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Planting Design: The Building Blocks

In this lesson

- The art elements of planting design
- Planting design principles

The building blocks of the planting design process are the art elements and the design principles that are used together to create specific visual effects, or to create areas with specific functions. Specific functions may simply be a garden to enjoy collections of begonias, an area to sit and read, or an entrance to a front door. Each garden has its own unique problems and solutions, and to be successful, it is essential to always consider the art elements and design principles. Not only will they provide the foundation of your designs that you will commit to paper in the form of your plans, but they will also help to provide you with some of the language needed to effectively communicate your ideas.

The art elements of planting design

Line

- The eye is naturally drawn to well-defined lines, and in a garden they can be formed by the edge of a planting bed, a row of planting materials, a path or a driveway, or the transition of color, contrast, textures, heights or materials.
- Curved lines of beauty can be particularly pleasing to the eye and can create a sense of movement and direction. A curving line that leads to an area that is hidden from view or around a corner can create mystery as to what is beyond.
- Repetitious straight lines can be used to make patterns and create interest. Curved and straight lines can be combined, for example a curving path with a brick pattern can be inviting and pull a visitor along it.
- A long line of flowers can be an effective way to accent a particular area, such as a parking court, or to draw your eye toward a feature, such as the bank of a stream.
- Lines can be above the ground, or even below in the case of a ditch; they can be vertical, horizontal or diagonal, so when you think about the use of lines, think in terms of a three-dimensional space, rather than a two-dimensional plan.

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Color

- Color is the most obvious of the art elements, perhaps because it has the power to create emotion. It can be used to set the emotional tone of a garden.
- A mix of colors, such as wildflowers, can be zippy, whilst warm colors, like red and orange can be used to pull you into an area.
- The horticulturist, Gertrude Jekyll (1843 -1932) showed how you can add a dollop of a cooler color to make reds seem more red, or purples seem more purple.
- Contrast is important to add interest or depth. Consider different shades of green, for example, the dark green of the American boxwood, or the whitish, green-grey of lamb's ear.

Form

- The art element of form is revealed in shapes: the shapes of hard landscaping features, such as a curved set of steps, the shapes formed by planting materials, and the shape of a tree, such as a the pencil tip of an Italian Cypress.
- The garden at Hidcote (as shown in the slideshow) provides many examples of form, including meticulously shaped box border edging, hedging, and huge topiary sitting hens.
- The form of a tiered backdrop can be used to blend a landscape into mother nature, by simply showing a crescendo of sizes and shapes of plant materials, starting at the low annual or groundcover height of 6", then going to 18" to 24", and moving on from that to 36" to 48", and then into large shrubs and trees.

Texture

- Texture deals with the animated surface of an object, whether it has large-scaled modules or smaller scale, finely-textured modules.
- Consider how the texture of hard landscaping can be used to contrast or complement the texture of plant materials, for example, the texture of paving pebbles can be picked up in hotsas or the fine-leafed texture of the miniature boxwoods.

Planting design principles

Focalization

- Focalization means that there is a point, a spot, a special thing in a straight line in front of you to catch your eye.
- Focalization can be also achieved by narrowing the cone of vision, for example, the view through a window or a gap in a hedge to focus the eye on an item.

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Axial relationships

- An axial line, or axis, is simply a straight line that may be formed by row of trees, a long straight path or steps, or a water feature that runs in a straight line.
- Axial relationships are created by placing features along a straight line, or at the end of a straight line. The axial relationship, could, therefore be used to create bilateral symmetry.
- Axial relationship, therefore, usually relate to repetition and rhythm, because items are often lined up in an equal fashion on either side of a center line and repeated.
- The garden at Buscot (as shown in the slideshow) designed by Sir Harold Peto (1854 – 1933) features waterfalls, cascade pools, bridges and fountains, and a focal point of an island with a pavilion on top—all linked by a straight line of water.

