

Drawing a Landscape Design and Choosing Plants

Part 2 in a series

by Amy Bledsoe

After you've done your homework as discussed in the first part of this series, you are now ready to sit down and put a plan on paper. The simplest way to start is to find the site plan of your property that you most likely received when you bought your home. It is a document that has been issued by a survey company to show where your property lines are, and should show where your house sits on the property as well as any easements. Somewhere on the plat will be a compass and a scale that tells you what one inch is equal to. Using graph paper and a ruler you should be able to reconstruct the site plan, and even enlarge the scale if you need to show greater detail. Draw in the sidewalk and drive, and any existing plants you intend to keep. Draw them at their mature size, not their current size. Remember that any easements on your property really belong to the utility companies. They don't mind a bit that you plant in the easement, but someday they may need to excavate that area for repair work. Chances are they won't, but don't get angry if it does happen. It's there in black and white for you to see, and wouldn't you rather have indoor plumbing instead of an outhouse?

Take a minute or two to write down a plant list for yourself. I don't mean specific plant names, but features of plants. What plants do you like or dislike? Do you want to plant something that will attract wildlife, such as birds and butterflies? If you have deer, then you need to know that there is no such thing as deer proof plants. There are, however, deer resistant plants. If you know that you won't have irrigation, or want to do as little watering as possible, plant drought resistant plant material. If fragrance is important, then plant fragrant plants. Lists of the plants that will fit your needs and desires are easy to find on the internet. A terrific book is [The Southern Gardener's Book of Lists](#) by Lois Trigg Chaplin. It literally breaks down what plants will work in specific growing conditions. I highly recommend it. You'll wonder how you ever got along without it.

There are principles of design that you need to understand. If you don't, then you won't be satisfied with the results. Many times people who are diligent in doing their homework to find the plants that will fit the growing conditions are baffled when things just don't look pleasing to the eye. They paid attention to the science of good landscape design, but not the art of landscape design. Whenever you admire someone else's yard or see a great yard in a magazine, you may not know why it works, but you do understand that it does. It's because someone paid attention to the principles of design.

Repetition and rhythm is easy. A single hosta just doesn't have much impact on the overall look of a landscape. A group of hostas does have an impact. This is not the only way to have repetition and rhythm. You set groups of hostas throughout the landscape, even if you use different varieties of hostas, you have repetition and rhythm. Color is an easy way to repeat and create rhythm. You don't have to use the same plant material

each time to repeat color. There are yellow daffodils, yellow day lilies, yellow coreopsis, yellow yarrow, etc. It pulls the look together to repeat color.

Simplicity is maybe not as obvious. Don't confuse it with boring, either. Sometimes a single well chosen plant becomes a wonderful focal point. If you have wonderful lines in the architecture of a building, you don't want to get too busy with the plant material. Accent the lines with simple plantings. The difference between Chinese gardening and Japanese gardening is that they are completely opposite in their philosophies, but both work because they both understand the principle of simplicity. The Chinese culture adore bright colors and dramatic lines in the architecture of their buildings. The plant material they choose is simple with very subdued color so it won't compete with the lines and colors of the buildings. The Japanese culture like their architecture simple with neutral colors, but have wonderful plantings that show dramatic lines and use lots of color.

Unity of design basically means that things should look like they belong together. You wouldn't place a pond in your yard then plant cacti around it. There should be a flow to your landscape to move you easily through the yard to give the feel of unity.

Scale is the principle of keeping things in proportion. A small yard just doesn't work with very large plants placed in it anymore than a very large yard does with small plant material. Around the foundation of your house you may have a very tall, blank wall that needs a large plant place near it for it to not look stark.

Balance is keeping things even visually. A very formal garden is a mirror image of itself. Placing matching plant material on either side of an entrance creates balance if the door is centered in the architecture. Very formal, balanced gardens only work if the architecture is also very formal and balanced. Most gardens, probably 98% of them, are informal. Balance can be achieved here as well. For example, a split-level house can be balanced by placing a tree in front of the house that's opposite the tall side of the house.

Color is probably the most fun to work with. Color can be used to contrast, compliment, lighten, and brighten. Color sets the mood of your garden. A yard that has nothing but green plants in it can be boring. That's not to say that green isn't a color, too, because it most definitely is! There are so many wonderful shades of green, though. Playing a light green off of a dark green is very striking. Monochromatic gardens are very elegant and use various shades of the same color throughout the landscape. Too many colors can become too busy visually. Sticking with about three colors is pretty, complimentary, and contrasting. Within those three colors are unlimited shades of those three colors, which keeps it from being boring. Flowers are not the only source of color. Some of the best color can come from foliage, trunks, stems, and berries. Some colors just may not work against the background of your house. Too much orange in the brick may cause you to lose oranges and reds in your plant materials. Does this mean you can't have those colors in your landscape? Absolutely not! Just place them away from the house instead. Colors of planters is another way to get color in your landscape. A pretty blue glazed pot with yellow flowers in it looks striking together. Color can do some great things

psychologically, too. A shade garden with white, blue, and pink can make you “feel” cooler. Reds, oranges, and yellows are hot colors. Think about where the color is going to be placed. Our summers are hot and the sun is strong here. Pastel colors placed out in full sun areas tend to look washed out and faded. Choose stronger colors instead whose intensity can stand up to our sun. Pastel colors also tend to recede, are best appreciated close up. Place them near where you’re most likely to walk or see them. A pastel colored building can be the perfect foil for a dogwood with beautiful red stems.

Texture is almost as much fun as color. A Fatsia has a bold wide leaf. A fern has a very small, delicate leaf texture. The peeling bark of a crape myrtle or River Birch is fantastic! Hand in hand with texture is form. Plants can be upright, mounded, vase-shaped, spreading, weeping, tall, short, medium, rounded, airy, irregular, spiky, or pyramidal. You sometimes don’t even appreciate the form of a particular plant until it’s place near a plant with a different form. Variety of textures is what makes things become interesting.

In the next part of this series, I’ll talk about some common mistakes that are made in landscape design, and discuss the advantage of hiring a landscape designer or landscape architect. Got questions? E-mail me!