

Landscape Planning

"A great landscape is the result of planning and vision."

Without proper planning, your new landscape can be more work than it has to be and can actually take away from the beauty of your home and property.

This section covers all aspects of do it yourself landscape design from measuring your plot to planting. This page will mostly outline designing on paper. However, you can still use a lot of this information if you're using **landscape software**¹. I've tried to keep this as simple as possible.

Lets design.

Preparation And Measuring Your Landscaping Plot

Some people can find measuring their plot accurately a bit difficult and intimidating. So the first step in this process is to make measuring as easy as possible.

You may or may not be aware that you can usually get a plan map or site survey of your property from either your builder, developer, or at your local council office. This is or should be a to-scale drawing plan of your house and lot.

Generally, the plan won't be the scale you will use in designing but transposing the scale is pretty simple. (We'll talk about scale in a minute.) More than anything, we'll use this plan in landscape planning, as a design aid for accuracy, to see the "real" shape of your plot, and for locating utilities and property lines.

Make sure the house is where it's supposed to be on the plan by checking the distance from the house to the street. And make sure that the north arrow is pointing north and all other measurements are correct.

If the information on the plan is correct, you already have a base landscape plan to work with. Keep it handy for accuracy and reference.

If a plan isn't available or if you just prefer, you can do your planning on a graph paper fairly easily. You can purchase single sheets of graph paper at art supply or office supply stores. But buy more than one sheet. Just in case.

Check the grids on the graph paper to make sure that they match the scale you would like to use in your landscape design. **Most designers** prefer to work with landscape plans drawn to a scale 1:200 or where 10mm represents 2m.

Use a scale that will ensure that your entire landscape will fit on one single sheet of paper. It will be necessary to take a measurement of your entire lot perimeter to know this.

The easiest way to accurately measure a landscape is to start in either the front or back yard. It really doesn't matter which. But for the sake of this article let's just say we'll start the design in the front yard.

Measure from the front corners of the house to the front property lines and from the front corners of the house to the side property lines. Mark these measurements on your graph paper. Now you have the exact location of your house on your lot.

¹ You can use CAD or download Smart Draw for 30 day FREE trial - <http://www.smardraw.com/specials/landscape-software.htm?id=142899>

From this starting corner, measure the exterior walls and all angles of your house and draw them onto your graph paper. Once you've done this you'll have an exact template of your house and front yard.

Next, measure from the back of the house to the back property lines. Don't forget to include measurements of sidewalks, decks, driveways and any other permanent elements on the property. If there are existing trees, shrubs, or anything that you wish to keep, measure and place them accurately on your landscape planning template as well.

There, now you have a base design to work with. **But before you begin landscape planning**, take a trip to the nearest copy machine and make four or five copies of your base plan. Trust me on this. You might mess up, change your mind, or want to do several different design variations.

Let's start designing.

I'm sure that you already have a few great ideas and plans for your landscape but now is the time to expand your possibilities and vision and to gather as many ideas as possible.

First, a **Landscape Site Analysis**² will not only generate some great ideas, it will also eliminate the possibility that any necessary elements have been overlooked.

Now, take **a real good look** at some of the different landscapes in your area and community. Look at your neighbors' yards. What are your likes and dislikes of these? What plants and types of plants work? Which ones don't? Take in as many ideas as you can. Check out the libraries, the internet, and collect ideas from around the neighbourhood then make a list of what you would like to include in your design. Contact your mentor and share your ideas. Between the pair of you, you should be able to form the start of a new design

Remember though, the key to using other peoples designs isn't in finding the perfect design to fit your yard. It's in using parts of all the ideas you find.

It's a good time to consider the theme or themes, and style or styles that you will follow in your design. The general form your landscape takes will be a direct reflection of whatever you choose. The style of your home should definitely be an influencing factor of landscape planning.

Styles and themes are different. Different styles may be considered formal, informal, Australian, Tuscany, etc. The British **landscaping plans directory**³ is a resource for defining some of the different styles of gardens. Be wary of using plants or layouts etc that are not suitable for Australian conditions.

Themes or theme gardens on the other hand revolve around a specific subject or passion.

Your local library, books, and your neighbors' yards are all potential sources for other great ideas.

