

Planning the Home Landscape – Delight or Disaster?

Based Upon Original Text by Dr. Bruce Hamilton

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Introduction

All of us wrestle with our home garden. What do we wish to see in the garden for our personal use, how should it be developed such that it is most compatible with the home and how much of it should be created such that it pleases our neighbors or the street side community? The residential landscape should be a delight to residents of the house. If it is a constant source of tension, frustration and anxiety, no matter how good it may appear to the neighbors, it is indeed, a disaster!

Design Criteria

Evaluating the domestic landscape design is not an easy task. Our own preferences and prejudices often impair our objectivity. If we measure the effectiveness of an existing or developing residential landscape using the following three criteria listed below you will effectively:

- Enhance your design objectivity,
- Heighten your design appreciation and
- Have the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of others!

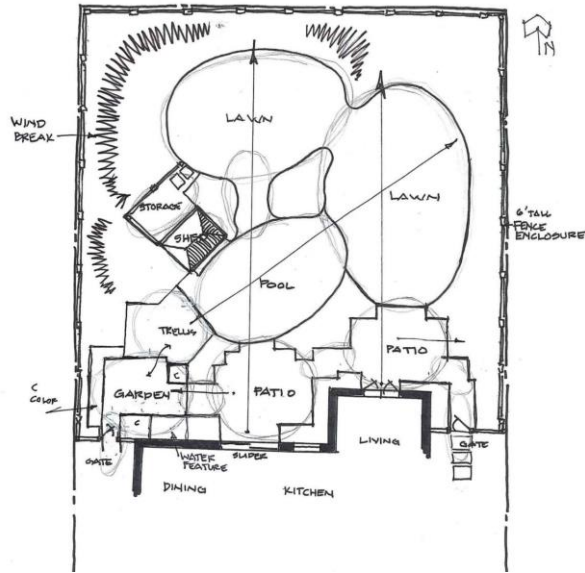
The criteria are as follows:

1. Meet the needs of the residents, especially if the resident is you!
2. Follow the Elements of Design and Principles of Design, but also consider design details that incorporate all of the human senses, not just sight
3. Provide environmentally sensitive solutions to site related problems – consider pollinators, plants appropriate to your soils types, beneficial animal and insect habitats.

The Needs

What do you or your family really need from the garden? The list is endless, but some considerations include:

1. Patio
2. BBQ or outdoor kitchen
3. Vegetable Garden/Herb Garden – will become increasingly of need.
4. Swimming Pool/ Hot Tub
5. Pond or fountain
6. Utility shed
7. Solar clothes dryer (clothes line)
8. Compost bin
9. Cutting Garden
10. Additional parking
11. Basketball ct/ backstop
12. Tot lot



Site Plan

Putting thoughts to paper needs to include a site map for these spaces to be noted. Everyone receives a site map or survey when they purchase a house, which will include the property boundaries, the location of the house and any other buildings, any easements and the location of North! Northern location is obviously very important to know in terms of where shade needs to be cast, the location of plants that are best for shade locations and the location of the northwesterly winds!

Surveys generally have a scale of 1"= 20', which is adequate for laying out the location and sequence of spaces, but it is too small for

detailing plant materials, especially the herbaceous layer. A scale of 1"= 8' is actually the smallest that one should work at for herbaceous materials. I prefer using an architect scale rather than an engineer scale (1/8 scale rather than 1/10) since it is easy to mark out the garden in the field when it is time to build.

Space

Designers spend a lot of time talking about space. Creating areas or spaces that have the appropriate size, shape and location for a specific activity is truly the key for the development of a usable garden. In general, spaces that are circular, square, octagonal or some combination thereof subconsciously inform an individual that this is a space in which to pause, sit and enjoy the area. If the space is long and linear it tells people to pass through that space. Linear spaces have a feeling of tension and energy and propel people through that space, making them feel more uncomfortable should they linger in that space. When considering these needs above, each one correlates to a space, which on a piece of paper correlates to a circle or an oval. When the circles or ovals overlap, one room freely flows into the next, much like a kitchen into the family room. However, when they do not overlap, they are separated by some form of a physical barrier. The barrier can take the form of plant materials, architecture elements (fence, wall, a building) or by landform. The shape of the plant materials will greatly affect how the space is perceived: plants with an arching habit typically create a more welcome or hospitable space – analogous to that of a cathedral ceiling – than a space which is surrounded by pendulous plants!

