

# GARDEN DESIGN

Presentation by Bill Freund :: April 9, 2014

I have been privileged recently to visit several of your homes and gardens, so I know first-hand, the passion you feel for gardening and I am humbled as I stand here to share a few thoughts about garden design. My plan tonight is to provide a guideline to help you reassess your garden, then a process for developing an overall design and finally, some ideas for creating new venues.

It is just at this time of the year when I await the arrival of catalogue orders and itch to visit a local nursery that I should be thinking about garden design. But, in truth, my thoughts are full of desire ... “I want that in my garden.” So, armed with a trowel and the new plants, it is very easy to just *find a place and stick it in the ground*, completely ignoring the plan ... the design part.

Yet, we all know that the basis of all truly successful gardens **is** a thoughtful plan. A plan that considers such factors as lot size and shape, terrain, drainage, existing structures, the house, drive, walks, walls, fences, utilities and, of course, all the plantings already in place.

## **But how to begin.**

For me, garden design and the planning process begins by taking a **REALLY GOOD LOOK at the garden**. Take a slow, careful, all over tour, examining the property from every vantage — being especially interested in the views that you will have: from the house ... the deck ... the kitchen window ... your bedroom. Determine the points from which you will most often view each area of your garden space. Make notes of what you see. Are there places and objects that are rather ... unappealing? Now, do the same thing from afar. What is the view from the street ... from your neighbor's house? Then come back and walk about your plot. You might even take a stool and stop, sit, look around and across the lot. Oh, and be sure to look back at the house.

Consider the shape and topography, note the immovable objects: structure, trees, large rocks and especially the sharp straight lines. Now, think about what style you would like. Do you want it to be formal or informal. Recall the things you have observed as well as your personal preferences. Does this space naturally tend toward balance and order, or would that be difficult to achieve? Clearly this style decision is important from the start.

I personally prefer a more informal style. For me, that means that I will be looking for opportunities to eliminate, or soften examples of hard, straight lines and to minimize repetition and exacting balance.

Now return to your notes and begin to think about those views. Is there a spot you will frequently see from the house? Imagine what that spot might become — a planting place, a trellis, a destination. Perhaps all three.

Now it is time to pick-up a pad. Trace out the basics of your lot, locate the house, the drive and all the significant immovable objects. There are some neat computer software tools or prepared sketch pads that you might use; but for me, it is mostly in my head, so just the basics is enough.

Now, mark off the dimensions of that “view” you have begun to imagine. Is the space you have identified already defined by existing structure of any kind. Or is it sort of wide open?

An interesting, really appealing viewpoint should be more defined in order to focus your attention. Even a wide open magnificent vista will become even more special when there is something of interest in the foreground. Now repeat this process from different vantage points. What do you see now? What would you like to emphasize ... or obscure? Is the view distant or close?

Creating an attractive view is very much the same whether it is a distant venue, a mid-range flower bed, a nearby container, or even a table arrangement. Every one of these must be appealing and interesting. In general, the design for each must meet the same standards:

- Be placed in a suitable and enhancing setting (planting bed, container, vase)
- Be arranged in an interesting, even provocative manner (variable height, size and spatial balance)
- Provide commanding attention (shape, color, texture)
- All of these in the context of the specific location — including light and surrounding objects and circumstances.

My favorite phrase for this is — *thrillers, fillers, and spillers*. ALL really successful floral arrangements are made by carefully arranging a bunch of *thrillers, fillers, and spillers*.

### **So now you have the concept.**

Go back to each of the views you have identified and placed on your layout diagram and begin to think about how each one might look. I find it helpful to think of an “in the house” flower arrangement designed to command a room or to illuminate a shadowed corner, but now expanded and embellished to achieve a similar result in a larger, more open setting. As you develop your design, remember that you need to control and satisfy the viewer’s eye.

You can control the viewer’s eye by being careful that there is sufficient background setting, such as surrounding shrub and tree foliage. You will also want to provide sufficient stuff — *eye-candy* — to capture and hold attention. For example, putting a lonely bush or even a nice bench out in the middle of the front yard ... just isn’t enough, no matter how fine they are.

So far I have been talking about what you see from the house.

