

## Landscaping Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Part 3 in a Series

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There are some common landscaping mistakes that are incredibly easy to avoid. You want your yard to have curb appeal, naturally. So have you ever stopped to wonder why so many folks create runways in their front yards? Runways get created visually by bordering a straight driveway with a row of plants on either side of the drive. This leads your eye straight up to, of all things, the garage door! Is this really what you want people to see? Have you ever seen a truly beautiful garage door? Of course you haven't! Yet you and I, both, have seen people do just this. When guests arrive at your home, you want to create an impression of welcome. Therefore, the entrance to your home should be the main focal point here, not the garage door. Paint the front door a complimentary, but different color, from the rest of the house's trim, and plant your landscape so that your eye follows in a curve to the front door. Nature would never plant in a straight line, and neither should you.

Having no focal point is another mistake folks make. If you will agree that there are some things that we want to screen, like trash cans or air conditions, then doesn't it follow that you would want to attract the eye's attention to something better? Think of your yard as an extension of your home. When you decorated the interior of your home you thought about your floors, walls, and ceilings, right? Carry those same ideas outside your home, too. You put terrific rugs down, hung pictures, displayed art, and used lighting to decorate. Outside, groundcovers can become striking carpets, pictures are created with floral displays, art is garden statuary, and the lighting now brings into focus the drama of the peeling bark of your River Birch. Rooms can be created. Shrubs become walls, and the furniture takes on a whole different feel. Who can resist the lure of the scent of steak cooked on a grill? Bring the kitchen outdoors with an area for grilling or bring the fireplace outside with a fire pit or chimnea. A pergola with a vines draping across creates a ceiling that the cottage cheese ceiling inside your house just can't even come close to competing with. Additionally, you can please more of your senses with your outdoor rooms. You know how soothing the sound of a fountain or waterfall is to you at then end of a hard day, not to mention the sound of the birds chirping in the trees. Movement of leaves as the wind blows through them is soothing. Few could argue the antics of hummingbirds as they boldly defend their territory makes us forget our troubles for the time we watch them. Some of our strongest memories are associated with the sense of smell. Anyone who has ever had the pleasure of having smelled the blossoms of a fragrant tea olive or a winter daphne is likely to ever forget it. A homegrown tomato still warm from the sun sliced to make a tomato sandwich has my vote as one of the greatest pleasures in life. One reason I fell in love with the house I bought last year was my stone fire place. It's the first thing you see when you come in my front door. It has great colors and textures that just set the tone for the rest of my décor. It's the focal point. The idea has simply been reversed of bringing the outdoors in to the house. It works. People have had stone fireplaces for hundreds of years, but yet seem to have trouble with the concept of outdoor rooms. Go figure.

The next mistake is usually made by unbelieving beginners. They go to the garden center with the idea of buying plants without every doing any measuring of the area they want to plant. They just want to plant some bushes in front of their house. How do you know how many to buy? You need to know the size of your planting space before you go shopping. Plant tags are a wealth of information. A plant tag will tell the buyer just how tall and wide the plant will become as well as growing conditions the plant requires. Just as cute little puppies can easily become the size of a pony, shrubs, too, grow. Newly planted shrubs will innocently look like they should be planted closer together to fill the space. Big mistake! Usually planting too closely is combined with planting too close to the foundation of the house. A plant that grows six feet tall and wide needs to be spaced six feet from the center of one plant to the next, and needs to come out from the house by three feet.

This brings me to the next mistake-that tag said it will get six feet tall. Do you know how far it is from the ground to the bottom of your windows? Most windows are four or five feet from the ground. If you really don't mind pruning, then by all means plant something beneath those windows that will grow taller than your windows. My philosophy, however, is to work smart, not hard, any chance I get. I'd plant something shorter just because I have better things to do with my time than trim shrubs. If you do plant something with idea of keeping them trimmed, be diligent about it. Mr. Burglar loves houses of busy people. They didn't quite find time to trim the shrubs, which gives him the cover he needs to break into their houses.

Men, pay attention to this next mistake. It will completely ruin your wife's day if she snags a new outfit or her pantyhose on a shrub that has stickers because you decided to place them right next to the sidewalk. Do the math, here, fellas. Ruined pantyhose plus angry wife plus guilty husband equals sleeping on the sofa. Enough said, guys.

Speaking of walks, most of the time they just aren't wide enough for two people to walk comfortably side by side. Consider widening an existing walk if you inherited the typical three to four foot wide walk. Six feet is a much better fit so that two people can walk side by side and converse. This will apply to paths through the yard as well.

Is there flow in the layout of your yard? Can people and yard equipment easily make the transition between the front and the backyard? Do the transition areas look desolate and bare or do they look attractive? Often the side yards are totally ignored, yet should blend with rest of the yard to create flow. My own yard had the worst possible case to use as an example. My house had no gate in the fence to get to the backyard. The only way to the backyard was to come through the house. I have no idea what the previous owners were thinking!

Planting nothing but green, identical Japanese hollies or boxwoods everywhere in the yard is the true mark of a lazy or unimaginative homeowner. BORING! Then, to add insult to injury, they turn these poor shrubs into meatballs or biscuits by shaping them that way. Landscapers love to laugh at these guys. Why? Because they know that by shaping them that way, eventually the plants will lose their leaves at the base of the shrubs and look leggy. So they then the homeowner will try to cut them way back. The shrubs finally send up a white flag and die. The homeowner gets frustrated and calls in the landscaper to plant something new. Money in the bag for them, all they had to do was sit back and wait. They plant something new, and wait again for

the homeowner to either contract for them to care for it, or kill the new shrubs off again by butchering them. We'll get into proper pruning in another article, but this could have easily been avoided.

I can usually spot a new transplant to our climate a mile away. They're the ones who have trees removed from around their house first thing when they move here. The heat in hell was closely modeled after the temperatures and humidity of Columbia, SC in the summertime. Yet, strategically placed shade trees can cool down a house and save your cooling costs by up to thirty percent. Personally, I hate give SCE&G any more money than I have to—at least until that money tree in my backyard gets a whole lot bigger.

Not grouping like plants together is a big mistake. A single shrub can make a statement if it's the right one, but most of the time a single shrub just looks lost. Shrubs are very sociable. They *need* to have buddies. Just kidding, of course, but the point I'm making is that grouped, they have more impact. Plant in odd numbers, if you can, because it's more esthetically pleasing to the eye.

Curve the edges of your planting beds to make it easier to mow. Gentle curves are something a lawn mower's turn radius can handle easily as opposed to a ninety degree corner. With a sharp turn, you will have to stop the mower, back up, and reposition the mower. This is a waste of your valuable time and increases the likelihood of you damaging something. The less time you spend on your mowing, the more time you have to play golf.

Here's a mistake that insurance agents hate and ambulance chasers love: placing plant material that blocks your line of sight at the end of a driveway. You can't see that oncoming car, and the inevitable happens. Not a mistake worth making. Save a life and keep the sight distance clear.

Forgetting the details is a mistake, too. It's those little touches of window boxes, benches, hanging baskets, color pots, mulch, edging, bird baths and such that make a yard have personal touches. Just as throw pillows and dust ruffles add that little something to the interior decorating, so do these touches on the exterior.

Sometimes the mistake people make is to forget that there are four seasons instead of two. They will plant spring and summer blooming landscape material without thinking about what the yard will look like in the fall and dead of winter. There are some great plant choices for the fall and winter that will give you color all year.

While these are not the only mistakes made by homeowners in landscaping their yards, this should help you avoid some of the most common. Got questions? E-mail me!