

YARD DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Another frequently asked question involves the fundamental considerations one should make while designing his yard. The intent is to ask and steer the design solution in a direction that will make it functional and aesthetically pleasing and, in the end, enhance the value of the property. We all have the ability to say that we either like or dislike something, but the trick is how to increase the odds of coming up with an appropriate solution instead of leaving it to trial, error and luck. The answer is to ask and answer the right questions in the right sequence. If you do this, you will greatly increase the likelihood of arriving at a solution that meets your functional desires while being aesthetically pleasing. If these two concerns are answered, then the enhancement of the property value will also be addressed.

So what are the questions or considerations that should be addressed to better the chances of arriving at an appropriate solution? A good design is basically “form follows function” while a great design is one that incorporates this in a manner that is aesthetically pleasing and consistent with the surroundings. The reason a design is successful is because it addresses specific design questions and issues in a sound and logical way. It works because of scale, proportion, texture, materials, colors, consistency, style, etc.

The following are intended to help guide a homeowner through the design process in a sequential manner, giving consideration to the various design elements that will help to arrive at a deliberate solution that is more likely to be satisfactory in all areas. The suggested process can be applied to a homeowner designed solution or as a part of the interface between a homeowner and a designer / contractor / architect.

Step 1:

Organize the basic information about your yard by obtaining a site plan that is drawn to a known scale. Verify the plan’s accuracy with dimensions taken in the field. Locate any existing meter boxes, swales, drain inlets, fences, gates, walls, slopes, stoops, paving, etc. accurately on the plan. Take photos as necessary to ensure that you are able to share this information or refer to it later.

Step 2:

Determine the style of your home and define it as best as possible through words and/or pictures. The best solution always takes the home’s style into account so that the exterior style and materials are complemented by the hardscape and planting solution through a consistency of materials, shapes, forms, colors and textures. In this way they will enhance each other and the two working in concert is much stronger than either element standing on its own. From this definition should come a “vocabulary” that reinforces and is an intricate part and definition of this style.

Step 3:

Start a picture file of plants and other garden elements that you like and that are consistent with your home’s style, so that you can refer to them and/or share them with an outside consultant. These can be taken from photos, books, magazines, model homes, people’s yards in your area or any number of other resources.

Step 4:

Obtain and review any and all applicable design guidelines and/or CC&R restrictions. From this review, you may find that certain desired styles, elements, improvements, etc. are either not acceptable or require special consideration, approval or mitigation.

Step 5:

Consider how you plan to use your outdoor space and how highly you wish to maintain it or have it maintained. As a part of this think about how often you entertain. How many people you entertain at one time? Do you have any pets or would you like to have them? Do you need a special area for the pets? Do the pets have special needs? Does anyone in the family have special needs? Do you need a cooking area? If you do, what amenities would you like it to have? (Shade, sink, refrigerator, cook top, barbecue, bar, shade structure, television, lighting, etc.) Make a prioritized list of what you want, from a functional standpoint, in your front, side and rear yard areas. The reason for prioritizing them is to let the designer know what is the most and least important to you, so that if cuts need to be made due to available yard space and/or budgetary constraints, then the item that is most important to you is sure to be retained. Keep in mind the size of your yard space and whether or not it can accommodate the desired elements.

Step 6:

Decide on a realistic budget of what you can spend right away for improvements and what you are willing to spend in total. How much money can we spend within what time frame? In this way, it will assist the designer to know whether the yard can be completed in one construction phase or whether the work will need to be broken up into different budgetary and construction phases. Hopefully this will allow for installing utilities, sleeves, etc. to facilitate future construction items without tearing up and rebuilding existing items.

Step 7:

Clearly communicate and discuss all of the information from Steps 1 through 6 to whomever you select to prepare your plan. Inquire as to his opinion and definition of the style of your house. What does he see as being the “vocabulary” of shapes, forms, textures, colors and materials that reinforce this style? Arrive at a vocabulary of materials that suits your desires and is consistent with the home’s style, the scale and proportion of the yard space and your budgetary constraints. In this way, the designer is more likely to come up with an appropriate decision without going through several redesigns or solutions. Time is money, so the quicker you can arrive at an acceptable solution, the less money it will cost.

Step 8:

Review the proposed solutions with the aforementioned criteria in mind and make comments to the designer based upon how well or poorly he addresses these issues:

- Consistency with the design vocabulary.
- Meeting functional needs and ease of circulation.
- Design element locations and ease of use.
- Relationship of outdoor elements to indoor functions.
- Enhancing views from inside to outside.
- Issues of privacy and/or ease of visual monitoring.
- Possible construction problems to implement from a grading and drainage standpoint, getting services or utilities to an area, dealing with grades, etc.
- Budgetary restrictions.
- Do you like it?

Remember, you don’t have to come up with a solution. That is why you have a designer. Give him your comments and direction and let him be creative and address the issues in an aesthetically pleasing way, or give you justifiable reasons as to why it doesn’t work or is a bad idea. The design process

should apply logic and common sense more than the concept of “doesn’t it look good?” It looks good and functions properly for a reason and he should be able to communicate that to you.

Step 9:

Repeat whatever steps are necessary, especially number 8, until an acceptable solution is found. Test the solution with an estimate of its implemented costs to see whether or not it meets the budgetary constraints. If it is too expensive, then a decision will need to be made as to whether or not the solution can be phased (built in separate and distinct stages) or modified to eliminate items that are not worth the additional expense. Only the homeowner and the designer can do this in concert with each other.