Meeting the Spatial Needs of the Resident

In order to meet the needs of a family and its four legged friends, the landscape should be viewed as a series of outdoor spaces. There are 3 general types of spaces, but they can be subdivided to serve the needs and delights of the residents.

1. Public space – typically the front yard. What the public sees.
2. Private space – typically the back yard. What the homeowner sees.
3. Service space – typically hidden from view from everyone. What no one sees!

Public Space

The public space is typically the area in front of a home that is typically open for the public to see and to potentially use should they wish to approach or visit the owners. For most homes, it is fairly open to the road or sidewalk and should say “welcome”, both to the home dwellers and their guests. Simply because it is the entry or public space, does not mean that it is necessarily one large space. On the contrary, it can be divided into several smaller spaces, some of which can be hidden from view and only experienced as the person travels through the spaces. In most towns, the public space is to be neat and organized. The lawn is to be cut, the plants properly cared to and – as odd as it sounds in this sustainable age – no vegetable gardens!

The biggest challenge with the public space is to detract the eye from the garage doors or driveway and to focus them upon the front door. This can be overcome in several manners, but the best way is to incorporate the concepts behind focalization – one of the principles of design mentioned below. In other words, develop the design such that the front door highlighted both by the planting, but also by the architecture of the home where possible, entry steps and the walkway! Also, the entranceway should be spacious and gracious. How often do we see the front walk reduced to a small narrow passage that is not welcoming and prevents visitors from walking to the front door side-by-side? One difficulty that many people experience is being able to transition from a ‘scale’ that is appropriate for inside the home to that outside. Typically, 4’ wide walkway is an absolute minimum, but 5 or 6’ will provide a much more comfortable entry ‘experience’. Unfortunately, we think of this numbers in terms of interior scale and 5 or 6’ seems disproportionately large. The walkway can lead the visitor directly to the front door, as would a straight walk from the curb to the front door or take the visitor through a series of smaller, yet delightful arrival spaces. The configuration of the walk is obviously dependent upon the amount of area in the public space that can be dedicated to this walkway experience. On the way, the guest should not be subjected to unflattering views of the neighboring houses or the yawning mouth of an open garage door.

The other common mistake for the public space is layering too many plants as well as too many types of plants in front of the house. It requires far less thought for us to ring a building with plants as opposed to using plants to create the outdoor rooms. Many homes have an attractive brick or stone façade that goes to the ground and there is certainly no reason to hide the materials. In addition, the plants should not grow taller than the window sills; otherwise they give the appearance that they are ‘eating’ the house!

Service Space

The service space or spaces are usually hidden from view. The dog run, compost pile, the solar clothes dryer (clothes line) or garbage cans may be essential components to residential life, but they should not serve as focal points in the landscape for all to see. Vegetable gardens can be considered service areas if you are a sloppy gardener or a featured garden if it is kept neat and has an attractive and ornamental design.

Service areas can be along the side of a house, a small space carved out of the front yard that is hidden from view or a similar space in the back yard that is also hidden from view.

Private Space

This space or spaces belongs to the family. It has the highest potential for creative outdoor living and for simply relaxing after a long day or week of work. Depending upon the family, it can be divided into Active Zones, which would include lawn sports, swimming pool, tot lot or vegetable garden, and Passive Zones, where a person could simply just sit and relax or dine outdoors. These spaces are not static – they must be flexible enough to change with the changing needs of a developing or aging family. For example, as the children’s play area loses its importance, the sand box may evolve into a pond, water feature or a sculpture.

One of the areas that should always be considered is the outdoor patio. Oddly, many homes often omit the outdoor dining room! Patios should be a minimum of 14’ in diameter to comfortably accommodate a 5’ round table, chairs and room to circulate. Patios should not be located immediately outside of the kitchen doors, since the view from inside would be of a paved surface with empty chairs and table for much of the year. Instead, it is best to locate the patio to the left or right of the axis, such that the garden is the year-round focus. Walk about the inside of your house and consider what views are most important and should be strengthened, as well as which views of neighbors should be screened.