Cross axial relationships

- A cross axial relationship is formed by two lines that intersect, for example, a path that crosses another path, forcing the visitor to make a decision.
- If you are standing in the middle of a cross axial relationship, and you are able to look north, south, east, and west, you are standing at a point that is known as a node.
- An example of a cross axial relationship can be seen at the garden at Sissinghurst (as shown in the slideshow) with a room in the center formed by walls of hedges and paths coming in from four directions. The room in the center is the node.

Repetition

- Repetition can be an effective method to pull the eye through a garden.
- An example of repetition, in the slideshow, shows golden topiary yews repeated around the center of a sundial, demonstrating how repetition can be used to draw the eye and pull a visitor to a focal point, when combined with a cross axial relationship and symmetry.
- The geometric period was known for its repetition and rhythm, and the clipped formality of the geometric form was the hallmark of this period.
- Landscape design of the medieval period demonstrated the use of repetition with the formation of repeated square beds—each one a separate garden for individual plant species to be cultivated.

Balance – symmetry and asymmetry

- Balance is a beauty that can derive from symmetry or asymmetry.
- Plants frequently appear symmetrical close-up—leaves, nuts and flowers all display bilateral symmetry, but when looking at the big picture, we can see that asymmetry becomes prevalent in nature—rivers meander, seeds scatter randomly, trees lean towards the sun.

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- The formal gardens of 17th century France involved symmetrical design, whilst the picturesque gardens of England in the 18th century borrowed heavily from the asymmetry found in nature.
- The 1960s gardens (an example shown in the slideshow) designed by Thomas Church (1902–1978) in California, demonstrate a very fluid and organic asymmetry, with curved, sweeping lines.
- The hallmark of the Japanese or Oriental garden is a design that looks to nature for clues to harmoniously build new spaces, but to also respect mother nature's own space.
- An example of a picturesque garden (as shown in the slideshow) by landscape architect, Stephen Switzer (1682–1745) demonstrates asymmetry in the placement of kitchen gardens, also known as kitchen quarters.

Chaos and order

- Chaos can be thought of as the ripples on a surface of a pool after a pebble has been thrown into the water. In a garden, the pebble could be an invasive plant that is left unchecked.
- The process of designing a garden with well thought out and clearly-defined, functional areas, that interconnect provides the order to a project.
- It is important when designing planting plans to create a blueprint that is built around orderly principles and to then let mother nature soften the edges.

Light and Shadow

- Light and shadow can be used as a powerful method to pull a visitor through the landscape.
- A view from a dark doorway or from the shade of a tree can be contrasted by a brightly lit or brightly colored area that draws a visitor outward.
- Light and shadow is particularly effective when using arches. An example (as seen in the slideshow) can be seen from the Palladium Bridge at Stowe, which looks out to the glistening waters of a lake.

Dominance and Subordination

- Dominance and subordination is a design principle that should be considered in creating a garden that feels harmonious.
- Plants and trees can be too dominant, and it is important to be aware that we can easily put plants in the wrong place, for example, a large tree overshadowing a little flower.
- Dominance can be used for visual effect, for example, the colors, red or white can be used to great effect to dominate a space.

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Planting Design: Types of Garden Patterns

In this lesson

- Shapes and sizes of plant materials
- Client interviews
- An introduction to the plant list matrix
- Community projects

Shapes and sizes of plant materials

The two by four analysis

- The two by four analysis is a criteria used to categorize every type of planting material.
- The two refers to the two types of environmental habit—evergreen and deciduous.
- The four refers to four categories of plant materials based on size, which are trees, shrubs, ground cover, and vines and annuals.

Visualizing the sizes and shapes of trees and shrubs

- As a landscape designer, it is important to start thinking about plant materials in terms of their sizes, so that when you look at a plant or a tree in a photograph or in a garden,

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you say to yourself: “that’s a 3’ diameter plant, or that’s a 30’ tree,” or, “that’s an 8’ to 10’ accent tree.”

