LESSON 1 INTRODUCTION TO GARDEN DESIGN

Designing your own garden can be one of the most creative things you ever do – producing a living sculpture that gives you years of enjoyment.

The secret to good garden design is a plan.

Site Analysis

When starting a design, the first thing to do is carefully examine the existing garden. Unless you have a brand new house on an undeveloped block, you will have to consider what is already on site. Things to look for include:

- Easements, caveats and utilities – are there legal restrictions on what you can do and where you can build? Look for gas, electricity, phone and water connections.
- Buildings and hard surfaces – are there sheds, paved areas, garden beds, etc?
- Topography and access – is there a slope or a change in levels? Can vehicles or pedestrians move freely?
- Orientation, seasonal issues – does the house shade parts of the garden? Do deciduous plants let in light during winter? Does one part of the house or garden get hot in summer, etc?
- Climate – where are the prevailing winds? When and how much does it rain? How often do you get frosts, etc?
- Soil, drainage – do you have clay or sandy soil? Are there wet spots in the garden?
- Atmosphere – is there any noise or air pollution?
- Vegetation – are there existing trees or shrubs you want to retain?
- Re-usable materials – are there any pavers, timber, etc. on site?
- Local area – what are the surrounding gardens like?
- Are there likely to be any future building works (extra rooms, new garage, etc)?

Deciding What You Want

- What sort of atmosphere do you want to create?
- Privacy – do you want the garden for entertainment purposes, or for peace and quiet?
- Views, focal points – where are you going to look at the garden? (The most common view is usually from the kitchen window). Is there a view you want to hide?
- Traffic – do you need room for cars? Will pedestrians trample the lawn?

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Suggested task

1. Find a site to be landscaped within easy reach of your home. It could be your own garden, another home garden, a small section of a local park or a redevelopment of an older garden. Conduct a brief site analysis, i.e. consider what is on-site using the points opposite. In particular think about:

   a) What structures already exist - can these be incorporated into the design?

   b) What plants are present - can any of these be retained or transplanted in the new design?

   c) What is the existing soil like? Does it need to be amended? Does it drain well?

   d) How does the climate affect the growing conditions throughout the year?

2. Draw up a list of priorities for your chosen site. Rank them in order of importance.

- Children, pets – do you need room for ball games or for the dog to play?
- What sort of plants do you like?
- What sort of plants don't you like (e.g. do you suffer from allergies or hay fever)?
- How much maintenance do you want to do?
- Do you want to include an irrigation system?
- Do you need a clothesline?
- Would you like an area to grow vegetables?
- Budget – how much do you want to spend?

DO IT IN STAGES

Often the garden has to be developed in stages because:

a) The money isn't available to do it all at once.

b) Other work must be done first (e.g. a sewerage main is to be laid, a shed is to be erected, or a building is to be extended).

Undeveloped, or underdeveloped, parts of the garden might be screened with fast growing plants or a temporary fence until they are able to be attended to. Areas designated for paving, garden beds or water gardens might be grassed to provide a reasonable appearance until the time is right to finish the development.

As with anything constructive, it is always a good idea to start with a plan. List everything you want to eventually include in the garden - and arrange these things in order from your highest priority to your lowest. (Note: the low priority item might only be low because it's expensive and not necessarily because you want it any less).

Your 'prioritised' list might be something like this:

1) Washing line

2) Barbecue

3) Lawn (or mulch to keep the mud and dust down)

4) Fences on boundaries

5) Trees for shade

6) Shrubs to screen the neighbours' houses

7) Plants to provide cut flowers inside

8) A garden setting for eating outside

9) Paved pathways for access in wet weather

10) A paved patio area

11) A vegetable garden

12) A garden shed

13) An ornamental pond

14) A swimming pool.

A well-planned garden will eventually accommodate everything on your

list - but you may very well consider the garden's development to be an evolutionary process over many years. At any stage of that evolutionary process, the garden should still be aesthetically pleasing and functional.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

Landscape planning is both an art and a science. It's a process in which you need to consider the physical requirements of building a garden, and at the same time strive to create something which is artistic and pleasing to the eye.

