



## Garden Design to Reduce Stress

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It's no surprise that in these times of uncertainty in the world, more work, and less time it seems for personal and family pleasures, that a new trend of home garden design to provide stress relief has begun to emerge in Europe. In the Netherlands it has been termed "geo-sense" gardening, with the emphasis mainly on proper use of colors.

The trend of designing home gardens with specific, relaxing qualities in mind may be a new trend, but it has much deeper roots as seen in the ancient gardens of Egypt, Persia, and China. The wealthy merchants or nobility of these ancient civilizations went to great lengths and expense to bring nature into their own "urban" environments. Later, this could be seen in European parks, at palaces, and country estates in England.

The importance of nature to humans, their mental health, and ability to focus, can be seen in the famous parks of Olmsted, such as Central Park in New York City. It can be seen in the writings of the famous Henry Thoreau. This need of humans for nature has been written of more recently by scientists, is part of the field of environmental psychology, is believed by some to be genetically based, and has been termed "biophilia."

Horticulture Therapy is a relatively recent field of study that primarily focuses on the effects of the *process* of gardening on rehabilitation, providing both a sense of control and a distraction from worries, pain, and stresses. One of the first studies in this field, and more recent ones, have shown that merely viewing or experiencing natural or pleasing landscapes can be beneficial.

Gardens to reduce stress may include zen principles such as simplicity (Kanso), austerity (koko), or naturalness (Shizen). While zen gardens have come to refer to raked gardens of sand, these stress-reducing gardens are much different. They are often similar to any other woodland or flower garden, only emphasizing certain design principles or colors.

Gardens designed for serenity, to help reduce stress just by viewing and experiencing them, may incorporate one or more of the following ideas:

- Primary colors can be divided into warm (red, orange, yellow) and cool (green, blue, violet). Cool colors are more soothing. You may use a warm color for accent or focal point, but use only one plant, or less than five percent of the overall design.
- Use tints (lighter) or shades (darker) of the above primary cool colors, or pastels (light combinations of colors).
- Avoid white, as it is a powerful color attracting your attention and creating divisions among other colors. Grays or silvers are more calming.
- When combining colors, use adjacent ones on the color wheel such as green and blue, or blue and violet. These create interest, yet are more serene than contrasting opposite colors such as blue and yellow.
- Similar to color, avoid large contrasts in other design principles such as heights and textures. Plants of a more uniform height are more soothing than big ones next to little ones. Texture is the visual appearance plants create, such as a fine texture from tiny leaves or ferns, or coarse texture from large leaves such as castor bean.

- Just as a horizon on the ocean is more soothing than the upright pillars in a cathedral, so are horizontal lines in a design. These could be from uniform heights of plants, a trimmed hedge, the top of a wall, or even a view of the horizon in the distance.
- Curves and rounded lines are more soothing than sharp, straight edges and geometric shapes. Keep these in mind when making edges to beds and borders, or paths. Beds that are rounded or versions of ellipses, such as a kidney-shaped island bed for perennials or daffodils, are more soothing than square or rectangular beds such as for roses or tulips. Some plants lend themselves more to one bed type than another.
- We often return to nature for peacefulness. How is this created? Nature uses large numbers or masses of plants, totally informal or placed at random, in large swaths. This may seem peaceful to some, but not to others. To others who like the appearance of control, discrete plants with space and mulch between may seem more pleasing and calming. This control can be seen in Japanese gardens, with their trees and shrubs clipped into precise shapes. Whether control or natural abandon is pleasing and calming depends on one's personality type. What personality are you?
- The sound of gentle water is soothing, so incorporate a small stream or bubbling water feature in your garden. Avoid gushing fountains or waterfalls if you want relaxation.
- Scent is the most powerful sense, so incorporate pleasing scents in your garden. Which scents are pleasing may vary as well with personality. Some scents such as lavender actually can physically help you relax from breathing their essential oils.
- Don't forget the sense of touch. Use plants with soft, velvety leaves, or at least not ones with thorns!
- Following zen principles, a simple garden is often a peaceful one. Less is indeed more in this case. Use few plants, or at least few types of plants. In a woodland, this might be a few wildflowers, with the rest leaf litter. In a shade garden you may simply have moss on the ground (the simplicity, horizontal effect, soft touch, and green color all soothe).
- Using fewer plants also means less maintenance. Or choose plants that require the least maintenance, such as pruning or staking. This often means choosing the right plant for the right place. You want to be able to stroll through and enjoy your garden, not constantly be reminded about what is out of control. This is not relaxing!
- If you are in a busy or noisy area, such as a city, surround the garden with a hedge of plants, wooden fence, or even an earthen berm if space allows. These will provide both a visual and sound barrier to the outside world, a principle often found in Japanese gardens. This means of escape, of shutting out the chaos and distractions, is crucial.