

Evaluating Your Landscape

Part 1 in a Series

by Amy Bledsoe

Winter is coming to an end soon, and as it does, people inevitably emerge from winter hibernation. Ah, Spring--that seemingly ten minutes or so that we have in Columbia that the weather is just perfect. The pollen has not run us in yet, the bugs have yet to emerge to plague us with their incessant biting, the temperatures and humidity are in a low enough range that we can comfortably draw a deep breath, and its still daylight when we pull in to our drives from work. With enthusiasm we turn to our yards for both pleasure and to evaluate problems we may have had to deal with in the past.

Many people have asked me how to get started with a yard makeover or even to start planning a new yard. It's easy to get overwhelmed, but the answer is easy! You start plans for your yard in the same manner that you eat an elephant: one bite at a time!

Before you can decide what to plant, you have decide what it is you want to use the various areas of your yard for. Do you want to have a play area for the kids? Do you need to park a boat or RV? Do you need a place to get from the front yard to the back? Do you need an area for the dog? Do you need an area for entertaining? Are you passionate about golf and need a putting green? Now that you've thought about the usage of your yard, think about any future additions you may be making to the house, even if they're a long way in the future. Will you add or enlarge a deck or patio? Will you be adding rooms to your home? Do you wish to widen the drive or add a parking/turn around area? Ok, you're set with future plans.

Now think about your lifestyle. Are you parents of young children and have little or no time to work in the yard? Are you someone who is concerned about what is being added to the foods found in most grocery stores and would like homegrown vegetables? Are you someone who is just mad about spending time gardening, and hours in the yard are a pleasure? Realistically, how much time can you devote to a garden? These are questions you will need to ask yourself, because there just plain is no such thing as a maintenance free yard.

Along with your lifestyle, you also need to consider your age and health. Fact is, none of us are getting any younger. Getting down and pulling weeds may not be something that is easy to do in ten years. Consider raised beds if you have physical challenges. Wide, easy paths that are easy to walk on or accommodate a wheel chair is easy to add if you think to do so. Surfaces, too, for paths may be decided by how user friendly they are to physically challenged people.

A major issue for many folks is privacy. We often share our yards with neighbors on both side yards and adjoining backyards. We don't want to see them any more than you want them looking at us. Look out from inside your house and decide where you can strategically place plants that will act as a screen. Go outside as well and decide what the neighbors can see from their perspective as well. I like my neighbors just fine, but when I'm sun bathing on my deck, I

have no desire to be seen by them! Screening isn't just visual, either. Plants can screen noise from a busy road as well. Well placed plants can really muffle the noise level that reaches you.

Now look at those problem areas of your yard. You know the ones. You really don't like the way you can see the trash can. You don't like the view in a certain place. Deer plague you. There's too much shade. There's too much sun. Erosion is a problem. Compaction, moss, mildew, standing water, a tree too close to the house, and the list goes on. For every problem, there is a solution.

Don't forget your wish list. Those are those things that in your dream yard you'd just love to have. Sometimes it's a putting green. Sometimes it's a pond, or a pergola, a rose garden, an arbor, a sitting area, a pool, or anything that for you personally would make your yard more than a yard: a sanctuary. Look in magazines like Southern Living for ideas that you can borrow. Art, benches, window boxes, hanging baskets, color pots, gazing balls, statuary, and such add personality to your yard. It's your yard. Make it fit your tastes and personality.

Along with dreams, however, comes the practical considerations. You have to know the starting facts of the yard. What type of soil do you have? A soil test done by Clemson Extension offices should be the first thing you spend money on because everything depends on your soil. Soils can be amended to meet the needs of the plants you choose, but a soil test is the only way to know where you stand. Results of your soil test will tell you the pH, what nutrients are needed, and the recommended amounts of needed nutrients to be added. By not guessing, you will save money! A soil test usually takes less than two weeks for the results to come back, only costs \$6, and can even be e-mailed to you! The benefits are priceless.

All plants depend on light to make chlorophyll. Remember your middle school science classes? Well, the facts remain true even now. The interesting thing is that not all plants have the same light requirements. In fact, very few plants grow well in both shade and full sun. Evaluate the shade that you have. It's not the same everywhere in your yard. Next to buildings, fences, and dense tree canopies, you will have full shade. That shade will move as the sun progresses. Some areas will have morning shade and afternoon sun. Some areas will have morning sun and afternoon shade. Some areas may have full sun or full shade all day. Dappled shade is different than full shade. Spend a little time watching the shade and sun patterns in your yard. If nothing else, know which direction north lies.

If you've lived here a year, you know a little something about our climate. We have cold, hot, and miserable! Plants have a given range in which they will grow. The country has been divided up into zones of similar temperature ranges. Plant tags will say what a particular plant's hardiness zone range is. Columbia is located in Zone 8, but some of the rural areas to the north or east of Columbia may drop to Zone 7b. If Zone 8 is within the hardiness zone of a plant you purchase, you should have little problem growing it here. If the range is Zone 9 or higher, treat the plant as a tropical. Watch the other end of the range as well. If a plant is only hardy through Zone 7, the plant is likely to melt under our excruciating heat and humidity.

Drainage for most plants is a must. The list is pretty short of plants that can stand in water. This is usually correctable, but can involve a lot of labor and expense. Erosion is a problem that can

be solved often by choosing a good plant to help hold the soil on slopes. All this goes back to evaluating your problem areas.

Hardscapes, too, will be factor that determines what can be planted. Sidewalks, drives, patios, and decks will interfere with a plant's ability to absorb water and nutrients. Everyone's seen how a tree will push up a sidewalk or drive in a desperate attempt to get air. Take this into account.

Consider lighting in your yard. Some of the most attractive yards make use of up lighting or down lighting to bring an attractive feature of the yard into focus. Safety lighting may even be something you desire along a path to an entrance.

Americans have traditionally planted shrubs around the foundation of their houses. This practice started when pigs and chickens were allowed to run underneath houses in colonial times. Shrubs were planted to hide the unsightly mess. Europeans, however, tend to plant where there's a view from inside their homes. Think about it. If you're looking out of a window from your favorite spot to relax, you don't even see whatever is planted against the house. Traditions are hard to let go, so if you need foundation plantings to make you feel comfortable, do it, but plant something you can see from the inside as well. Speaking of views, don't forget about those "borrowed" views. Those are the areas you can see from your yard. It may be a fine example of architecture in a neighboring church, or a view of the lake. This is the type of view you don't want to block. Instead, frame the view with plants.

One thing most people overlook when planting is to look up. That's right, up. We live in and love the age of electricity. However, it usually arrives in our house by overhead power lines. It doesn't take a genius to know that a tree that is planted beneath a power line is going to be butchered by the power company.

For esthetic purposes, take into account the color of your house and trim. Plants can compliment your house or they can disappear if you choose the wrong color plant material. Sometimes they can even clash!

All this is homework you should do before you spend the first dollar on any plant material. It may seem overwhelming, but it really just boils down to common sense. Most people work too hard for their money to just throw it away on the wrong plants for the yard. A little homework before you choose plants will make you much happier with the results you want to achieve.

The next part of the series will focus more on the plants themselves and the science and art of landscape design. Stay tuned! Got questions? E-mail me!