

Gardening 101: Lesson Four - Garden Design

This is where the fun comes into gardening.

Thus far Gardening 101 has been concentrating on the scientific aspects of gardening but now it's time to consider the aesthetics or art of gardening - what plants you want to plant where to achieve the overall artistic effect you want to create.

There are several common styles of garden design.

Probably the most popular is the English garden in which beds of mixed plants are arranged so that almost all the soil is covered by various kinds of plants to create a harmonious effect of abundance and beauty. No matter what time it is in the gardening season, English gardens contain flowering plants, sometimes intermingled with complementing shrubs and trees. This tends to give an informal effect but the cozy result belies the large amount of effort it takes to establish and maintain such a full garden. English garden style is, however, well suited to the sort of small garden spaces we have in Old Ottawa East.

More formal are the French and Italian styles. French gardens contain carefully arranged plants which are pruned or otherwise arranged to give an overall pattern. There is usually a limited variety of plants used and flowers tend to be not as important as are the shapes and textures of the plants. Italian gardens are similar in that they value structure over flower and prefer geometric plantings. Not impossible to achieve in our usually small Ottawa spaces but better suited to places where larger vistas are attainable.

Japanese gardens are formal too but in a different way. Every plant and ornament is carefully chosen and placed to create 'pictures' which are pleasing to the eye or to invoke a particular feeling in the viewer. Rocks and stones feature prominently in Japanese gardens. These are challenging to maintain since any flaw in a plant or object will jar the eye and spoil the overall impression but the Japanese style suits small garden spaces very well.

Prairie-style gardens are a relatively modern style of garden. In them, large swathes of plants are combined to create impressions of movement and flow. Colour occurs in great drifts rather than from the combination of different plants as would be the case in an English style garden. While Prairie-style gardens look informal and very naturalistic, they require careful attention to scale, working best in larger areas of ground.

Geometrical gardens can be formal or informal in mood, they can be Japanese, French, Italian, or even a little English in style but basically they all rely on the orientation of plants to give their particular effect. Plants are situated in repetitive patterns and are carefully controlled in sized so that the various geometric shapes are maintained. A small space can easily support this kind of design.

There's another kind of design which seems to be no design at all. This is the Cottage garden in which plants which please the individual gardener or which are given to or inherited from a previous owner are arranged however the gardener wants. This is the most informal style and

tends to evolve over time as plants come and go. A lot of our Old Ottawa East gardens are in the Cottage style.

Regardless of which style you prefer, there are considerations which every gardener needs to keep in mind in choosing a style:

The House

Often the style of a garden is determined by the style of the house it surrounds. For instance, a modern style house doesn't usually look its best when surrounded by an English style garden because the two designs fight rather than complement one another.

Your Style

Sometimes, it's your personal sense of style which determines garden design. If you're not one to wear severely minimal monochromatic clothing, you probably won't enjoy a Japanese Zen garden. If you enjoy exuberance, a cottage garden might just be the one for you.

Reality Check – what kind of gardener are you?

There's really no point in creating a garden which requires a lot of upkeep unless you're a person who has a lot of time for garden chores such as pruning, raking rocks, deadheading or weeding. A straightforward and easy design will suit you better. Conversely, if you really enjoy collecting special varieties of plants and seeing how they grow in combination with others, you'll probably love English or Cottage garden designs.

Budget

There's no use trying to put in a garden in whatever design you choose if you don't have the money to buy what's needed. Either trim back the design to what you can afford or plan on achieving the design systematically, over several years.

Once an overall style has been selected, consider such design aspects as:

Colour

Colour can add so much to the enjoyment of a garden but combinations of clashing hues or the inclusion of shades you just don't like will detract from your pleasure. If you don't like pink, you probably won't enjoy pink flowers or foliage in your garden and while utilization of only one colour can be dramatic, you run the risk of becoming bored with it over time.

Texture

Gardens containing plants with foliage of similar texture tend to be uninteresting so it's best to aim for a variety of textures in your plantings. Unless, of course, you deliberately want to

emphasize geometric design where repetition of the same plant(s) over and over achieve the design.

Heights

A garden containing plants all of the same height isn't very eye-catching unless, as in the French style, those plants are arranged in patterns which require that the eye be able to view all the plants at once. More interesting is the garden in which the eye moves up and down to discern the full effect.

Hardscaping

Determining the ways you want to use your garden and how you want to move around it will determine the sort of paths, seating, patios, fences, walls, etc. to be included in the garden design. Your budget will probably determine what material you use for these non-plant elements.

Trees/shrubs

Fundamental to a garden design are the sizes and locations of trees and shrubs in it. It's the harmonious placement of these larger plant elements which helps determine where the other garden elements should go.

Designing a garden is at once the most fun and frustrating part of gardening. The truth of the matter is that many of us simply don't have the artistic vision and talent to plan and realize an original garden design. We may be perfectly competent gardeners and we may be able to combine our plants so that they function well together but still, without an overall aesthetic, our gardens will never be truly satisfying to the eye.

If you, like me, lack the gardening aesthetic gene, the best thing to do is to hire a professional to help you or to simply copy an appealing design you've seen in a magazine, a book, or in wandering around other peoples' gardens. (There are some inspirational front-yard gardens in our neighbourhood. Take a walk down Colonel By Drive or along Marlowe Crescent to check out some nice ones and get ideas.) Or you can just try your luck and be prepared to do a lot of adding, discarding and moving of plants as you realize how to improve the design. In any case, enjoy what you've created.

Next lesson: clean-up and preparation for winter