

designing with plants

Create a lush look. Garden design: Rolling Stone Landscapes



THE FUN PART

While the right plant needs to go in the right location, when it comes to the final selection, it's a personal matter

Story: Helen Young



Right plant in the right place

One of the secrets to successful and low-maintenance gardens is having the right plants in the right place. If the plants are suited to their local climate, soils and aspect, they'll grow well and won't suffer too much from pests and diseases. The amount of sun or shade is particularly important when choosing plants for each part of your garden. Other physical factors to consider are drainage, exposure to wind or salt and drought- and frost-tolerance.

Speed of growth is something to consider, too. You might want a fast-growing hedging plant to provide critical screening, but it's worth remembering that fast-growing means frequent pruning, year after year. Other characteristics that might be important to you are whether plants have thorns or prickly leaves; are poisonous or cause allergies to people or pets; if they're short-lived, drop berries onto paving or shed quantities of bark or leaves, thereby creating more maintenance.

Designing a garden can be a bit like designing a house. The garden designer is the architect who develops a plan in consultation with you, the client. The landscape contractor is the builder who does the construction. What was just a concept becomes reality and the mess is worse than you thought. But now comes the fun part, which is adding the plants. Here is your chance to put your individual stamp on

the garden, to add the colours, scents and style that will make the garden something you love.

Think about plants as the outdoor equivalent of the furniture, paint, curtains, pictures and personal treasures that decorate the inside of your house. If plants are not your forte, it's well worth the modest cost of getting assistance from a qualified horticulturist to help you achieve the result you want.

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Finding just what you want

Collect a scrapbook of plant pictures you like, torn from magazines, which preferably are from gardens in your region. Visit local nurseries, make a list of plants you like the look of and utilise their free advice. Photograph plants in your neighbourhood that you admire.

Expert assistance is available from Australian Institute of Landscapes Designers & Managers (AILDM) members, most of whom will be qualified horticulturists. A garden consultation, consisting of two or more hours of advice and ideas, on-site in your garden, will solve most of your planting issues. The cost is readily recovered by avoiding buying the wrong plants and you'll maximise the potential beauty and pleasure your garden can bring. ■

succulents require almost no attention at all.

A tip to reduce maintenance is to mass plant — and this adds strong visual impact as well. It means that whatever needs doing is done to large groups of plants at once. By contrast, cottage gardens with a conglomeration of plants growing in among each other need more work, as each plant has differing needs at different times and they require discipline to stop one overtaking the other.

Selecting for a garden style

A garden's style is expressed not just by its design but by the choice of construction materials, decorative elements and the planting scheme. It's the whole package. If you have a particular theme such as Mediterranean, lush tropical, formal, Japanese, native or contemporary, the choice of plants needs to match the theme and reinforce it. For example, a Mediterranean-styled garden will feature cypress, olive, rosemary, lavender and terracotta pots.

Tropical gardens will use palms and coloured foliage plants such as cordylines and bromeliads, planted in complex layers. Formal gardens rely on box hedging and clipped topiaries in regular, often symmetrical arrangements. But, of course, most home gardens don't have a strict theme.

Say, for example, you inherited the trees and large shrubs and these are worked into a design that suits the character of the house and the needs of your family. In this case, you can simply choose plants you like and which suit the area and are broadly in the same style. Take a walk around the neighbourhood to see what grows well. Pick colours you like or that match the colours of the house. You might have some sentimental favourites, such as a plant that grew in your grandmother's garden or a perfumed flower that triggers memories of a happy time. Grow these plants and your garden will have real meaning for you, as it should.



Try contrasting foliage. Garden design: Garden Expressions.



Use strappy plants for interest. Garden design: Paradisus.

Choosing plants for function

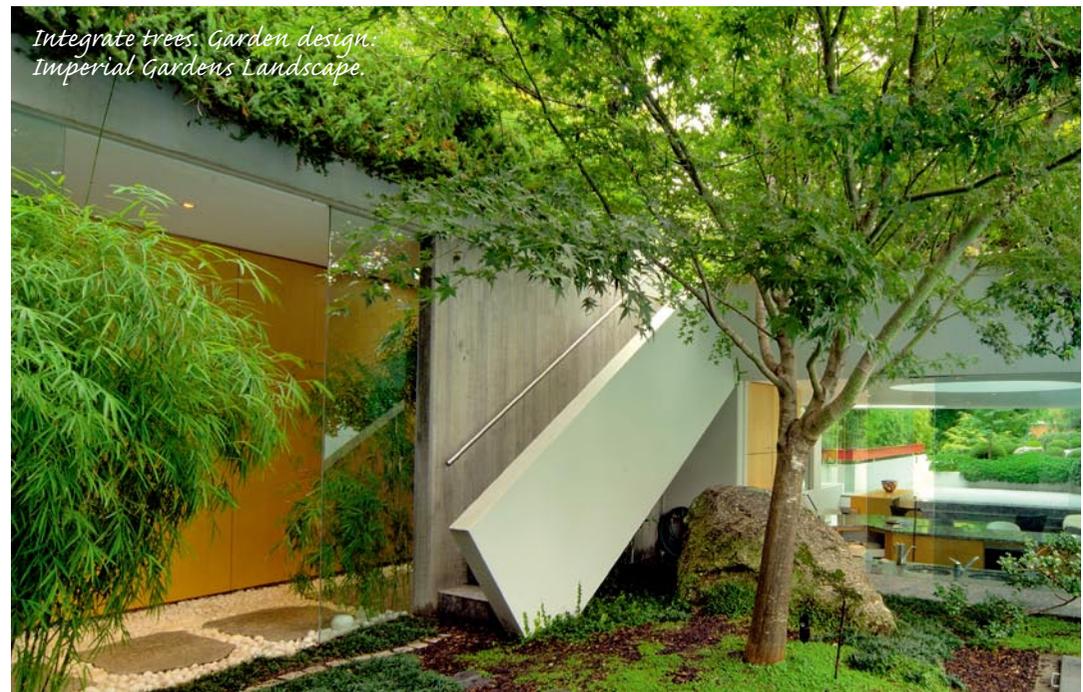
Plants are also chosen for their function. Trees are essential for shade and to add scale to the space. Deciduous trees, which lose their leaves in winter, allow in the winter sun, while evergreen trees can screen out the block of units next door all year. Hedges make good privacy screens, climbing plants cover fences in narrow spaces and groundcovers keep weeds down and cover bare soil.

Feature plants are important as focal points at strategic places. Typically, these have a strongly sculptural or architectural shape such as a rosette or spire, or have unusual form such as our native grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea*), the dragon tree (*Dracaena draco*) or dramatic yuccas (*Yucca* spp).

Another important purpose of plants is to provide habitat and food for our native birds and animals and for beneficial insects such as bees. The garden might also produce food for your family, with fruit trees, vegetables and herbs on offer. And it might supply flowers to be picked for a vase or for the sheer pleasure of giving to friends.

Consider the time involved

Some people are keen gardeners, while others might be if only they had time and others just don't want to know. Recognising where you fit will help decide whether choosing strictly low-maintenance plants is a priority. For instance, roses are some of the best-loved flowers in the world, but they are definitely high maintenance, requiring regular spraying, pruning and feeding. Azaleas get lots of pests and diseases, too; certain lilly pillies will always suffer from disfiguring pimple psyllid; and pretty flowering annuals need quite a bit of work as well as changing every few months. At the other end of the spectrum, plants such as mondo grass, frangipani and many



Integrate trees. Garden design: Imperial Gardens Landscape.