Master Planning

The first step in planning uses a designers "trick" called a **bubble graph**⁴. At this point you're not interested in the exact size or shape of each activity area. This is just a simple rough sketch of the various activity areas using loose shapes (or bubbles) to identify each area.

Begin this step by using one of the copies of your base plan or by placing a fresh sheet of tracing paper over your base plan. This is still in the planning stage so don't be afraid to wad it up, throw it in the trash,

² See Page titled Landscape Site Analysis

³ URL: <http://www.the-landscape-design-site.com/gardenstyles/plans.html>

⁴ URL: <http://www.the-landscape-design-site.com/bubblegraph.html>

and start over (now you can see why you made several copies of your base plan). Use a soft lead pencil for easy erasing and for trying a lot of different ideas.

Begin drawing the different elements of your landscape design by first keeping only two things in mind.

- The information you gathered from your site analysis.
- How you will move through your yard or garden to get from one place to the next.

Take a walk through your yard and plot out the natural paths of movement you will use to get to sheds, gates, pools, play areas, etc. This is where you need to place paths or walk ways on your plan. Sketch them down.

For added interest, you may want to make your paths curvy and not straight. Curves add a sense of motion and smooth, graceful, natural flow to the landscape. Remember that the edges of your paths can also be used as borders for flower beds and gardens and to separate different areas or themes.

Its all starting to come together now isn't it.

At this point you should already have the theme, themes, style, or styles in mind that you gathered from the different ideas resources mentioned above.

You may or may not have considered the specific plants you plan to use. This is O.K.. The placement, size and spacing of plants is more important than the actual plants at this point. For instance, you might say this is where I want a tree for shade or this is where I want a hedge to screen out noise or neighbors, or this is where I want a flower bed, or...etc. You get the picture.

However, you may want to check out **the guidelines for plant selection⁵** either now or in future reference. If you go there now just keep what you learn in mind until it's time to actually select plants.

I would like to note here that one of the biggest problems that people have in designing their own landscape is the inability to see and design beyond what already exists. As you've been drawing you've probably attempted to use existing site conditions as they are and design around them.

There's nothing wrong with this but try and remember that you *are* designing a new landscape here and you can change *almost anything* to create your dream landscape. Use some of the ideas in the landscape planning books and references mentioned above.

Now is the time to consider if you need to change any slopes or grades to accommodate for drainage or any of your activity areas. Can you change any slopes or grades to create new activity areas? Do you need retaining walls, terracing, or stairs? How about berms (small hills)? Make these changes as you see necessary.

O.K. now that you have all the necessities and "have to's" in place, let's look at some of the frilly details.

We're almost to the point of creating your final master plan and transposing your bubble graph into a real working design. The following elements will help you to define, separate, create different "rooms", and create themes for your landscape. Although these elements can be considered as "filler", they are the **focal points**, character, and points of interest that your whole design will revolve around.

I won't go into detail about the following elements in this article (it's long enough already) but you can just click on the links to access articles and "how to's" that I've written on these subjects.

⁵ There are many selections you can choose from – here though is the ABC's <http://www.abc.net.au/gardening/plantfinder/>

Water features, ponds, garden statues, garden decor, gazebos, arbors, bridges, and decks should now be given some consideration. If up to this point you've had spaces that you've wondered what will go here and what will go there, these could possibly fill those spaces. You can create entire "rooms", themes, and separations around these elements.

Now you may feel that I've gone about this process all backwards but my experience with home owners and do-it-yourselfers has proven that placing the necessities first and designing around them works best. You may now need to make a few adjustments to walk ways and such to make everything fit together.

O.K. now go out into your yard and try to visualize how it will look. Can you see it? How does it feel? Using stakes and string, paint, or even laying a rope or water hose along lines can help to visualize the final layout. Take notes and make changes now because we're almost ready to do the finished design.

The Master Plan

O.K., now you basically have your landscape plan. We're going to clean it up a bit and put it to scale. This will be the genuine "blueprint" that you will follow.

Trace your final design to the scale you've chosen onto a clean sheet of paper or onto another one of your base plans. Show all your base plan elements like property lines, house, walk ways, and existing structures and plants that you want to keep. Add in new areas and label materials and structures which will be added.