- Becoming familiar with plant sizes will help you to visualize how a garden could look; it will help you to select your planting materials and help you to create your plant matrix—the list of plants that will be part of your design.
- Large garden trees are typically around 30’ to 50’ feet in diameter; obviously they can be much larger, but usually we plan for things like large maples to be at least 30’ to 60’ tall and at least that wide.
- Medium-sized trees are 15’ to 30’ tall and wide. Usually a circle 15’ to 25’ in diameter on the planting plan represents a medium-sized tree, and they can be placed tip to tip, but it is recommended to separate them by about another 5’ or 10’.
- Accent trees, are generally a maximum of 15’ diameter, and again typically spaced at least 5’ to 10’ apart.
- Small trees and large shrubs are often very similar in size, for example, Japanese maples and tall rhododendrons can both be at least 8 feet tall and can be shown on a plan by a circle of 6’ to 8’, but a large shrub would typically be 8’ to 10’.
- Small shrubs are usually shown at a maximum of 5’ diameter.

Creating shrub masses

- Shrubs can be put together into masses, such as rhododendron masses, which can be between 8’ and 15’ tall.
- Placing large shrubs in a zigzag, or a lazy W, can help to create a natural-looking shrub mass with more depth.
- Show massed shrubs on the plan with some of the circles overlapping slightly; they will grow out to appear to be as one big shrub.
- Smaller shrub masses can also be placed in a W shape, for example, a series of gumpo azaleas or dwarf leucothoe.
- Show the number of plants that are in a mass on the plan in parentheses.

Perennials and annuals

- Perennials are usually drawn at 6” in diameter and at least 6” apart, but bear in mind that some perennials can grow to around 3’ in diameter.
- Group perennials together in clumps of threes and fives and ones, to allow space to weave other plants between them, in order to create a more natural look.
- Annuals and groundcover plants can be too small to show on a plan if you are working on an eighth of an inch scale – show a sample of the planting in detail at half inch scale.

Tree forms

- Learning to recognize, visualize, appreciate and draw tree shapes will enable you to quickly sketch trees in elevation.
- You need to be able to know which trees are which shape. Obviously some trees, like boxwood, can be meticulously clipped to any shape, but your trees need to work for the

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purpose or shape intended, for example, a tree that is intended to give shade needs to provide sufficient head clearance below the branches.

- Appreciate the form of trees from a design point of view.
- Gumdrop-shaped trees, such as a Chinese elm, make for an ideal shade tree.
- Vase shaped trees, such as American elm, are very elegant.
- Spherical or ovoid trees, such as a red maple, can be used to echo circular design elements.
- Weeping trees, such as a weeping and pendulous prunus, or a top-grafted weeping cherry tree really make a statement.
- Pencil-tipped trees such as the Italian cypress can be very dramatic.
- The examples of trees above are based on trees shown in this series of lessons, but it is important to spend the time to research information about trees, so that you can build a comprehensive knowledge of different types of trees and understand their shapes and sizes, whether they thrive in sun or shade, whether they are fast or slow growing, and whether they are evergreen or deciduous.

Plant design tips

- When you prepare your initial concept plan, which will be the first plan your client sees, remember, you do not have to draw every single plant. Just show the edges, the borders, the tall trees, the massing and their shapes.
- Remember to think about the hardiness of plant materials. If your client has a garden where temperatures plummet below freezing, or down to minus 20° you need to choose plants and trees that will not rot and die in the cold!
- Recommended reading: *Plants for the South: A Guide for Landscape Design*, written by Neil G. Odenwald and James R. Turner. This book includes a list of plants and their shapes and sizes, and it includes very good examples of plan graphics techniques.

Client interviews

What to ask your client

- Be organized and efficient in your collection of data and:
 - Ask if the client has a plat. This will lead to further discussion about getting mapping done.
 - If you are new to landscape design, you may want to encourage your client to focus on one area. Write it down, for example, “Susie’s future perennial sweep by garage.”
 - Ask your clients if they have photographs of what they like. That will help to establish if they like a formal or an informal look.
 - Ask your clients how they would like to use their garden.
 - Ask about time schedules – does the client need to have the work completed by a particular date, or is it going to be a project that could take years to finish?

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