



## Landscape Design Basics

OH 30

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The most efficient, functional, and aesthetically pleasing home landscape should be developed to satisfy the needs of the people who will use and maintain it. The planting design should be compatible with the existing environmental conditions or restrictions. But most important, the design should enhance the quality of life for the users. Good landscape design and the arrangement and placement of plants are all based on certain plant characteristics and time-tested design principles. The visual characteristics of plant size, form, texture, and color contribute to the functional and aesthetic qualities of a planting design.

Plant size should be the primary consideration. Large plants, such as shade trees, should be located first; the smaller trees, shrubs, and finally the ground covers should be arranged to provide a sense of support or framework to the overall design. Shade and evergreen trees, such as maples or spruce, are the most dominant plants in the landscape design. They provide background, visual weight and structural framework. Ornamental trees, such as flowering crabapples and birches, are used as focal points or dominant elements because of their seasonal and often picturesque branching characteristics.

Tall shrubs, such as viburnum and lilac, help establish vertical edges to an outdoor space, create screens, enhance privacy, or provide a neutral background. Small shrubs, such as junipers and cotoneasters, are also used to define edges and spaces without blocking views; they can connect and link unrelated or separate plants, and define areas and space on the ground.

Form or shape is a second important consideration in a planting composition. The most common plant shapes are the spreading (cotoneaster, Hetz Juniper) and rounded (lilac, Norway maple) forms. These two basic plant forms have the most application in planting design; they create neutral patterns in contrast with more unusual forms of plants. Columnar and pyramidal-shaped plants, such as tall-hedge or Hicks yew, have visual characteristics that suggest vertical edges in an outdoor space. They create a major contrast with the more common rounded or spreading plants. The picturesque and weeping forms of plants, such as weeping birch or willow, are useful as accents or focal points in the planting design when used sparingly.

Plant texture refers to the visual roughness or smoothness of a plant. The texture of the foliage, twigs, and branches is either coarse, medium, or fine. Texture effects are most visible at close range and in smaller landscape plantings. Coarse-textured plants, such as rhododendron or viburnum, tend to be dominant and attract attention. They usually have dense foliage or broad leaves. Fine-textured plants, such as shrubby dogwood or birch, appear delicate and tend to recede from view. They usually have fine foliage or needle leaves. In planting composition, medium-textured plants, such as crabapple, yew, or lilac, should dominate and contrast with either the coarse or fine textures.

Color is one of the most visual plant characteristics. It includes the color of leaves, flowers, fruit, branches, and bark. Green is the predominant plant color, but has seasonal variations. With evergreens, the same color is present year round. The color of the summer foliage has the longest seasonal effect and the most importance in design composition. A variety of greens has more visual appeal when displayed against a uniform neutral green background. A common mistake is to use too many different colors. Plant color can be used as an attractor, to call attention to some area in the landscape. Dark-colored plants contrasted with light-colored plants create focal points in a planting composition.

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Plants should be arranged for summer foliage effects first, and the color characteristics of flowers, fall foliage, fruit, or branching second. Foliage color varies with texture. Fine-textured leaves are more reflective and tend to be weaker in overall visual effect. Plant colors can also be used to suggest certain emotional or psychological feelings. Dark greens give a somber, gloomy feeling. Lighter greens suggest gaiety and cheerfulness.

Order is the design principle used to create unity in the planting composition. Unity is achieved when all parts of the design, plants, and materials have a harmonious relationship to each other.

Unity in design can also be achieved by reducing the number of different elements such as plant species, sizes, forms, colors, or textures. A basic principle in planting design is to group plants together in groups of three, five, or seven, rather than scattering them about. Young plants may first appear as small individuals, but as they grow and mature they should be viewed as a group unless they are designed as individual specimens. Scattered plants or groups of plants can be connected with beds of ground covers (bugleweed, Japanese spurge) or low shrubs (junipers, cotoneasters).

Dominance suggests that one element in the composition has authority over other subordinate parts. Dominance may be created by size alone, such as a shade tree, or by form, texture, color, or location of the elements within a design. The dominant element may also become the focal point. Major contrast is a similar design principle where one element is so different that other parts of the composition are subordinated to that element, such as a bed of red salvia flowers against a background of green yews.

Repetition and rhythm are planting design principles achieved when similar plant characteristics are introduced and repeated to help create the feeling of recall or unity in the composition. Interconnection is a principle similar to repetition whereby different plants are linked together by overlapping or touching similar plants. Fences, walls, or beds of ground cover are frequently used to link elements together in the landscape.

The theme of a planting composition may be informal, curved, or natural. The style may give a formal, linear, or symmetrical theme. By following a definite order or style, the design does not have a fragmented or uncoordinated appearance. The most visually pleasing designs are not created by chance, but follow a specific order, theme, or style that carries throughout the landscape.

(Adapted from a publication by Fred K. Buscher, Ohio State University)