

## **Landscape Design Principles**

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### **What is 'good' landscaping?**

Beauty as they say 'is in the eye of the beholder' and although we should be able to see the beauty in everything around us, ask a group of people to decide on whether a picture, a person or a car is beautiful and the discerning majority will generally agree.

The same group will just as likely agree that a whole range of different landscapes can be beautiful and should be able to point out what they consider to be beautiful. Ask, however, what makes a garden beautiful and how to go about creating it and you won't get the same assured answers. This is the role of the Landscape Designer and Contractor.

Two consecutive clients will often have totally opposite tastes when it comes to the plants they like and Landscapers are sometimes expected to be mind readers. Many would have heard the remark made 'You're the expert, you tell me' which implies 'you should know what I like'. This information has to be garnered through the questions the landscaper asks and it is important that the garden owner participates as much as possible to facilitate the process. To paint a picture for a client is a difficult task and virtually impossible without the aid of visual props such as pictures (whether as computer graphics or pictures of a similar garden) accompanied by a design and working drawing.

The vision of the designer needs to be drawn from the requirements of their client for which good communication between the two is essential. The riskiest route is to rely on someone else's taste and expect them to create something you will like without knowing what it will look like beforehand. It's too late or very costly to change a garden landscape once installed. The characteristics that define beauty, keep designers and beauticians in business. Taste and Styles of gardens differ and this is different to beauty, since beautiful gardens can be old fashioned and of the ageless classical style or relate to a specific period in history or geographical area. Alternatively they can be modern and very different. Contemporary Gardens will by definition best reflect the popular fashion or trend of the day, so have an idea of what you're after and a 'Design brief' in mind before picking up the phone book.

If not sure ask for a consultation first. It is cheaper than making a mistake and a professional will gladly part with their hard earned 'Intellectual Capital' when they are paid for it, whereas contractors are all too aware, when they are being milked for such information under the guise of a 'quote' request.

With gardens generally becoming smaller and more maintenance-free there is a swing towards hardscapes replacing lawns and bed areas. Smaller areas generally infer a formal style garden as the informal style of sweeping scallops cannot be accommodated in a small garden. Retainer walls, feature walls, murals, water-walls

and other water features along with different types of hardscape surfaces and screens become important choices in contemporary gardens, where we need to soften but incorporate the high walls that are pushed in our faces. Small courtyards have to be turned into livable outdoor rooms. Plant choices while generally fewer in number and variety also become all the more important, being more fewer, closer, therefore more visible and expected to provide a reliable shape and form to complement the rest of the design.

While there has been a big shift towards water-wise and sun-hardy natives, the architectural feature plants that have these characteristics and hold their shape and form are the most popular. These generally don't outgrow the area planted in, too quickly, or become messy but still give some interest while retaining the dynamic of a living sculpture. These real winners are those that a Landscape Designer loves to use and can rely on.

At the end of the day 'good landscaping' is that which takes all your requirements into consideration and meets these expectations.

### **Landscape Design Principles**

When it comes to the creative part of the design there are a few principles that Landscapers use as 'Rules of thumb' that are worthwhile knowing. My theory is that when you know the rules you can break them at your own discretion. Apart from good product, plant and construction quality as well as budgetary considerations, the following are some examples of factors to consider.

While not exhaustive these can be listed under;

- Theme & Style
- Balance & proportion
- Simplicity
- Intrigue & uniqueness
- Colour
- Texture\ Depth
- Utilisation

There are many other considerations within these such as micro-climate (aspect {shade, sun, elevation}, prevailing winds, salty air, soil characteristics, water use, pets, children, plants to avoid for asthmatic or people with allergies etc.) that a good designer will look at or ask about but they will form part of these general categories.

### **Theme & Style**

There are many themes a garden can take and as mentioned before they can be categorised according to a specific period or geographical region or fashionable trend eg;

Old English, European Old World, Spanish, Roman, Byzantine, Mediterranean, Federation, Japanese, Feng Shui, Balinese, Mexican, Native, Ethnic, etc.

or

Xerophytic (desert type), Tropical, Water-wise, Water garden, Herb garden, Fruit garden, Scented garden, Butterfly garden, Colour themed garden, Nature garden, Miniature etc.

or

Contemporary, Modern, or Minimalist and a few more new ones all the time.

While most of these or a combination of them can be worked into a garden and its different areas, depending on the scale used, the two primary choices that will determine the overall style and shape of the garden is the choices of whether the garden will be **Formal or Informal**. A garden can have both in different areas e.g. Front and Back or where there a definite separation and have on occasion been successfully mixed.

The **Informal** style consists of long and slow sweeping scallops and is generally used in larger gardens with the beds as a border or framework around the edges. It can also have free-standing beds such as a typical 'clover-leaf' shape. Scallops and sweeps should be bold and few in number with accentuated cut-backs. The bigger the garden and the further from the viewer the beds are situated, the larger and bolder should the scallops be so that the pattern can be detected from afar. There is nothing worse than small ripples that from a distance can't be distinguished, as such, and look like a straight line that isn't quite straight. Small disconnected beds that form no particular shape or pattern are just as ugly. The informal style is, however, more forgiving and can be altered in size as the planting matures.