I am also fascinated as to how we fail to consider privacy in their private space. Many houses simply have a chain-link fence or a row of white pines signifying the property line, with little other thought given to screening! The creation of shade and the use of shade trees is also an important addition to the private space that many people omit since trees ‘take too long’ to mature!!

The Design Process

A) Theory

Elements of Design

The elements of design are based upon paintings and artwork, not directly upon the design of gardens. As a result, they only focus upon the sense of sight, neglecting the other 4 human senses.

1. Line. Line is found in all designs as bedlines, at the edge of buildings or even in the courses of brick.
2. Form. The shape of objects.
3. Mass. The visual density or weight of an object of plant.
4. Color. How the reflective light impacts the eye.
5. Texture. Coarse vs. thin and the tactile description of a surface (smooth vs. rough).

Principles of Design

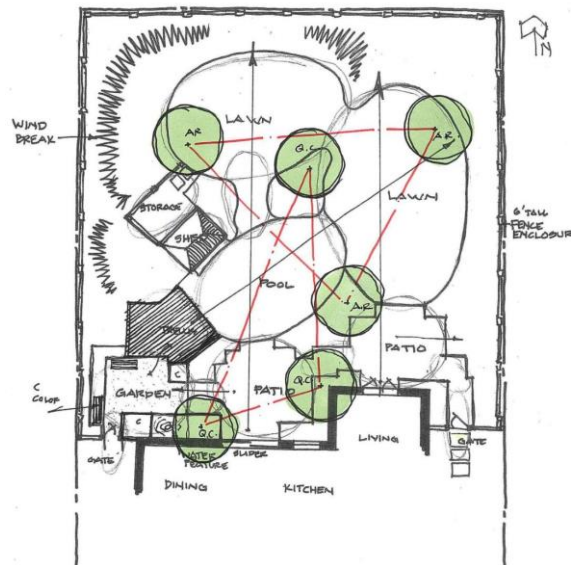
The principles of design employ creativity and common sense. Typically, they are used to control the Elements of Design. They include:

1. Simplicity. For the plant enthusiast, simplicity is the most difficult principle to keep under control. All too often we are seduced into planting one of each kind of a plant, creating a nervous and tension filled garden. The most effective gardens focus on 2 of the Elements of the Design and suppress the focus upon the remaining 3.

2. Scale. The impulse buyer often find themselves victims of ‘scale ignorance’. What appear to be small neat and tidy plants when purchased soon grow into monsters, obliterating walks and obscuring houses. The other problem is that we think in terms of indoor scale, not outdoor. Items that appear appropriate for inside a home are often much too small when placed in the out-of-doors.
3. Sequence. This refers to plants, objects or spaces that we perceive as we physically walk through the garden or as we visually process the garden. Sequence also refers to seasonal change. The most effective plants or plant groupings in the landscape have more than one season of ornamental interest.
4. Balance. To appreciate the principle of balance, you have to become aware of the visual weight of plants. A densely branched plant with dark-colored, coarse textured foliage will have greater weight than an open, airy, light-colored plant with fine or delicate foliage texture. With this in mind, there are two types of balance possible – formal and informal. With formal balance, there is an exact duplication of plant materials on either side of an axis line or focal point. Informal balance makes use of plant and material weight and proximity to the focal point to achieve equal weight on either side of the focal point. For example, a larger (heavy) plant near the focal point would be balanced with an extended mass planting of smaller plants on the other side.
5. Focalization. A focal point is the point that stops and holds the eye. The logical location for the focal point is at the terminus of an important view, such as that from a dining room window or back door. In the front yard, the most logical focal point is the front door. Plants and architecture should be used to enhance and further develop the focal point, not hide or prove to be distracting. The advent of cubism in the early 1900’s brought about the philosophy of studying objects from multiple viewpoints – a philosophy that has slowly crept into landscape design, and proposed multiple axis and focal points in a view. Unfortunately, it is much more difficult to effectively develop and few have success with this approach.