The next step is choosing plants which fit in your landscape and that will fit the needs gathered in your site analysis. Before you do so, I do suggest you read all the other pages in this set as well - you need to consider native plants or plants that are best suited for your area.

Place plants into your design and label them for reference. Your design is done.

Now that your design is done there is one more step that needs to be taken care of. And although this is the last step it will be one of the first project you do now that you know where everything goes. This last step is the layout of your irrigation and sprinkler system.

Don't design this part of the plan onto your master landscape planning sheet. Either use a piece of tracing paper or make a copy of your master design and use it.

You should find everything you need to do it yourself in the directory under Sprinkler Systems

- **Take your design to one or all of the irrigation suppliers in your area** and ask them to help you. Many irrigation suppliers will help you with your design. Some for free or for a very small price.
- **Ask a landscape or irrigation contractor to design it.** Some contractors have a design service.

As you finish up your project, remember to place sleeves for irrigation, lighting, etc. under paths, patios and other permanent fixtures.

If heavy equipment will be used to deliver, or carry materials, it is best done before any new lawn or sod is installed. And the last thing installed should be your ground cover and lawn.

There you have it. A simplified, step by step guide to landscape planning. The only decisions you have to make now are what materials you want to use. Brick, flagstone, or gravel for paths? Mulch or gravel for flower beds? Etc.

Landscape Site Analysis

A site analysis is just your basic "make sure you thought of everything before landscaping" checklist. Of course, with every landscape and design being unique, there may be other considerations not mentioned here.

Besides what you expect from your new landscape now, you should also try and think ahead in days, weeks, months, and years. Not just today. I know it can be hard to think of everything that could possibly happen or change. Just keep this in mind.

- **Existing plants and trees** and their relation to the landscaping and your new design should be noted. Do some trees need to be removed or changed? Will shade from existing trees or from the house affect **plant selection**, structure placement, pond placement, or activity areas? Are there areas where you'll want more shade?
- **Observe views** from the outside of the house looking in and (most folks forget this one) from the inside looking out. Your view from inside the house can be just as pleasing as being outside in the garden. If you want to see it, consider placement of large structures and plantings. Cute little plants grow up to be big plants. Can existing or newly planted shrubs, plants, or trees be used to either enhance or block out certain views? Or noise? Do you need more protection or privacy in the front or back yard?
- **Consider the wind current and strength** in your landscaping. Do you need plants or other elements such as walls or **fences** to be used as wind screens?
- **Do slopes or land elevations** need to be changed to accommodate for water drainage? Will steps or terracing need to be installed for slope or elevation changes?
- **Locate all utilities** and mark them on your plan. Always, always, always call before you dig.
- **What are your needs as a person or family?** Functional and practical landscaping should be considered an outdoor extension of your home. There should be activity areas outside just as there are inside your home.

These areas might include:

- a living area,
- play area for the kids,
- work area,
- public or entertaining area,
- entrances, and
- flower or vegetable garden areas.

The outdoor areas should be natural extensions of your indoor areas. For instance, the work area should extend off of the garage or utility room and the entertainment area should extend off of the kitchen or family living room.

- **Vehicle access** to the back parts of the yard should be considered. Should a large gate be installed in the back fence?
- **Maintenance?** Do you want low, medium, or high maintenance landscaping? Do you want shrubs you'll have to trim, plants to prune, leaves to clean up, a lawn to mow and water, a pool or pond to clean, a **sprinkler system**, etc.?
- **Do you need more lawn area?** Less lawn? How much? For what?
- **Storage space** for gardening equipment, trash, **patio furniture**, toys and play equipment?
- **Fountains, waterfalls, pools** or ponds? Consider the spaces needed for these and design around them or include them in the plan now.

To be treated as a guide only

Reprinted from <http://www.the-landscape-design-site.com/landscapesiteanalysis.html>

Xeriscaping Water Wise Landscaping

If it were better understood, xeriscaping and drought tolerant design would be practiced more often than it already is. Xeriscape based design can be very beautiful and generally requires less water, fertilizer, maintenance, and pest control than traditional landscaping. And, of course, using less of these will save you time and money.

The principles of xeriscaping address the areas of slope, plants, plant groups, watering methods, and soil. And because xeric design is based on principles, shape and other design aspects can be based on and used for any design style.

