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W175



Twelve Common Landscape Mistakes

And How to Avoid Them

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No one today would doubt that we live in the Information Age. It would be nice to say that some credit should be given to people submersing themselves in well-written books and magazines, but let's face it—we can find pretty much anything we want on the Internet and from watching a huge variety of do-it-yourself cable programming. Yes, there is so much data at our fingertips that it doesn't take too long before we have the confidence to believe we can do everything ourselves.

One of the areas where folks feel most tempted to bypass the advice of professionals is in the creation of gardens and landscape design. It's very true that gardening is an extremely rewarding endeavor and the feeling of accomplishment that comes with creating a beautiful space is unmatched, but there are still some key guidelines to consider. What follows is my observation of the 12 most common landscape mistakes and some "cut-to-the-chase" advice on how you may avoid them.



1. Don't give away your property…

This "mistake" is most often observed in newer developments with fewer trees. Typically, in newer subdivisions, there are one or two token trees planted in the front yard. In an attempt to not make these features look quite so lonely, a kidney bean-shape island is often developed around them, featuring a low groundcover or a few small flowering shrubs. While this can be an attractive addition, there can be a visual problem with this approach. Although it may not appear so initially, as this landscape matures it may

eventually seem as though part of the yard is being given away. The area between this planting bed and the street or neighbor's property line can sometimes be forgotten until mowing time. The eye of the viewer will stop at this bed and assume the areas beyond must belong to another yard.

A solution may be to pull this entire planting closer to the edge, to not only better define the lawn area, but also serve as a visual boundary to the front or back yard. You should strive to design a well-defined area of turf and then plant heavily around the perimeter. Here's one way to look at it. "The shape of the lawn is often more important than the shape of the beds." This also helps create a more pleasing perspective from views inside the house by giving the viewer's eye more to see from key windows than just grass and a couple of trees. With the proper backdrop, you could create more contrast, which is key to any pleasing garden.



Comfortable "rooms" can be created by dividing a larger space.



A vast property with an overwhelming sense of scale

2. Fear of subdividing….

To feel comfortable in any space, attention to scale is essential. This is especially true when designing gardens. Perhaps its just the American way, but it's mystifying the way we yearn to possess the biggest piece of land we can afford, while at the same time attempt to see as much of it as possible in one view. There are so many backyards out there that are merely wide expanses of turf with no real purpose other than giving the mower a workout.

To create a truly appealing garden, you should not be afraid to subdivide large spaces into smaller, more intimate rooms. A great garden is one that is broken into smaller compartments, each having its own identity. "The patio," "the water garden," "the herb garden" and "the perennial border" all exude the feeling of discovery. Merely planting a hedge of evergreens in the middle of a backyard with an appropriate opening or portal somewhere along its length allows one big space to be divided into to two separate use areas. Too often we see our backyards as little more than a mowing nuisance. The gardens in Italy, France and England are great examples to emulate here, albeit on a smaller scale, with their precise control of movement and views created by the placement of walls and hedges.

One of the greatest compliments one could receive on his or her garden would be to have a visitor return after several visits and discover a "secret garden" and then respond by saying, "In all my visits here, I never knew this existed." Just as in any good card game, you should not show all of your cards at once. Another way of putting this would be "reveal and conceal." Create mystery in your garden and allow visitors to explore and discover new plants and features.

3. The missing edge…

Definition is the key to any great garden or landscape design. Just as you would be reluctant to hang a painting on a wall with no frame or feel awkward when you forget to put on a belt, your garden elements also need to be separated from one another, even if by nothing other than a very thin line. Seeing mulch kicked out onto an otherwise clean pathway or turf growing fuzzily into an adjacent bed tells the viewer that details are not important, whereas the exact opposite should be true.

Just like architectural lines on a building, different elements in a garden need to be crisp and well-defined. Along a crushed stone pathway, this may consist of installing an extra material such as a steel edge. Where turf meets beds, it is often necessary to delineate this transition with brick, stone or thin strips of pressure-treated wood. If using a natural, trench-type edge, be sure to re-cut this every so often so that the two materials do not blur. The next time you visit a botanic garden or well-designed landscape, pay attention to edges. See what's out there and don't be reluctant to bring some of those ideas back to your own yard.



Lack of edging creates a poor division of elements.



Crisp edges add contrast to lawns and paths.



