

PLANTING DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

An item in the design process that often gets a homeowner into trouble is the selection and location of plant material. Since there is such a wide variety of plant material in the California area, one can usually find an appropriate plant for a specific location. The problem arises when someone sees a plant that they like, goes to their local nursery, brings it home and then sticks it in the ground, with no forethought as to its eventual height, spread, horticultural requirements (water, soil, nutrition, drainage, sun/shade, etc.) messiness, possible poisonous effects to children and/or animals, flower color, foliage color, or its compatibility with the other plants around it or the style of the house.

Attention should be paid to the sequence of events. A plant should be chosen because it meets a specific set of criteria better than any other available plant or does so within an acceptable range of variation. Plants should be thought of in an objective form with the aesthetics being a part of the criteria, not the sole basis for selection. By being more intentional in the selection of plant material, many of the costly and time consuming problems can be avoided or eliminated. And who doesn't want their yard to look better, while costing less and requiring less time and energy?

Step 1:

Review your community's design guidelines and applicable CC&Rs for any restrictions and/or design requirements for any and all elements. Check to see if they have any restrictions on specific plants or plant types.

Step 2:

Prepare a plan drawn to scale and proportion reflecting:

- The lot and its boundaries.
- The house on the lot properly located relative to side, front and rear yard distances to the property lines.
- The tops and toes of slopes.
- Existing hardscape features that are to be kept in place such as walks, drives, fences, walls, gates, meter vaults, utility boxes, transformers, air conditioner compressors, etc.
- Proposed hardscape elements such as pools, spas, water features, walls, fences, gates, arbors, trellises, gazebos, palapas, patio covers, fire pits, fireplaces, barbecues, counters, pilasters, columns, play areas, pet areas, etc.

Step 3:

Determine where you want lawn areas versus ground cover and/or shrub bed areas. You should try to keep lawn areas where the grade does not exceed 20%, or a slope of 1 foot vertical to 5 feet horizontal. Never put lawn on slopes any steeper than 33%, or 1 foot vertical to 3 feet horizontal, and then only for small areas or short runs as it is hard and even dangerous to mow. In addition, steeply sloped lawn areas can be difficult to sufficiently irrigate due to excessive runoff prior to the water actually soaking into the soil. Lawn should also be kept only in areas where the specific appearance of lawn is wanted to enhance the style of the home, or where it is needed for a functional purpose such as a play area or patio extension for larger gatherings. Try to keep lawn areas no less than four (4) to five (5) feet wide as narrower areas become very difficult to adequately irrigate without overthrowing onto adjacent paved areas, structures and/or plant beds. Think about how informal and natural (curvilinear) or formal and geometric (rectilinear) you want the lawn and plant bed forms to be.

Step 4:

Draw or outline the mature size of shrubs and trees and locate them on your plan. The spacing of plants will actually be determined by the projected mature width of the plant and whether or not a dense screen or massing is desired. It is best to locate permanent “back bone” plants so they will have enough room at maturity. Woody plants are considered to be more enduring, whereas herbaceous perennials are more expendable or shorter lived. Avoid using too many species of plants in one area. Variety is nice, but simplicity, consistency and repetition are usually more desirable.

Begin to think and plan what you want the plant to do for you in a special manner: tall, upright, low, spreading, accent, screen, background, open, foreground, texture, layering, etc. This can be better and more easily accomplished if you have determined the style of your home and done research regarding plant types and schemes that best reflect that look.

Step 5:

Once you have made an initial attempt to locate your trees, shrubs, vines, espaliers and ground covers, it is time to answer some basic questions about each plant or group of plants as to what characteristics you want them to have or goals you wish them to serve. Here are some questions that need to be answered first, before you look for a specific plant. You want the plant you choose to meet as many of the specific goals or requirements as possible, and this needs to be done for each and every plant and/or plant grouping, whether it is a tree, shrub, vine, espalier or ground cover. The following is a list of characteristics and/or considerations in the selection of a plant.