The main fundamentals of xeriscape are:

- PLANNING AND DESIGN
- CREATE PRACTICAL TURF AREAS - manageable sizes, shapes, and the right drought resistant grasses such as Soft Buffalo Grass (also called Sir Walter).
- SELECT LOW WATER REQUIRING PLANTS - select native or adaptive plants and group plants of similar water needs together.
- USE SOIL AMENDMENTS - like compost, manure, leaf mold, etc.
- USE MULCHES - to reduce evaporation & to keep the soil cool.
- IRRIGATE EFFICIENTLY - with properly designed sprinkler systems.
- MAINTAIN THE LANDSCAPE PROPERLY

You may want to approach xeriscape in one of two ways. One is to "adjust" your existing landscaping ideas to be more water wise and drought tolerant. The other is to design and construct an entirely new water wise landscape.

The basics of transforming an existing landscape to water wisdom are really very simple. We'll look at xeriscaping basics and principles here and for design considerations.

A common thought is that xeriscaping is strictly rocks and cactus. While this may be one way of doing it, Xeriscape principles can be applied to most any garden design style.

Plant selection. Besides the native plants already adapted to your area, there are many colourful drought tolerant plants native to other climates such as Southern Europe, North Africa, Western Asia, and South Africa, that will thrive in your garden.

A reasonable knowledge of plants is an essential key to a successful water-wise garden or any landscape design.

You can discover a lot of helpful information about native plants and their properties from the Australian Native Plant Society¹ online plant guide . You may also look up plant information on the SA State Flora² site.

Proper grouping of plants is a main principle of xeriscaping. Grouping plants with similar water needs allows them to be watered as required with very little waste. By planting high water use plants separate from low water use and no water use plants, you can regulate water needs more accurately. Your irrigation system can be zoned according to plant needs which will save resources and money.

¹ URL: <http://anpsa.org.au/sgap1a.html>

² URL: http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/Plants_Animals/State_Flora/Catalogue

If you don't have an automatic irrigation/drip system in place, you should consider it. Along with the rest of your design, this is something you can easily do yourself. Discuss it with your mentor.

Watering: Plants love infrequent deep waterings much more than frequent shallow waterings. The same is especially true for xeriscape plants. Most non-xeric plants require a deep soak about once a week in dry summer. Xeric, native plants require a soak about every two to three weeks once established.

Proper grading allows water to soak into the soil and be used by plants rather than being allowed to run off. Slopes can be terraced or simple wells around each plant can be created.

The use of mulch is encouraged for successful xeriscaping. Mulching has several benefits for the soil. It retains water better than plain dirt, reduces soil temperature, supports and increases essential bacteria, and gives the surface soil an "alive" look and feel.

The word xeriscape comes from a combination of two other words: "xeri" derived from the Greek word "xeros" meaning dry; and "scape" meaning scene.

While this translates to mean "dry scene," the real concept behind xeriscaping is simply just **the practice of regionally appropriate horticulture**. Which translates to plain language as "using the best plants suited to your area or using native plants."

As a matter of fact, since xeriscaping is really more about plants than anything else it wouldn't take a major overhaul to make your landscape more water wise. It could be as simple as changing and adapting the plants you already use to some of the more beautiful native plants of your area and/or practicing the methods above.

Practicing regionally appropriate horticulture doesn't mean that your landscape has to look like a desert scene unless you just want it to.

Because this type of landscape design is low maintenance, low cost, and saves natural resources, I see it as not only a growing trend but as a necessity.

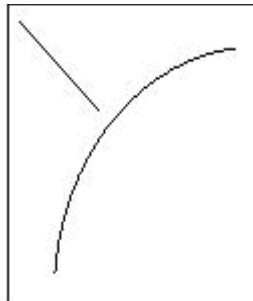
Focal Points In Landscape Design

Focal points in the landscape can be naturally occurring or strategically placed features or plantings that draw the eye to themselves. This gives the design of the garden a more dramatic, orderly look. All gardens need at least one focal point. A small garden may need only one, while larger gardens may need several.

The human eye has a very strong connection with circular forms. Most of us are able to visually find the centre of a circle, and we naturally expect to find something interesting there.