Now consider those other views you noted — from the far side of the lot, from the street, from your neighbor’s house. Each of these will provide another potential viewpoint. Place them on your schematic. You may find some overlap. Especially with a new or expanded flower bed, you may be able to encompass more than one perspective into the same location. The same plantings may look different from different angles and there could be some economy too.

As you begin to envision new and pleasing views, be sure to include all those special parts of your plot, such as terrain change, large rocks, and interesting tree trunks. You may want to de-emphasize and mask some features, but others could provide opportunities to create fantastic settings. I especially like to emphasize topography. One way is to lay-up a low stone wall on a slope and then back fill it to serve as a venue for creeping or climbing plants. A low wall, a large rock or an interesting tree trunk can become a place to build into a real “*go-to*” venue. By adding a chair, a small table and a bench, you will have a conversation spot. As you walk through your garden with a friend, you will be drawn there to sit and chat, while all the time enjoying the special view from that perspective. How about increasing the “draw” of that *sitting place* by using stones, small shrubs and plantings to create a sort of path to guide you from the deck or door over to those beckoning seats?

I urge you to enhance all that you have ... and then to create more. For example, you could hollow out an existing low spot and then pile the soil in another place to make a mound. Now you would have *two* new, unique planting spots that will challenge you to find new plants. If the hole you made is near a downspout, then the hole, *filled with a little gravel*, might become a rain garden where water plants will grow. The mound might be topped with some ornamental grasses to make it appear *more* like a small hill. And don't forget mystery. There is nothing like surprise, and the unknown, to heighten interest. Yes, it would be good to be able to see the little resting place over there and to be drawn to it, but it is also great fun to discover something not yet seen, something unexpected.

Pathways, whether vague or defined, are wonderful for encouraging movement around even a modest garden. Most of us like to share our garden with friends and paths are such good ways to do that. But when the path is even just partly hidden, everything is changed. Imagine .... if that grassy mound were large enough to shield a special planting area, or flowering shrub, as you round the turn with a friend .... you might hear an “*oh look*” comment that simply would not have been said if the item had been in full view all along. Encouraged, your visitor might be tempted to continue around the side of the house to find the rain garden waiting behind a low shrub, next to the downspout.

### **Good planning can enhance the thrill and interest of your garden.**

Let me recap a little. I have mentioned movement and mystery as well as my personal preference for informal design. We've talked about identifying and then creating viewpoints and venues around your property. I suggested ways to enhance the natural features and create new ones. And you will want to share your garden, so paths and walkways would be nice to link it all together. As you envision all this, be thinking about how it all fits together. Of course, you want to keep things interesting with the *thrillers, fillers, and spillers*.

But, you are also going to want your plantings to flow together and function as a whole rather than be a series of single events. The “*in between*” fillers are just as important as the thrillers and spillers. In addition to walkways, you can use lawn, ground covers, and structures to knit the various destinations and viewpoints into a cohesive whole.

- Envisioned schematically when looking from above, you would see lots of circles linked by curving lines.
- Looking horizontally, there would be significant variation in height, shape, color and texture.
- Like any flower arrangement, you will want to place highest things in the back or middle and then gradually lower the height as you move toward the front or side.
- Colors can also be important. Blues and purples are cool and nice in shade, but they can get lost. Some people put white blossoms in front to make the colors in the back stand out. You should consider whether you like to mix colors such as the wild flowers in a cottage garden or prefer to group the same or similar colors for impact.
- As best you can, try to plan your plantings to provide a constant source of bloom and color throughout the season.

Finally, I really urge you to make a commitment to spend time in your garden. A few relaxing minutes spent each day deadheading and nipping out weeds will avoid the task accumulating and becoming a **big job**.

### **Take-Aways**

1. **A Give-away-store.** If you have perennials, you will need to divide them, you will need to pluck out volunteers and nip off slips and starts. Why not make this a part of your regular garden maintenance? Pot them up as you go and set them aside in a special place — the “*give-away-store*”. Then invite everyone who tours your garden to take something home. For gardeners, there is just nothing better than sharing plants. I love remembering my gardening friends as I see a plant that came from their garden.
2. **Helping hands.** I put small debris bins along my garden paths to encourage everyone who passes by to do some easy nipping, snipping, dead-heading and plucking of weeds.