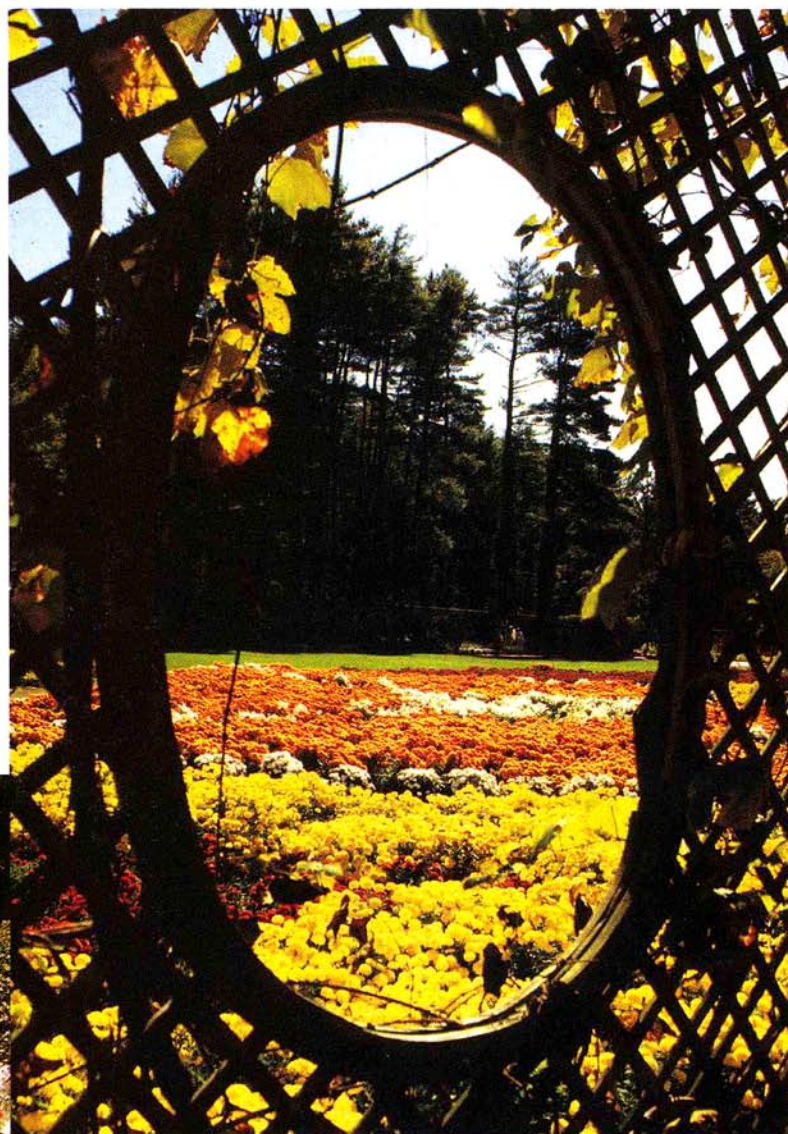
ficient size (shoulder to head high) to dominate the scale momentarily as the visitor passes through. This will emphasize the feeling of transition.

The cost of a portal will vary with the materials you select. A wall constructed of stone or brick will probably cost the most, while a wooden arbor and adjoining fence will fall in the middle price range. The cheapest may be a portal made of plants itself, such as a strategically pruned hole through a row of hemlock that grows full to the ground. (If you're planting hemlock for the first time, you are going to have to be patient for them to reach the appropriate size.)

As I mentioned earlier, I have experienced many very nice gardens only to find myself wondering as I walk about, "What's missing?" Oftentimes, these gardens lack transitional spaces and passageways. So the next time you visit a botanic garden or even a well-designed residential landscape, take time to study how the space is divided into garden rooms and linked by portals. These unique features add mystery and privacy to the garden, which all visitors will enjoy. ♡



▲ Perspective changes as a visitor moves through this formal garden, and the hornbeam arches frame different views.



▲ The landscape is framed by this unique garden structure. The shadowy lattice work emphasizes the brightness of the blooms on the other side.

Visitors to this home pass from public to semi-private segments of the garden as they walk under a dome of fragrant eleagnus.



▲ Consider the style of your garden when selecting materials for your portal. This rustic cedar arbor blends nicely with a cottage-style home.