B) Application Plants

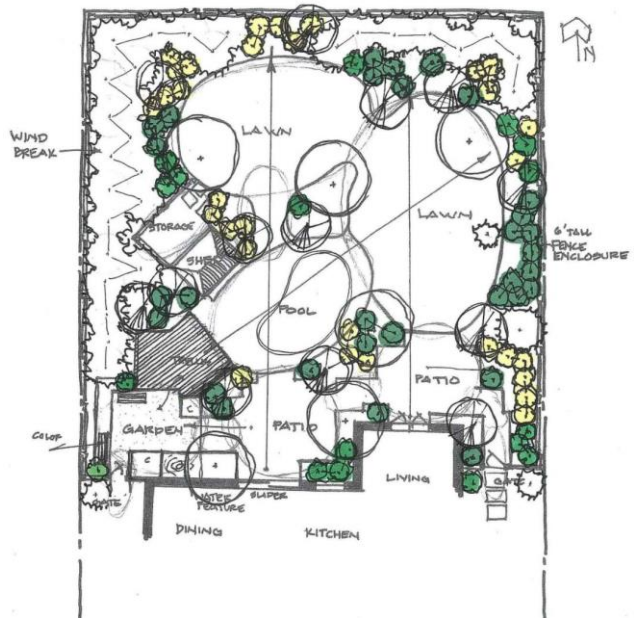
1. Shade trees. One of the most important, high priority plants for the garden. Not only does it provide a sense of enclosure from above, but it is also a solar powered air conditioner. The evaporation of water from the leaves provides cooling and – when planted on the SW corner of the house – it protects the house from the hot afternoon summer sun. Shade trees also provide a great sense of depth for the garden. Not only does the presence of a trunk create a physical marker that the observer can use to gauge depth, the shadows also create a physical point for which we can gauge depth. In the



established garden, healthy shade trees should be protected. If soil grade changes are being considered, remember, fill kills!

Trees can be planted as

- Feature plants – only one plant is selected, which causes the eye to go toward and land upon that one tree.
 - Pairs – your eye naturally passes between the two plants, and often your body will follow
 - Threes or Triangulation – produces a much more natural and calming appearance
 - Groves – masses where you are meant to sit beneath or to walk or pass through.
2. Evergreens. With the presence of year-round foliage, the evergreen can serve as the environmental workhorse of the garden. It is valuable for screening, wind breaks, filtering of light and sound as well as absorption of air pollutants. Do not plant where it will shade a drive or walkway during the winter, as the shadows will prevent the melting of accumulated snow and ice. Located in the right place, it is a growing asset that becomes more valuable as the years pass.
 3. Small trees. A very versatile group of plants in the garden. This plant may be tree like or shrub like, depending upon how it is pruned. They can be feature plants or massed for screening purposes. In the front of a house, a small tree may break the horizontal line of the roof and siding or the many vertical lines of the architecture. From inside the house this same small tree will filter the view from a picture window with its branching, adding mystery. In the patio area, the small tree may provide shade and at the same time serve as a focal point. The ideal small tree will provide year-round interest with flowers, foliage, bark and habit.
 4. Shrubs. The layer that we depend upon most to create the walls of the outdoor room, as well as color through flower and foliage color. Shrubs which grow to 5' or more should not be placed adjacent to a patio or walkway, such that they will grow to the edge of the hardscape or even beyond, as they create an overgrown and claustrophobic feeling. Shrubs reaching 3' or less do not create this feeling.
 5. Herbaceous layers, including groundcovers. The easiest groundcover to maintain is turf, but there are other ground covers which are especially useful where grass will not grow (shade or steep banks) or where grass is difficult to maintain (around shrubs, buildings or rock outcroppings). Aesthetically, groundcovers provide a change in texture or color from that of grass and they also serve to unite isolated plants into a single unit. Permitting nature to reclaim a portion of the property may also be a viable option. If too much of the property is covered by turf, the property not only lacks creativity, it can become an environmental nightmare. The 'perfect' lawn demands too much water, to



much fertilizer and too many applications of pesticides, while at the same time only permitting limited amounts of deep water recharge of storm water!