4. Bad bed scale…

Relating to the previous challenge of the missing edge, inappropriate bed scale also presents a dilemma when designing and laying out a landscape. A good example to help illustrate this would be to picture that ever-present walkway connecting the driveway to the front door. Very often, this may be 12 feet or more from the foundation of the home. In order not to have to maintain lawn in this area, the foundation bed is allowed to continue uninterrupted to the walkway. Unless one has densely planted and well- maintained groundcover, the result of this situation is similar to what was described previously, with mulch or debris being kicked out on to the walkway.



A narrow band of turf creates a good transition from hardscape to bed.

This would be an ideal situation to install a narrow band of turf to serve as a transition from bed to walk. By having such an intermediate texture, the scale of the bed is kept in check and the entrance garden may look much more inviting. You may have experienced a similar instance where a shopping center attempts to keep maintenance down by simply mulching enormous areas that were really meant to be planted or have turf. More than likely, a decision made to keep costs down results in hundreds of square feet of "blah" and a great catch area for the ubiquitous cigarette butt. Well-defined zones of turf would probably not be much more costly to maintain than the biannual practice of mulching everything in sight.



The ever-present bean-bed.



Too much mulch provides no contrast.

5. Choosing only curves…

Somewhere in the history of American landscape design, someone must have been quoted as saying "curves are soothing and make us feel more relaxed." While this is no doubt true in many instances, why must they dictate the design of every bed and pathway in our gardens? Geometry can be a beautiful thing. A modern home with exciting architectural angles should not have its landscape conform to the status quo.



Too many curves lead to chaos.

If you have a smaller, rectilinear backyard, try rotating your viewing axis to take advantage of the longest measurement (see diagram on right). By doing so, you will inadvertently create some fantastic opportunities for developing some creative subspaces. Very often our landscapes are bound by geometry, considering the adjacent structures, property lines, walkways and such. We too often feel compelled to force a curve into an area in which it makes very little sense. Be creative, bold and daring. Try a straight line now and then.



Straight lines can be just as appealing as curved lines.



A poorly designed pond may actually reduce property value.



This geometric design takes advantage of the backyard's longest measurement which creates some inviting sub-spaces.

6. The common water feature…

There was a time when a backyard pond was cutting edge. This eventually evolved into the story of the "stone necklace." You may have seen these or may even have one. The stone necklace is the term given to the ever present rock-ringed garden pond. The stones are initially placed around the perimeter of the pond to conceal and / or anchor the flexible liner. The result is a water feature with perhaps pleasant sound but appearing anything but natural. If you have one of these situations, consider installing a few crawling plants in a few key areas around the edge to help conceal some of this stone. Adding a bog (shallow, consistently wet planting area) to one end may also help mitigate some of the stone.

Another common mistake that is observed in many garden ponds is the unnatural change in elevation, which is often

a result of the desire to have a waterfall in a setting with no natural change in topography. Typically, the soil that comes from the pond excavation is conveniently placed very near the pond, creating a mini-mountain effect. However, to create a waterfall and make it appear as though it is the result of a natural grade change, a considerable amount of additional soil should be brought in to allow the adjacent mound to taper out more gradually.

If the idea of moving water without the maintenance of pond, fish and plants appeals to you, consider a pondless water feature. The idea here is to showcase some strange piece of yard art or a beautiful urn in which water flows, eventually draining into a small, underground reservoir housing a compact, re-circulating pump. There is no open, standing water in this case, thus keeping mosquitoes and algae at bay.





Interesting water features give gardens a unique identity



7. Lack of lighting…



When planning a landscape budget, lighting is rarely mentioned. This is unfortunate. So much time and money is invested in creating a beautiful outdoor environment, it's unfortunate much of it isn't seen after the sun sets. Outdoor lighting doesn't need to be complicated or outlandish. One saying in the outdoor lighting industry is "a little light goes a long way." A 60- or 75-watt lamp is great to read by, but putting the same intensity outdoors can be overpowering. Low-voltage lighting uses a transformer to step down voltage from 120v to 12v, generally speaking. The lamps may range from 10 to 35 watts.



Strategically placing a few path lights along a front walkway allows visitors to comfortably negotiate their way to the entrance. "Puddles" of light cast on the groundplane do much more for landscape aesthetics than high-wattage "glow bombs." (High-wattage lights placed upon columns or posts actually create a mind-numbing glare and do little to actually light a walkway.)



Good lighting will transform a garden.