- Height of plant at maturity? _____ feet
- Width of plant at maturity? _____ feet
- Evergreen (most of the leaves stay on the plant all year) or deciduous (plant defoliates once a year during a specific season)?
- Shade the year round or only during the summer?
- Visual screen?
- Fine, medium or coarse texture?
- Foliage color? Red? Purple? Bronze? Light green? Medium green? Dark green? Variegated (mottled or multicolored foliage)? Yellow green? Blue green?
- Flower color? White? Pink? Red? Fuchsia/magenta? Purple? Orange? Yellow? Cream? Blue? Variegated? Insignificant? (Remember, that the plants will probably only flower for a short period of time – 3 or 4 weeks.)
- Seeds, berries and/or fruit color? White? Pink? Red? Fuchsia/magenta? Purple? Orange? Yellow? Cream? Blue? Variegated? Insignificant?
- Open or dense structure?
- Single, low-branching or multi-trunked?
- Bark color and/or quality?
- Does the plant have invasive roots?
- Watering requirements?
- Yard design theme?
- Specific overall character? Water or stream related? Tropical? Desert? Natural? (Indigenous plants should require less maintenance than exotic ones.)
- Attract or deter a specific type of bird, mammal and/or insect by providing food or shelter?
- Allergy and/or insect (bees) concern?
- Specific soil, physical or nutritional requirements?

- Ability to grow and thrive in my area?
- Exposure – sun, partial sun and/or shade?
- Desired level of maintenance? Clipped and formal? Natural?
- Is fragrance of foliage and/or flowers desired?
- Plant form and/or shape? Cylindrical? Lollipop? Pyramidal? Canopy? Upright? Spreading?

As you can see, there are a number of characteristics a plant can exhibit and decisions that need to be made in its selection. Once you have answered these questions, compile the answers into a matrix, notes or other form for quick and easy reference.

Step 6:

Select the plant that best addresses the set of characteristics that you noted and compiled in Step 5. This can be accomplished through research over the internet, the library, the purchase of books or other printed materials, your local nursery or plant supplier, through observation within your surrounding geographical area or an outside consultant. In a number of cases, you will actually find that all of the desired characteristics cannot be met by one specific plant. Therefore you will have to compromise and select a plant that meets the greatest number or the most important ones. In no case should the plant's horticultural or environmental requirements be compromised as this will mean the plants poor performance and/or demise.

This will be a give and take process, requiring possible changes to the layout of your plants in order to meet the plants specific height, spread and/or rooting setback requirements. Also keep in mind that you want to group plants together that require the same amount of water, as it is technically difficult to water plants of differing needs together on the same irrigation valve or system. One will do well while the others will be either over or under watered.

Step 7:

Once the plant list has been tentatively finalized, find the plants and look them over at your local nursery or plant supplier. Find out in what sizes they are available for purchase and talk to the retailers or wholesalers about their specific experience with these plants. Some may offer alternatives that meet the same set of desired characteristics while fulfilling other needs or goals better, and being more readily available or easier to maintain and/or install. They will also be able to assist you in recommending possible amendments and/or planting procedures during the installation process to better ensure the plants healthy survival and vigorous growth.

Step 8:

Finalize the list, purchase the plants and follow the plan and planting recommendations during the installation process relative to the location and quantity of each plant or plant group.

Step 9:

Plants are living, viable, growing and changeable dynamic creatures and do not always respond or react in the same manner or to the same degree, much the same as people or animals. Therefore, in all likelihood, you will have some plants that do not perform as well as you had hoped, or express the desired characteristics for which you originally chose them. Find replacements using the same steps previously noted. In this way you will fine tune your planting selections and ultimately arrive at a solution that meets not only your home's aesthetic requirements, but also the existing environmental conditions. Not only will your landscaping look better, but it will do so with less time, money and technology.