For perennials, much as with shrubs, it is easiest and often most effective to use masses of three or more perennials for best effect. Some other fun and easy tricks include:

1. If designing a perennial border, make the border as deep as is possible. This allows for greater ease of creating plant combinations and interesting plant mass configurations in the garden.
2. Allow the masses to sweep through the garden from front to back, as well as from side to side. If plants are simply in lines parallel to the front of the border, the design becomes very static. If the masses sweep into the back of the garden, it creates depth and interest.
3. Repeat plants in various locations of the border, ensuring consistency.
4. Place some tall materials to the front of the border and sweep some of the shorter materials to the back. This helps create more three dimensional imagery and continues to break anticipated or static designs in which the tallest material is at the back and the shortest in the front.
5. Color combinations are great and at their best when the colors are adjacent to one another. Sounds odd, but often designers will mistakenly select plants that bloom during the same season, but not at the same exact time. Or one will be fading as the other plant is beginning, or one flower is much higher than those adjacent.
6. Foliage! Many designers consider perennials mainly for flowers, but forget the impact of silver, chartreuse or dark purple foliage. Foliage is typically present throughout the growing season and makes it easier to design interesting combinations.
7. Spikey foliage, such as Yucca, attracts the eye and is useful for moving the eye through the Garden!
8. Mowing strips of stone, brick or wood are effective elements to use along the bed lines of perennial borders or wherever you want to maintain the integrity of the bed line shape. For perennial gardens, they are helpful for keeping errant lawnmowers from cutting off flowers that have fallen forward or to prevent weeds in the lawn from wandering into a groundcover mass at the front of the border.
9. View of the Garden. Most gardeners setup the border such that it is laid out with the long axis perpendicular to the primary point of viewing. It is often more dramatic to set up the border such that it is parallel to the main axis. By no fault of the plants, there will always be portions of a border that are not in flower. By viewing the border down the length of the garden, the plants compress together and the holes are no longer visible!

As mentioned before, when looking at the house and garden, do not think in terms of 'Foundation Planting', but rather in terms of creating outdoor rooms with the plants, much as sheetrock does in a house. This will help to eliminate the static quality that many residential landscapes provide.

The best technique is to balance these four groups of plants. Often, we consider springtime gardens to be among the most attractive, since there is color from the ground plan to the tree canopy. However, that can also be duplicated during the summer and fall season through proper selection of plant materials. Believe it or not, there are a number of shrubs and small trees that

offer color or interest throughout the summer, fall and even winter months. Consider using small or ornamental trees, shade trees and even large grasses to provide the important element of depth to a garden; the act of looking past the trunk and canopy allows even the smallest of spaces to appear much larger. Also, the process of partially blocking views creates a sense of mystery that pulls the visitor through the garden.

Interestingly, trees also allow us to live longer! A study released by Texas A&M University found that visual exposure to settings with trees produced a significant recovery from stress within a 5 minute period, as denoted by changes in blood pressure and muscle tension. The USDA has also calculated that 1 acre of forest absorbs upwards of 6 tons of CO₂ and emits 4 tons of O₂. That is enough to meet the needs of 18 people! Plants, particularly deciduous shrubs and trees, are also very effective for baffling noises from roadways, and should be considered when designing buffers.

Patios and Walks

Walkways to the front door or for where you envision several people walking together as a group should be wider than a back yard 'discovery' walk. Major walks, such as to the front door, should be 4-6' wide, while discover walks should have widths of 3-4'. Patios that are to accommodate a 4-5' diameter table for eating should be minimally 12' in diameter and preferably 14-16'! Patios for simply chairs should be proportionately smaller.

Review and Reflection

There is never a perfect solution to a design, nor is there a true definition between good or bad design. As I was always told by Dr. Bruce Hamilton, every solution has its set of problems. Most often, unattractive designs result from the designer failing to honor a good sequence and proportion of space, or neglecting to obey the Principles of Design. It is best to look at the overall area and work from the most basic level, the spatial level, to the most complex, or the Elements of Design. Unfortunately, most individuals focus upon the Elements first – and sometimes only the Elements – and the result is an uncomfortable or unpleasant garden design. The other element that always comes into the equation is budget. Everyone has a limit as to what they can afford to develop in a given year. One of the great attributes of developing a plan is that it can be executed over a period of years, as the budget and the time become available. Obviously, everyone still needs to be realistic; if you design a Mercedes and truly can only afford a Pinto, the gardener will only become frustrated and feel defeated. The true beauty of a garden is recognizing that you are indeed the king, queen and jury of the garden. After part of the garden is installed, take the time to review and reflect upon what you have built and recognize that within the legal confines of the town or state, you can always make improvements and changes as your garden continues to grow and amaze. With thought and work, even that rusty old Pinto will eventually change and mature into that shiny new Mercedes!