In garden design, curved paths and beds are created by using circles, arcs, or circle segments. Our minds naturally recognize these as being a part of a full circle whether they're complete or not. So the deepest point of an inside curve, which is the relevant center of its surroundings, is a natural place for focal points.

By visually moving the line in this diagram to the left or the right you can see that it doesn't feel as natural as it does being placed in the center.



Focal points in the landscape can be as simple as one spectacular plant or group of plants placed among others in the design. For example: Adding taller specimen plants to a group of smaller plants can create a very natural looking focal point in flower beds. The taller plants will stand out drawing the eye to themselves.

Placing the taller specimens in the center of the group is actually more dramatic and interesting than placing them toward the back of the bed.

Also, any dramatic colour change in plants will attract attention. White plants especially, or anything white for that matter will always be an attention getter because white is a natural focal. But try not to use too much of it.

One of the simplest and most popular ways of adding a focal point to the garden is by using garden statues and/or garden decor (bench, ornaments, birdbaths, bird feeders, etc). Some careful thought and consideration should be given to adding these features to the garden. It's best if these features are the centre or centrepiece of a part of your design and don't look as though they're just some thrown in afterthought. Try and keep them fitting with the theme of each particular part of the garden.

"Borrowed scenery" is a focal point that not all of us are fortunate enough to use. Having a backdrop of a distant mountain range, skyline, river, meadow, or even desert scene is a perfect opportunity to create an outstanding focal point. Not only is it a great opportunity to create focal points but also to "blend" your landscape with its natural surroundings.

If you are lucky enough to have a great view, use it, frame it, and build your landscape around it. Keep in mind not to plant trees and large shrubs in the design that will eventually grow up and block the view.

Focal points can be created using just about anything that is natural or well placed.

Large, existing trees should be left in a design whenever possible. Some trees and large shrubs just need a little bottom trimming to make great focal points in landscape design.

Placing flower beds around the base of these specimens enhances their effect as natural focal points. Not only do they create great focal points but they create the illusion that a new garden design isn't a new design at all.

Gazing globes, trellises or arbors covered in flowers, or even large decorative rocks make great focal points. But always give it some careful thought and planning so that your design will always appear well thought out and not just a sequence of pieced together afterthoughts.

Landscaping Planting Ideas

Proper plant selection is one the most important "secrets" in successful landscaping. Plants and colours are the "flavours" that bring your garden to life. They're also elements that can be used with *purpose* such as screening, shade, erosion control, dividing, focal points, noise control, etc.

So propagation of or choosing the right plants for the right place and *purpose* is helpful for professional looking, working, and manageable landscaping.

Growth habits and characteristics

First, there are some common mistakes that people make about plant selection. Usually this is simply because of a lack of knowledge of the growth habits and characteristics of individual plants. The size plants reach at maturity, light requirements, heat and wind tolerance, and soil preference are the most common.

Rule #1 - Don't plan your garden or landscaping at the nursery or garden center.

Do a little homework. Know a little about the plants before you buy them and take them home.

You can use the plant databases page for reference *and* get yourself a good plant encyclopedia in your library. You'll save a lot of time and frustration being able to look up plants according to your specific area, type of plant, colour, characteristics, by name, and so on. They're also very handy to carry with you into the garden or to the nursery.

Another common mistake in choosing the right plants and propagation is made in the area of zoning. Its extremely important to know local council by-laws and suggested plants (if applicable) and plant accordingly.

Most generally you can trust the little plant selection tags that come with the plants but sometimes you can't. Its best to check with the plant databases or your plant encyclopedia for specific zoning in selecting plants.

Primary considerations for selecting landscape plants

- Height and Width are figured by the mature size a plant will reach in both upward and outward directions. Not calculating this can cause serious problems in the future.
- Form is the shape of the plant and how it will occupy and accent space. Form and shape are considered as columnar, round, vase, weeping, oval, creeping, etc.
- Texture is the fineness or roughness of plants. It can also be categorized in terms of leaf thickness and shade(light or dark) of plants. As a rule, plants with finer textures should be used in greater numbers than plants with coarse textures.
- Seasonal interest and color are figured by the special features a plant has at different times of the year. Foliage, fruit, flowers, Winter color, changing colors, etc.

Secondary considerations for selecting landscaping plants

- Insect and disease resistance
- Sun or Shade
- Moisture tolerance
- Drought Resistance
- Soil Type

Plant selection for best design and effect.

