

An *island bed* is a freestanding garden that can be viewed from all sides, usually surrounded by grass. Think of a lovely arrangement in the middle of a table—you can approach it from all sides, and it looks wonderful from any angle.

Island beds can create an illusion of space or they can make a big lawn seem smaller. The key to a successful island bed is to find the right location and then design the right size and shape.

Choosing the Right Location

Viewing point

To choose the right location for your island bed, first determine from where you'll be viewing it. Do you want to see your island bed from the deck, your patio, the kitchen window? Are you trying to hide a view, such as a utility box or your neighbor's yard?

TIP: You don't need to design a large island bed in front of an eyesore to hide it. A small island closer to the main viewing point can accomplish the same purpose.

Where not to place it

When placing your island bed, remember it can be an obstacle. Don't place it where it will obstruct foot traffic, make lawn care difficult, or in the middle of your child's play area.

Balance

Consider the design concept of balance when deciding on the location for your island bed. Balance involves the visual weights of elements in the garden. A large object is *heavier* than a small object. Dark colors are *heavier* than light colors. A horizontal object is *heavier* than a vertical object. For example, an island bed placed on one side of your yard can balance a large shade tree on the other side. Or, you can balance a large tree by designing the bed with one side wider than the other.

Choosing the Right Size

Scale

Consider the design concept of scale to determine the right size for your island bed. Scale involves the relationship of size. It's the visual relationship of each part of the landscape to every other part—the size of your house, your lot and the space surrounding your property. A large island bed can overwhelm a small yard and a small island will disappear in a large yard.

How big?

Many garden designers follow a rule of thumb for the landscape:

One-third = Shrubs and flower beds
Two-thirds = Lawn

As with all rules of thumb, feel free to break this one. If you want to mow as little as possible, then make your shrubs and flowerbeds two-thirds of your landscape and the lawn one-third.

In *The Well-Tended Perennial Garden*, Tracy DiSabato-Aust suggests an island bed be 3 times as long as it is wide. For example, a 6-foot-wide bed would be approximately 18 feet long.

Barbara Blossom Ashmun suggests that island beds be at least 8 feet wide to hold enough layers of color and texture.

And finally, Rita Buchanan states “. . . many people timidly create small islands . . . A better solution is to make a big, assertive island that demands and earns its space and to include openings or pathways so you can move through the island instead of going around it.”

TIP: The most frequent mistake gardeners make concerning scale is to make their gardens too small. Bigger really is better!

Choosing the Right Shape

Island beds can be formal with angular corners or informal with free-flowing, curvy edges. Rectangles and ovals work well because they can be laid out so the longest side faces your main view. Island beds can also be kidney or crescent shaped. The shape of your island bed should blend with the shape and size of your house. Above all, choose the shape that pleases you. After all, it's your garden.

Choosing and Placing the Right Plants

Selecting plants for an island bed is a different than selecting plants for a typical perennial or shrub border because island beds have a front and a back and can be viewed from all sides. “The prominent position of an island bed demands that it look good year-round, and it is of key importance to create a planting plan that takes this into account.”

Use these guidelines to help you create your island bed.

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| 1. Attractiveness | Choose plants with attractive foliage, long bloom times and ones that don't require staking. |
| 2. Variety | Use a variety of plant materials—trees, shrubs, perennials, bulbs and annuals. Also use a variety of heights, textures and leaf colors, but limit yourself so your design doesn't become busy. |
| 3. Continuity | Use some of the same plants in the island bed that you used in other beds or borders. |
| 4. Analogous growing conditions | Use plants that require the same growing conditions. |
| 5. Drifts | For the best effect, plant in drifts whenever possible—groups of three or more—and arrange the drifts along the length of the island facing the main vantage point. |
| 6. Placement | Tallest plants should be placed toward the center, medium-sized plants in the middle and short plants up front. Think of your island bed as a tiered wedding cake! |
| 7. Height | Rule of thumb: The tallest plant should be 1½ times as tall as the island bed's width. However, if you want a feeling of openness, use shorter plants regardless of the bed's width. To provide screening or a feeling of enclosure, include taller plants even if the island bed is narrow. |
| 8. Edging plants | Choose edging plants that have good foliage. Edging plants are the most visible part of the island bed. However, don't draw a ring or "picture frame" around the island with the same plant. |
| 9. Transition from lawn | Short, fine textured plants along the front edge help make the transition from lawn to flower bed less abrupt. The island won't appear to be floating! |
| 10. One season of bloom | For maximum effect, emphasize one season of bloom. |
| 11. Wintertime color | If the island is close to the house, use plenty of winter color and evergreens. |

The two-dimensional "foundation planting" of shrubs against the house can improve the look of some older houses . . . but they don't enhance the property so much as islands of plantings. Trees and shrubs can add an extra dimension or expansiveness to your property if planted away from the house. They can also reach their full ornamental potential, will be more in proportion to the overall property, and will tie the house into the yard. Lawn is not the only way to fill up your square footage.

Remember to use your entire property for designing. Get away from the "it has to grow next to the house" mentality.

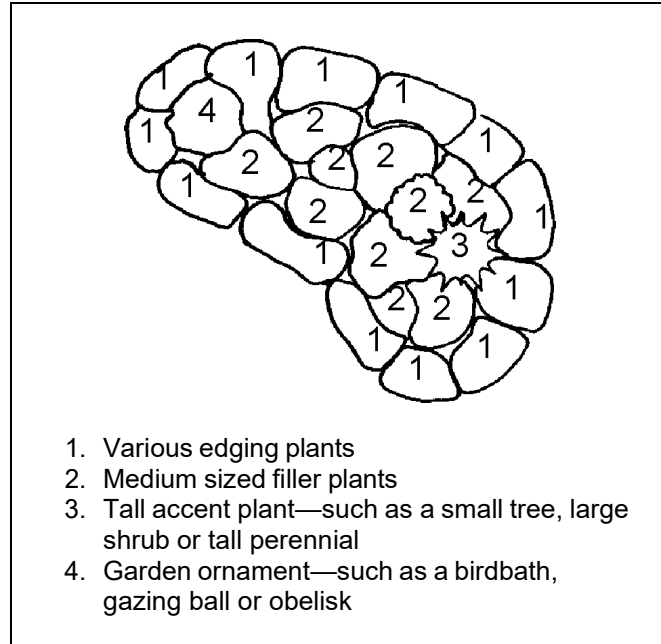
— Joel Lerner

How to Plan an Island Bed Planting

Before buying any plants, determine a shape, size and color scheme for your island bed.

Next, sketch a planting plan. For beds more than 8 feet wide, be sure to include paths that provide access to the center of the bed for chores like deadheading, pruning and weeding.

The example at the right shows a pleasing design for a kidney-shaped bed.



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