Low-voltage lighting can also be very flexible. Since the wires are not fixed in conduit, fixtures may even be moved (provided there is enough slack wire) to cast a glow upon different plants and special garden features as the seasons change. When placing light fixtures in the garden, just remember that not everything needs to be lighted. Having too many hot spots of light can be as chaotic as having too many specimen plants in a small area, creating competition and confusion. There is more information on landscape lighting available on the Internet and in specialized how-to books in where you may get more detailed guidance.

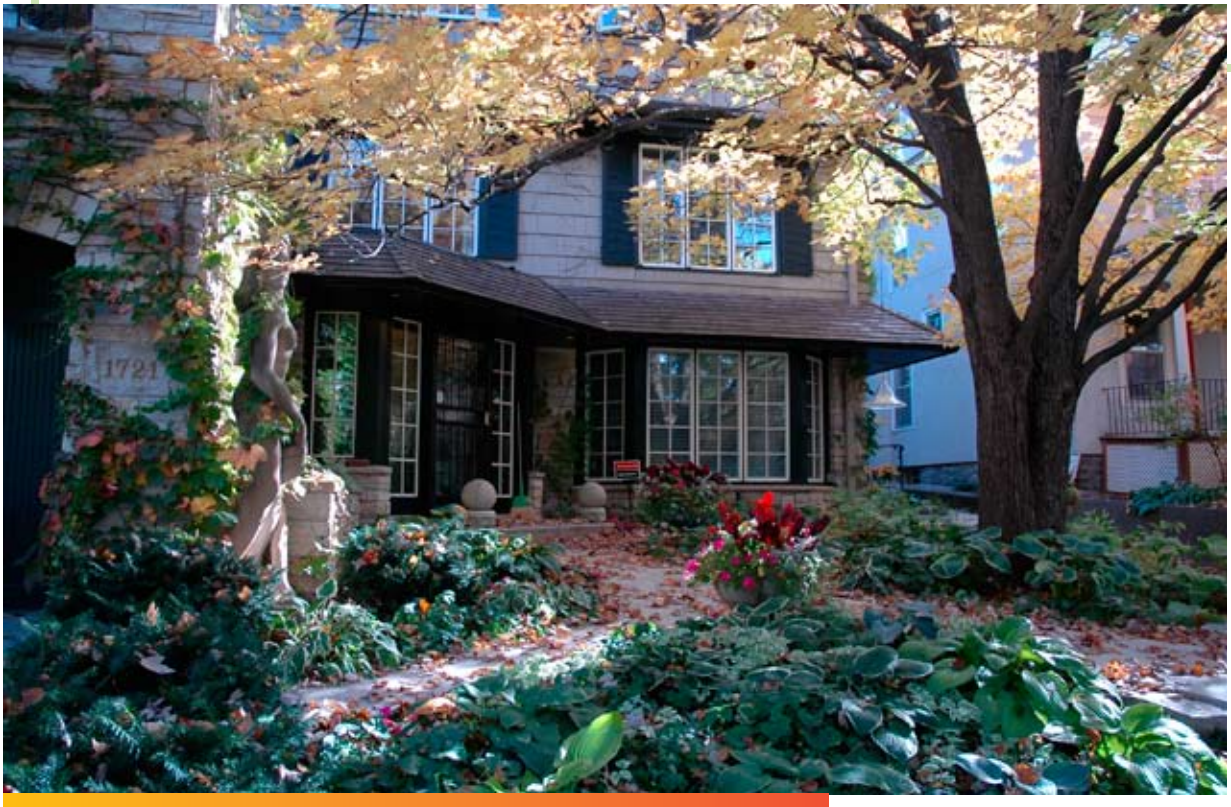
8. Limited plant palette…

Like it or not, we have become lazy. The words "fast" and "convenient" have become synonymous with our shopping habits. Concepts like fast-food, drive-thru and one-hour photo have carried over to how we buy plants. The suggestion here is to take your time. Be selective, do your research and find plants for your garden that are hardy but different from anything you see in a commercial setting.



Large beds with one species of plant may actually increase maintenance.

Again, with the aid of tools like the Internet and all of those great plant catalogs that are vying for space in your mailbox, there is no need to settle for "Blue Rug juniper" or "Manhattan euonymus." While it is true that there should be a certain amount of repetition or glue in your garden, which will be discussed next, you should strive for individuality. This is especially true when selecting those precious few, like the specimen plant, that beckon a visitor to come closer. Finding certain plants for your garden should be like a scavenger hunt, only with no time limit. A great garden is never finished, so resist the urge to check it off the list and be done with it. There is little more satisfying to a gardener than to have a visitor comment "What is that? I've never seen it before."