A few well-selected plant varieties can have more impact and appeal than a mix match selection of one of these here and one of those there. Unity is achieved in garden design by consistency.

Planting in groups of 3's, 5's, 7's, etc. also gives a sense of intentional design, balance, and unity.

Like stated above, colour is the "flavour" of your garden. Good colour combinations and coordination can have a dramatic impact in garden design.



Colours next to each other have little contrast and will tend to blend together well. Colours directly across from each other and at 90 degrees from a colour will have the greatest contrast and can be used as complimentary colours. Those in a triangle from your starting colour are harmonious to your starting colour and can be used together with good effect.

Gray (silvers), blacks, and whites are considered neutral colours. Although they're not on the wheel they can be considered complimentary. These colours are best used in the background with bright colours in the foreground but can be used successfully in many colour combinations.

Your plant selection could include silver and reds, silver and purples, silver and yellows, or any number of combinations. Silver plants could include Sages, Dusty Miller, Lavenders, Lambs Ears, or Artemesias just to name a few.

These are just examples of basic colour theory that can be used in garden design and choosing landscape plants. Feel free to experiment with other combinations.

There's a software tool that can help you generate, experiment with, and visualize a lot of different colour combinations for your gardening or landscape design called **colour wheel pro**¹. You can get a free trial download here. I don't endorse or recommend that you buy the product. Just use the freebie.

Plant selection should also include plants of different bloom cycles. Use plants that bloom at different times to keep a splash of colour in the garden all year. Use plants that are evergreen and semi-evergreen in equally spaced settings for added winter color and unity.

Give consideration to plant height. Obviously when creating striking colour displays you want to keep small plants in front and larger plants in the back but plant height can also be used in creating natural focal points. Learn more about creating focal points.

Choosing the right plants for your specific area

As mentioned above, knowing your zone is very important in plant selection but often times there are different zones or microclimates within zones. As a general rule, zoning maps are accurate but there are a few variations that could affect you.

Living near a large body of water or even a slight variation of a few hundred feet in altitude are just a few examples of things that can influence your choice in plant selection.

Along with owning a good general plant encyclopedia you may want to have a regional plant reference for your specific area. These guides are more specific about plant selection and get into more detail about soil types, altitude changes and usually have great planting and design tips.

¹ You can download a trial version at <http://www.color-wheel-pro.com/>

Native plant selection is also something that you should consider. These plants are already adapted to your area and chances are they're already growing "right in your own back yard". This could amount to a substantial savings not only in plant purchases but in natural resources as well.

For information on native plants visit State Flora or your local Botanical Garden. For more information on xeriscaping, go to xeriscaping.

Saving money in plant selection

Saving money in choosing your plants can be accomplished by simply using a little common sense.

When you go to the nursery or garden center you usually have the option of buying plants in 6 packs, flats, 4 inch pots, 6 inch pots, and one, three, and five gallon containers. And of course the prices increase accordingly to the size of pots.

What you may not know is that the plants you get in the 6 packs, flats, and 4 inch pots will reach close to if not the same size of the plants in larger containers by mid-season.

I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this. Assuming that you know exactly what plants you want and that they are available in the smaller containers, you can save *a lot* of money and get the same effect simply by buying the smaller pots.

The final Draft

O.K., now that you've read all the pages and you're good and educated in choosing the right plants, know exactly where the house fits on the block, have checked the soil type and discussed with the builder where taps and underground services will be, ensure you do the following before finalising your design and costing plants and materials.

- Ensure that your draft ideas are feasible – discuss them with your mentor.
- If you have included the verge, have you checked with council as to their requirements.
- Spoken with local suppliers and arranged any in kind donation that is on offer
- Walked the neighbourhood and seen first hand what plants are thriving after more than a year and those that are not. You might even notice some plants that while very much alive, are dormant in growth for some reason. It would pay to check out why new growth has not occurred.
- Remember, this house block was once farming – what herbicides, if any, were used. A simple soil test would indicate the soil make up and what plants would be suitable.

An Extra

For 15 Ideas on Garden Design by Diana Snape that could be considered when planning an Australian garden, visit <http://anpsa.org.au/design/gdnews1a.html>