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# Landscaping for Small Spaces

*(Inspired by: Dennis Patton, Johnson County  
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Small space gardening presents unique challenges. All the elements of good design should be followed, but on a smaller scale. Successful design of small garden spaces, patio areas, balconies or theme gardens is often harder and more complex than designing an entire front or back yard.

Making a small garden both functional and beautiful requires a different approach.

- **Size is the most obvious difference.** Smaller spaces affect your perception of objects. You can use this altered perception to your advantage, for instance, by using large shrubs as small trees.
- **Horticultural conditions.** They do not vary much in a small garden. It is not unusual for small gardens to have a microclimate that is one hardiness zone warmer or colder than the remaining property. This difference may result from adjacent fences or walls that can serve as heat reflectors or windbreaks.
- **Intimacy is created within small boundaries.** You can create a cozy, soothing atmosphere that is difficult to achieve in a larger garden.
- **Everything is in view at the same time.** A fading perennial or a broken pot is noticed right away. One or two vibrant specimen plants have more impact than masses of the same plant in a more expansive garden setting.
- **The cost for plant materials is much less.** You may want to treat yourself to an expensive specimen plant as a focal point.
- **Maintenance requirements are reduced.** You may find time for a high-maintenance plant that you have always wanted.

## Site Assessment

Your first activity in planning your garden is an assessment of the area in question. A successful garden of any size is rarely the result of chance; it is almost always the result of careful planning. Remember that every element of the small garden is seen close up and every detail has impact.

**Begin by making a detailed sketch of the garden site.** Draw a “bird’s-eye” view of the proposed site, including the lot outlines, the house and any existing features. Include measurements of all important features, especially existing trees, shrubs and hardscapes.

**Define your planned uses for the area.** Do you want a restful retreat? A place to entertain? An herb garden? A children’s play area?

**Maintenance – How much time and energy do you want to spend on it?** Determine if you want to spend your leisure time keeping your garden looking its best or if you prefer a garden that demands minimal care.

**Decide where you want the focal point to be.** Look around the area. If the views from inside your house are a primary consideration, move around the rooms to frame the view.

**Water.** You will need access to water to care for the plants. If you want a moving water feature, you will need access to electricity.

**Exposure.** Take note of the exposure (north, south, east and west). How much sun does the area receive each day? When? In our region, there is a vast difference between morning and afternoon sun.

**Assess the soil.** Your garden spot should drain well. Consider doing a soil test to determine if additives are needed. Amend it prior to beginning any planting.

## Designing Your Garden

### Style

- The style should be compatible with the architecture of your home and the interior from which you view the garden.
- Small gardens look best if a single style or theme is selected. The space will appear more unified and cohesive.
- Choose garden elements and plants to reinforce the theme.

### Scale

Scale is the most important factor when designing for a small space.

- The individual elements of the design must stay in proportion with the overall space available.
- The cardinal rule for choosing plants is to select plants that suit the site. Select plants that maintain themselves within the space allotted without major pruning. In a pruning battle to keep a plant small or within a space that is too small, Mother Nature will win every time.
- Large pots or urns give small plants an aspect of height without the mass of a tall plant. Using large scale materials in the front of a space, then graduating to smaller materials at the back creates an illusion of greater space.
- Use large shrubs as if they were trees, medium-sized shrubs as backdrop plantings and large perennials as you would shrubs in a larger space.

### Form

Form is not only the shape of the garden itself, but also the individual elements of materials used, such as plants, statuary, paving materials, fencing, arbors, etc.

- A pleasing small space design features enough variation in form to make the garden interesting, but not so much that the landscape looks jumbled.
- Make any changes in shape or form bold enough to show your intent.

**Texture**

Texture has the greatest effect on the overall feeling of the space. The size and texture of the leaves of the selected plants can make the space seem larger or smaller.

- If you place plants with large, coarse-textured leaves at the beginning of a space and diminish the size and texture of the leaves as you pass through the area, the variation tends to add depth to the area.
- The opposite textural order will make the area seem more intimate and cozy. This principle holds when selecting other design elements, from paving to statuary to stone to garden art.

**Color**

Color gives a garden personality and mood.

- Although flowers are the headliners in a small garden, the color of plant leaves, bark and stem also play a tremendous role in the effect of the overall space.
- Every plant in a small garden should carry its weight by providing color during some part of the year.
- Most colors work together if their intensities are the same. The warm colors brighten dark corners and draw the eye. Use them sparingly in small areas. Cooler colors are soothing and serene. They tend to make a small space seem larger. Softer colors, such as silver and bronze, blend with all colors and pull the garden together.
- Colored stone, paving, statuary, furniture and other hardscape features can either contrast or complement the plantings used in the design.

**Repetition**

Repetition is the most fundamental and commonly used design principle. An organized repetition of elements brings a sense of unity and continuity.

- Repeating color, shape, texture or plant combinations establishes a rhythm and a sense of predictability in the garden.
- Repeating an architectural or décor feature outdoors helps tie house and garden together.
- Your taste will dictate how much repetition you need to strike a balance between busy and boring.

**Evergreens**

Evergreens provide both a background and year-round interest in the garden. In small gardens, choose plants that add to the look of the garden in all four seasons.

**Fragrance**

You can enjoy fragrance readily in a small garden.

- Select plants that will ensure at least one fragrant plant is in bloom throughout the season (shrub, perennial, annual).
- If you have to choose between a fragrant and a non-fragrant plant, select the one that will add another dimension to your sensory enjoyment.

## And Finally ...

According to Peter Loewer, author of *The New Small Garden*, keep these five fundamentals in mind when planning and designing your small garden:

- 1 Plan for the eventual size of the plant.** Visualize what it will become 5 or 10 years from the day you plant it.
- 2 Match the plant to the conditions.** A bush that requires perfect drainage won't be happy in heavy clay.
- 3 Avoid straight lines.** This rule holds true unless you are planting in an area that has a direct relationship to an adjoining building. They are never found in nature and soon become boring to look at and impossible to maintain. A gentle and sweeping curve looks much better and is easier to install and keep up.
- 4 Break the rules.** Although all the books tell you to put the large plants in the back of the border, medium plants in the middle and shortest up front, there are times and places to try the unexpected.
- 5 Trust your own aesthetic judgment.** After all, it is your garden and should reflect your likes and dislikes.
- 6 Select plants to utilize vertical space.** For example, choose upright, narrow plants that will not get too wide. Also use vines to climb up trellises and obelisks. Trailing groundcover plants can be used in tall container pots and hanging baskets.

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*For your lawn, garden and horticultural questions*

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