Diversity of plant materials creates a welcoming, warm garden.



A simple hedge provides welcome continuity in this garden.

9. Lack of unity…

Now for what may initially seem like a total U-turn from what you have just read. There was once a question asked in an interview with a landscape architect in which he was asked "What is the most common problem with American gardens?" His very short but memorable response was "Lack of restraint." Critiquing gardens is much like judging art. It is a very noble art form. It is also extremely subjective. In this world there are plant collectors and those who constantly attempt to put things in order. Collecting different species and cultivars of plants can be very rewarding but if there isn't any repetition or glue holding the garden together, it can easily become a jumbled mess.

Consider allowing some simplicity to creep back into your garden if it seems chaotic. This may be in the form of a continuous groundcover or hedge plants that may serve as a backdrop and provide contrast to your attention getters. A ribbon of paving may serve as a thread to hold everything together. There should be a certain distance between unique plants or groups of plants so that the eye may rest a bit between focal points. Some plants are naturally considered to be specimens (gold thread cypress, globe blue spruce, thread-leaf Japanese maples, etc.) and there are those that are meant to be used in mass (hollies, yews or juniper.) Landscape architects are often criticized for specifying plants too tightly and it is often a justifiable criticism. On the other hand, there are many species of plants that will never read as a mass if they aren't placed closely to begin with. Many of the grasses fall into this category.

One final word on grasses – don't be too quick to cut these back in the fall. Most ornamental grasses are at their peak in late fall and early winter. Cutting them back too soon is like leaving the festival before the fireworks blast off! Yes, eventually they will begin to break down from winter rains and snow, but as long as you cut them before you begin to see new growth appear deep inside the plant, you should be fine.

10. Poor rock placement…

Boulders in the garden can add an amazing, natural architectural dimension. Unfortunately, a very common problem occurs when these gifts from the earth are placed haphazardly *on* the landscape. You may have witnessed The Great Rock Drop. You have likely seen these abnormalities where accent boulders aren't nestled into the beds, but just placed on them. To be successful (look natural,) boulders should be planted. They should be buried up to the point of their widest measurement. Whenever you can see a boulder angle back towards its center, it's pretty easy to estimate its total mass. Ideally, you'd like these features to replicate natural rock outcroppings where one passing by sees only the tip of the iceberg.



Boulders resting on the landscape look unnatural.



These rocks look settled and are an integrated part of the design.



11. Using only plants…

The one element that is missing in so many gardens is architecture. While it is very tempting to include art in that statement, I believe that there are ample quantities of gazing spheres, painted plywood cutouts of the lady bending over in the garden and bathtub shrines out there to allow those elements to be excluded here. Missing are the freestanding brick or stone walls, inviting iron arches, trellises, gazebos and small shelters. Plants on their own are very appealing, but when they are positioned near constructed elements, they take on a new life. A very simplistic way to describe garden construction has been to relate it to baking a cake. The major features and architectural elements are located first, taking into consideration existing trees and plant material to remain, as well as grading and drainage. This is followed by linking these features with paths and hardscape components such as patios, drives, decks and walkways. The last ingredient to go on this cake is the icing – the plant material – since it is the easiest to modify and the most flexible.









Architectural elements add structure to gardens.

12. Thinking that a garden is static…

The final "mistake" in this list is the notion that so many garden lovers can't help but to try to keep their properties in some frozen moment in time. Plants grow, thrive and die. A garden is constantly changing. The sun-loving dianthus planted under the canopy of that small sugar maple will eventually have to be replaced with more shade-tolerant hostas, ferns or mondo grass.



An overgrown landscape in need of a make-over.

It's traumatic to take down a stately old oak or elm if it becomes diseased or poses a threat to the house, but it also affords new possibilities. Just when you think your garden is full or complete, you suddenly find yourself browsing the quality garden centers or surfing the Internet for that something special that you could never grow before because you had too much shade.

This list is by no means complete. There are surely things you have witnessed in your travels that if it were yours, you would have done differently. What has been written here should serve only as a guide or perhaps a little jolt to get you thinking about creating that next beautiful garden paradise.



An attractive landscape continues to evolve and appeal to many with proper maintenance.

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