

Garden & Landscape Design Department

10 Rules of Garden Design (by Christina Reeves)

1. Study your Site

It is important to spend some time analyzing your site before you begin your design. Ask yourself questions such as:

What are the important views that you want to highlight or preserve?

What are views that you might want to screen?

Where are important window locations where you will see the garden from the house?

What is your sun orientation? Is your site in full sun or full shade?

How is water draining in your design area?

2. Have a Plan

Spend some time measuring your site. Locate as accurately as possible existing conditions such as structures, built hardscapes and existing plant material. Make sure you note things such as windows and known underground utilities. Also think about slope and elevation changes in your yard.

3. Design Big to Small

Start with the layout of large or specimen material. Placing the trees first, is important because it sets the stage for your design. Like the walls of your house, trees can also create the walls and ceilings of your outdoor 'rooms'. Equally important to consider is the views from the house and patios. A design that intentionally creates good views, such a spectacular spring flowering tree (or grouping of trees) that you can see from a kitchen or bedroom window is particularly rewarding. Next place your shrubbery. Shrubs are the garden workhorse. They are like the furniture in a room, giving human scale to the design as well as filling out the structure of your outdoor room. Next place your perennials. They are like your throw pillows, creating seasonal accents of color and interest. Lastly, think about your groundcovers and/or mulch covers. They are the 'rugs' of your landscape and although often thought as utilitarian, they can pull together your design.

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4. Size Matters

It is important to know how big that cute little 18” shrub will ultimately get. Placing materials that are the appropriate size will save you time, money and frustration in the future. Some plants (such as Burning Bush), have very large mature sizes and should never be placed in front of windows or other areas that will require frequent pruning to keep it at a reasonable size.

5. Repetition, Repetition, Repetition

Balance your design by repeating elements throughout the design. You can do this by using the same plants in multiple areas in the design or by using plants that have similar textures or color schemes, for example different types of plants with variegated leaves, or all white flowering shrubs and perennials.

6. Three is NOT a Crowd

Avoid having a design that has too much going on. While, it is fine to use singular plants as an accent or focal point, designs with too much of ‘one of this, one of that’, can start to look random and incoherent. Grouping plants en masse, helps to give each plant groups more impact. Except when you are looking for complete symmetry, try to place items in groups of threes or other odd numbers. A zig zag or a triangular layout pattern is often pleasing and creates a more natural planting.

7. Have a backbone

Most design can benefit from some structure created by evergreen material. It is especially important in climates such as ours, where deciduous plant material will be bare or non-existent during the winter months, to balance your mix of evergreen and deciduous materials in your design. Even large flowering perennial gardens, can benefit from a ‘backbone’ of evergreen materials.

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8. Here today, gone tomorrow

It is important to select your garden for multi-season interest. Look for plant material that is more than an 'one dog and pony show'. There are many tree and shrub options that may have a great flower show in the spring AND a great fall leaf color or berries later in the year. Many perennials might flower for a couple of weeks, but also have a leaf color or texture or a seed head that can be left intact for fall and winter interest. Even plants that



have only one season of interest, for example spring blooming bulbs, can be balanced with other plants that shine at other times of the garden year.

9. Have Fun!

It is ok to be whimsical in the garden. Finding a spot for a fun accent such as a large colorful pot, a statue or a wind or water feature adds interest and helps to personalize your garden. Same is true for specimen plant material. Just don't go overboard!

10. Don't be afraid to change your mind

Although you might have spent a lot of time planning your garden in advance, give yourself permission to tweak your design once you have laid it out before planting. Sometimes things just do not look like you envisioned, or do not fit. Often it is important to site locate important trees to best screen a particular view and this might unexpectedly change your design. Sometimes, you have your heart set on a particular plant whose growing requirements just don't fit your site conditions. All gardens are alive and constantly changing.