The **Formal** garden style, is as previously mentioned, now more common with our smaller block sizes where expansive homes take up most of the land. This reduced space doesn't allow for sweeping and accentuated scallops and is better suited to straighter or symmetrical angles which may incorporate circles, semi-circles, triangles or stepped\ tapered beds. The importance with this style is that apart from proportion, balance and all the other considerations the most important is that the lines are symmetrical and retain their defined shape. Some form of edging, retainer or kerbing is therefore imperative to maintain this style.

### **Balance & Proportion**

Balance refers to the shape of the layout of garden beds, lawn and paving etc. across the whole garden or visible section of the garden, whether it be in the front, rear or courtyard area of the garden. Basically what you do to one half is generally mirrored on the opposite side though not necessarily in exact proportion. This can be accomplished on paper by folding a page in two or smaller still into quarters, to divide the area of the design into equal proportions. One then has distinct areas to work in that are in proportion to each other. In other words if the beds or planters start larger and taper in or vice versa then this pattern would be duplicated from both ends. It also refers to the bed sizes being in proportion to the plant size or spread (drip-line) and height so that tall, wide-spreading trees and shrubs are not planted in a small garden and bed areas where they will overhang the beds and look out of proportion, create excessive shade, also creating bare patches in lawns and mouldy areas on paving. The height of plants (when bought to be planted as well as their mature size) should also be in proportion to the other plants that will be around them so that a similar pattern to the bed shapes (2D) reflects in the 3D aspect. Your eye naturally looks for these patterns and unless you intentionally wish to create an abstract or random theme then these are good rules to follow. Even in nature there is a pattern when viewed from a distance.

## **Simplicity**

I've seen many gardens that are a botanical collection of an individual's favourite plants collected over time with some that can't be removed for sentimental reasons. Intrepid gardeners often have to have the latest 'new plant release' and will make a place for it, while others can't help themselves and are like 'kids in a candy store' at a nursery. To rectify these gardens, as in any established garden, is very difficult, especially where the plants have been allowed to grow out of all proportion. It is obviously a far easier task to start with a blank canvas..

Gardens full of accent plants, all screaming for your attention at once, are intimidating to the viewer compared to a simpler pattern of uniform plantings or grouped plantings which form a backdrop to the accent plants. This can be taken a step further where just one very large accent plant such as a palm, grafted topiary, Yucca, standardised shrub, tree or other focal plant is used. Surround this with a quality lawn or ground covering and one can really make a bold and effective statement.

Planting in uniform groups doesn't necessarily mean as in like 'soldiers in a row' and odd numbers are usually used in a zig-zag pattern to create a 3D effect. The 'rule of thumb' here is that the bigger the plant the fewer the number used in the group, while as the plants get smaller the greater the quantity used, especially the further away from the garden is from the viewer.

## **Intrigue & uniqueness**

Basically intrigue refers to the fact that the viewer or visitor to your garden shouldn't be able to stand in one spot such as the patio, window or gate entrance and see the entire garden with one sweep of the eye. Use the beds, planting and various screens or structures to firstly hide unsightly objects and secondly to entice the observer to walk around the garden to discover its secrets.

Your eye picks up on familiar objects in the foreground or distance which establish benchmarks to gauge distance such as power lines, telephone poles, fences and neighbouring homes. The more one can screen out these background images the greater the sense of space and depth will be created in the garden.

Apart from our need to fit in and have what is currently trendy we also all like to have something unique that is not common to or available to everyone. Be this using an exotic, imported plant or a rare native that is difficult to grow or not available commercially, your garden design enables you to be unique. This can be within a style or through creating your own style. Feel free to experiment within the known parameters 'Rules' or be daring and break a few moulds. Be the first to prove a plant grouping works and you'll have many copy you. Don't be afraid to also make mistakes. Many new trends have been created where 'ignorance was bliss' and while sticking to the tried and tested route is a safe bet you can bet it won't be unique.

## **Colour**

While the bulk of the garden foliage will be varying shades of green, foliage of grey (created by fine hairs on the plant that reflect light) will lighten-up a garden and create subtle features and textural highlights and add cooling tones. This can also be achieved through using any pastel coloured flowers.

The hot primary colours of yellow, red and blue, along with orange, create bold

statements and should be used judiciously such as with your feature\ focal plants. Again create a balance by repeating such colours proportionately around a garden.

