



University of Vermont Extension  
Department of Plant and Soil Science

# Garden Mazes and Labyrinths

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Leonard Perry, Extension Professor

Garden mazes are designs in which the participant is confronted with many choices or paths to get to the center or goal. As such it is basically a puzzle, a problem-solving left brain activity. Labyrinths on the other hand have a single path (unicursal) leading to the goal. They have been described as a right brain activity, enhancing intuition and creativity.

Labyrinths may simply be used as a quiet oasis or feature in a garden. Some compare them symbolically to the journey of life, or rebirth and reincarnation as they are walking along. Others compare them to the annual journey of planets in the solar system. To these the garden labyrinth may provide personal, psychological or spiritual transformation. In Scandinavia where many were built and some of the oldest still exist, they were used to trap bad winds, or fair maidens, and to ensure a good sea harvest.

Mazes and labyrinths may just provide a great running area for children, as in the recently popular corn or sunflower mazes found in many states. When my daughter was young, I would rake the fall leaves into patterns for her and her friends to follow and run around.

Mazes and labyrinths are not of recent origin, but have been around for at least 3500 years. The oldest labyrinth patterns are often referred to as classical, and were first seen on a clay tablet in Greece about 1200 B.C.E. Here they were used as oracles, and in diplomacy. These patterns often may use 3, 7, 11 or 15 circular paths, one within the other. The one with 7 is most common, and has been related to the 7 Chakras of the Hindu faith, the 7 colors of the rainbow, and the 7 notes in music.

Later labyrinths are often termed medieval, and have four distinct quadrants. Varying numbers of paths, including 7, characterize these. The oldest examples of such patterns can be found in European churches and cathedrals, the most famous being at Chartres in France. When pilgrims were unable to travel to the holy land, they would travel the cathedral labyrinth instead, on their knees! Turf labyrinths in England are often in this group as well.

Then there are other labyrinth patterns of more recent origin. Some may include a mound or hill, so be three dimensional. Others may meander in a rectangular space, or irregular one. Then there are more modern elaborate designs such as a 9-petaled flower, triangle, or flowery wand. These may have multiple paths meant to "enhance spiritual perception", so may not officially be called labyrinths.

Whatever design or group of patterns you choose, you should first draw the outline on paper. This may then be altered outside to fit reality, as in the case of the radius of a mower! Minimal recommended space is at least 25 feet across, although as we saw above even a narrow rectangular space might suffice.

Next you need to locate the area for your labyrinth or maze. You may merely be limited by the area available. In this case you may only have the option of orientation, perhaps facing the opening towards a hill, a view, solstice, or compass direction. If space is not as limiting, there are many other ways to locate the "proper" site and center, including dowsing.

There are several materials that can be used for mazes and labyrinths including the already mentioned turf labyrinth. Often these consist of mowed turf circles, with paths one walks on between them of gravel, mulch or other material. In my case, it is the path that is mowed, and the grass left to grow taller between. Also in my case, the circles aren't geometrical, rather free form. This creates some larger spaces between the paths, spaces for perennials and plants. Another variation consists of stepping stones laid in the lawn.

If a narrow space, posts and wire fencing may be used, on which could be grown vines. This is also perhaps the least expensive way to use plants, other than the straight turf labyrinth, or version such as mine using turf and plantings in wider areas. You might use one type of vine, or a mix of several. If using several, just make sure the vigorous ones don't overtake and kill out the others. Examples for vigorous selections would include hops, bittersweet, sweet autumn clematis, trumpet creeper, hardy kiwi, Virginia creeper, honeysuckles. In milder climates of USDA zone 5 or warmer, consider grapes and wisteria. Annual ornamental vines might include sweet peas, morning glory, or hyacinth bean. With vegetable vines such as beans and peas trained on a fence you could have a maze or labyrinth and garden too!

If ample space, with at least 2 to 3 feet between paths, stone walls or plants can be used. When choosing materials, keep in mind the height desired. For mazes, it is solving the puzzle that counts, so taller materials and plants are used to keep you from seeing the whole picture or where to go. For labyrinths, it is the experience going in and retracing your steps back out that is important, so these often use lower materials and plants.

Generally the space between paths is not very wide, so this rules out most shrubs. There are some upright, columnar, and rather narrow cultivars of some shrubs such as junipers. Generally though maze shrubs are such as the slow growing yew, or the fast growing honeysuckle which as with any vigorous shrub will need much pruning. Using all shrubs may be quite expensive as well.

Several ornamental grasses might work well, such as the switchgrass, feather reed grass, or the eulalia. Depending on the cultivar, the latter may not all be hardy in zone 4, some may be quite vigorous, and some in warm climates may be seed invasive. Low grasses such as blue fescue or sedges might be used to line paths. Ornamental grasses are fairly maintenance free, tough, and may provide a fairly quick and more affordable alternative to shrubs.

Perennials are not generally used for labyrinths, as most will spread over time and require some space. But they could be used in corners or wider areas in groupings, as in my own labyrinth. Or you might have paths lined with daylilies, tall garden phlox, or other upright or clumping

perennial if sufficient room.

Tall annuals for mazes include corn and sunflowers, and are probably the least expensive and quickest plants to use. Most other annuals that clump might line or separate paths of a labyrinth. These might include marigolds, zinnias, impatiens, geraniums, and so many more. Using such annual flowers, especially if you have a 7 circuit circular type labyrinth, you might consider using the colors of the rainbow, one for each circular path.

Finally, in the center of the maze or labyrinth, consider a quiet grassy area to rest and meditate. Perhaps include a bench or seat. Also consider using appropriate garden statuary and metal figures there or along your path, such as garden fairies, angels and spirit stakes.

Whatever labyrinth or maze type you choose, it will need some maintenance. This might be annual flower planting, dividing perennials, pruning shrubs, mowing turf, or weed trimming stepping stones and stone walls. Much more information on labyrinth types, functions, design, siting and creation can be found at the Labyrinth Society website ([www.labyrinthociety.org](http://www.labyrinthociety.org)).

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