

Spend Winter Hours Designing a New Garden

By Susan Camp

The holiday season has begun; winter is trying to make its appearance, without much success so far. I'm not complaining, though; there will be many long, cold, dreary days once winter finally arrives and time to plan a new garden for next spring.

In 2014 and 2015, I wrote about how Jim and I developed a garden plan from hardscape to flowers, and implemented it. The hard work paid off, because weeding has dropped to a minimum, and instead of needing to replace numerous plants each year, we can look at each garden bed or border and decide what is working and what needs to be removed or simply moved to another spot.

The garden design was easy for us. We replaced a struggling American boxwood hedge with a white picket fence. Our house was designed after 18th century homes in Colonial Williamsburg, although on a smaller scale. We decided to install parterres with a central paved walkway and narrower paved paths between the parterres.

The style of your home might require a different design plan if it is a mid-century modern rancher or was built between the 1970's and the present time. You may have right-angled borders and rectangular beds planted with evergreen shrubs and annuals that you replace each season. Perhaps you are longing for softer lines and colorful perennials, or you want to add native plants. Maybe, like we did for many years, you just stick a plant into a vacant spot and hope it works. Often it doesn't, and the beds end up looking like they were designed by a 3-year-old. Perhaps you say, "I don't know anything about garden design, and I can't draw."

Never fear! Help is available in gardening design books and on the internet. Millions of hits on Google provide designs appropriate for every style of house and every level of design skill. Most are free.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-202 "Planning the Flower Border"; Cornell University publication "Flower Garden Design Basics"; and the University of Illinois Extension article "Introduction to Perennial Garden Design" provide helpful information for the beginner and experienced gardener alike. Keep in mind that you should use plant lists that are appropriate for our region. Perennials that thrive in Illinois or upstate New York might not make it through a hot, humid Middle Peninsula summer.

Several preliminary steps are necessary before any digging begins. Put your design on paper. You don't have to be a landscape architect; a rough sketch on plain paper will do, or you can lay out your plan on graph paper, measuring distances from trees, buildings, and walkways and design the garden beds to scale.

Pay attention to the sunny and shady areas where you want to place your new garden. The types of plants you can use will depend in large part on sun and shade conditions.

Check the condition of your soil. Is it sandy or clayey? Does the soil drain well or hold water for days after a rainy spell? Send a soil sample to VA Tech for a soil test to find out the pH of your

soil and which nutrients are needed. Contact the Gloucester Master Gardener Horticultural Line at (804) 693-2602 for information on soil sample kits. Leave a message and a Master Gardener will return your call within a few days.

Plan borders and beds that will be easy to access for weeding and deadheading; a depth of 2 to 4 feet lets you work among the plants without trampling them or hurting your back.

When you begin selecting plants, consider the mature height and width of each. Place tall plants at the back of a border located along a building or fence. For a circular or oval bed, plant tall flowers in the center.

The real fun begins when you start selecting plants. A future column will look at color combinations. Happy planning!

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