### **Texture**

To further create the illusion of depth use contrasting leaf textures with small-leaved plants to create the effect of a receding background offset against large glossy leaved plants that are accentuated against such a backdrop. Tight dense foliage and closer groupings will spaced to overlap, as mentioned above, exclude background objects, especially walls and fences. Also use evergreen plants as the background or where screening a wall or hiding an eyesore, so that holes aren't created in winter. A deciduous focal plant or tree such as the tortured willow can look very effective against a clear skyline. Where sitting close to a garden feature one can use small dainty planting in greater variety as the viewer is able to see and appreciate the detail.

### **Utilisation**

Creativity is great and like house designs fancy garden designs can look great but be totally impractical and a nightmare to maintain. Probably the most important considerations in planning a garden and the first question that should be asked is how it will be used;

- Are there young kids that need space to run and kick a ball?
- Are there pets, particularly young puppies or dogs that like to dig, lie in beds and chew on plants, retic. And anything else available?
- Do you need a shed or cubby house?
- Is extra parking needed for that planned boat or second car?
- Will the patio be extended or a barbecue, entertainment area built?
- Is a swimming pool or spa on the wish-list or perhaps a nice water feature?
- Does the garden need to accommodate handicapped people and have ramps, smooth pathways or appeal to touch and smell for the visually impaired.
- Is fruit, vegetables, nuts or herbs part of the requirement or is the need purely aesthetic?
- Are the client's interested in attracting birds or other fauna and wildlife into the garden such as butterflies, frogs, lizards, possums etc.
- Is Lighting a consideration, particularly where paving is involved as it needs to be allowed for in terms of power points and along with the retic. needs sleeves left for cables and pipes (preferably 100mm diameter)? This should be co-ordinated along with the builders.
- Is access needed to parts of the garden with bigger machinery to build retainer walls or is a bore hole a consideration? It is much easier to access the back garden with large machinery before the garden goes in.
- Paving and pathways to the front and rear doors, sheds and utility areas are also important and you don't want to be trying to carry the lawnmower, wheelbarrow or groceries over intricate stepping stones or retainer walls and fences because of an all-too-fancy design.
- Gardens that are too big and spacious could also often be improved by the use of sunshades, patios, pergolas, umbrellas and screening such as walls, hedges, trellises and planting to create a cosy atmosphere such as around the entertainment area and to protect it from harsh sunlight or winds. A nice sheltered spot in the garden with a suitable bench and surrounding planting and accessories can be a great retreat to relax and meditate in.

Generally the sooner the Landscape Designer is involved in the design process the better and this can start along with your consultations with the prospective builder or once the house plans have been completed.

Secondly, my advice to clients is always to design for your ultimate dream garden\ outdoor area and work backwards from there if necessary to tailor it to suite a particular budget. It is easier to do this than to try and add-in things later that have not been planned for.

### **Employing a Landscaper or Landscape Designers**

So what's the best route to follow in achieving our desired garden?

There are various options available in the market place which can be broadly summarised as follows;

- Design and Project Management by a Landscape Architect\ Landscape Designer
- Design and Construction by a Landscape Contractor
- D.I.Y Design & Build

The first option is similar to the process followed in building a house where a professional consultant carries out the design process and works through all the options to present the client with concept drafts followed by a Working plan. While some of these are still hand-drawn many are now computer drawn plans. This phase of the construction is usually followed by a specification and the design being sent out on tender (usually done for commercial projects) or quotes and the project is then monitored by the consultant while under construction by the appointed contractor's.

Pros and cons would be the perceived extra expense associated with professional fees whereas these are often offset against avoiding mistakes and associated unhappiness with the project that cannot be undone later. The fact that the design options are worked through first and all contractors quote on a 'like for like\ apples for apples' basis generally eliminates this problem.

The second option is where the Landscape Contracting company offers a design service as part of their construction package. This may be done 'at risk' where no fee is charged upfront, with the hope of attaining the work or where a separate design\ consultation fee is charged to the construction work. While this can be cheaper if the design costs are not worked into the construction overheads it limits comparison of quotes based on the exact same design. Very important when using this method is to choose a reputable company and preferably one that is a member of LIAWA (Landscape Industries Association of WA).

The third option is where a designer is used to prepare the Design and Working Drawings for construction of the garden by the client themselves or under Project Management of the client, who would solicit, appoint and supervise the various contractors on their own. The designer may supply the plants and materials or part thereof as they often have access to better trade prices.

### **Summary**

What is critical in all of the above options is to verify the credentials of the chosen designer\ contractor through references which may be 'word-of-mouth' form friends,

family or associates, testimonials and 'checked' references or membership of the relevant trade associations whether it be for Irrigation installation (I.A.A), Landscaping (LIAWA), Building (MBA) or any other trade used.

### **Maintenance**

This topic covers such a diverse array of information from fertilizing, mowing and machinery, to pests and diseases that it warrants its own article. What is important to note, however, is that the best designed garden without adequate and suitable maintenance (albeit a low maintenance design) will not look great and add the value intended, whereas a less than perfect design can often look great and better than the aforementioned well-designed but poorly maintained garden, through top quality garden maintenance.