Don't Be Put Off By The Challenge

Planning your garden can be a lot of fun, and remember it's a lot cheaper to make your mistakes on paper!

Follow this step-by-step process and you can't go too wrong:

1) Draw a sketch of your property (preferably to scale) as it is now. A builder's plan is often good to work off (all you have to do is trace over it).

2) Make up a list of things you want to put in the garden (e.g. washing line, shed, BBQ, lawn area, vegetable garden, children's swing etc).

3) Draw in pencil where you think the best place would be to put each of these things.

4) Now stand back and think for a week or so. If you like, ask friends or relatives what they think about where you plan to put things. Use a bit of common sense and consider whether each of these things is located in the best place (refer to the list "What Goes Where").

5) Rearrange the location of these different components, and settle on final locations.

6) Fill in the gaps - placing lawn, shrubs, paving, mulch, gravel, etc. between the various components.

What Goes Where?

- The barbecue, outdoor setting, and patio should be together - and close to the kitchen, if possible.
- The rubbish bins, compost heap, and burner should be away from the house and any outdoor living areas.
- The washing line is better hidden from outdoor entertaining areas, but in mild to cold climates it must be in a sunny spot.
- Areas where children play should be away from things you don't want to get damaged (e.g. prize roses or the vegetable garden).
- Areas which are walked over frequently should be well-drained and surfaced with gravel, mulch or paving (grass will become damaged and high-use areas may become slippery when wet).

EARTHWORKS

Earthworks are the foundation of a good garden. As with many things, if you have a good foundation the rest of the job is much easier.

Ideally, earthworks should be undertaken before anything else. Jobs such as soil-shaping, building, laying drainage, sub-surface irrigation or electric cables - should be completed in an area before other work such as paving, fencing or planting takes place.

Earthworks include the following:

1) Site Clearance

Remove unwanted plants (weeds, dead trees, etc), rocks, and rubbish (building rubble, glass, drink cans, etc). Dispose of your rubbish properly, usually at a tip. Pay particular attention to plaster, cement and concrete which might be lying about. These things will affect plant growth if left there.

Remember, once weeds are removed, the area will become more susceptible to erosion and so you will need to quickly progress to other landscaping tasks which will help to stabilise the ground.

2) Levelling

You are always better off working with the natural slopes of the ground. When you start changing levels, you change drainage patterns both through and across the surface of the soil. If changes made on your property affect neighbouring properties (e.g. by causing water to flood a neighbour's yard), you have a legal liability to pay for any damage.

Often the builder will have changed levels already to build the house, in which case further major changes may not be needed. Often changing levels can help create character in a garden, and by hiring a machine such as a 'bobcat', you can do a lot very easily yourself. Nevertheless, keep in mind how this will affect the water flowing over your property. On very steep slopes, terracing may be the only way to create some useable outdoor living areas.

- Don't bury rubbish, dead trees, vegetation, etc. as this can subside later.
- Don't excavate below the water table (this can cause seepage).
- Areas which are to be paved, or built on, should be compacted (or given time to settle) after earthworks, but areas to be planted should not be compacted (particularly in clay soils). Rolling has in the past been popular when preparing an area for lawn, but is now considered to be undesirable.

3) Soil Building

Light (i.e. sandy) soils are easier to dig and are better drained, but they can dry out quickly so plants will need constant watering.

Heavy (i.e. clay) soils are hard to dig, often drain poorly, and are initially difficult to get wet, but once they are wet they will stay wet longer.

Both types of soils can be improved by mixing in lots of well-rotted organic material: manure, wood shavings, compost, lawn clippings or similar

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Suggested task

Try following the step-by-step planning process.

a) Draw a sketch of the site to be developed.

b) Mark where you initially think each of the items from your list of priorities should go.

c) Think about it some more and perhaps discuss with others.

d) Rearrange and finalise the locations of your priorities, omitting anything which seems surplus to requirements.

e) Fill in the empty spaces.

Spend up to 20 minutes doing this.