



Plant America: Beautification, Conservation, Education

Landscape Design Newsletter

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Landscape Design 101 Series

Part One

Functionality First



By: Suzanne Finger, RLA

A pup tent under the stars was the preferred method of one of my professors to get to know a site before beginning on its design. Insisting that one must thoroughly "know" the land before working with it, he instilled in his students an appreciation for understanding a site's drainage, soils, existing plant material, and sun/shade situation. Over the years, I developed my own surefire method of getting acquainted with a site that did not involve a tent or bug repellant. It consisted of a cool morning walk-through accompanied by a Krispy Kreme doughnut and a good cup of coffee, a noon drive-by observation from an air-conditioned vehicle, and a late afternoon site visit on the porch with a glass of iced tea. This proved to provide all the existing site information I needed. There was no need for a nighttime visit. I'm pretty confident about the sun situation at that point.

Although fundamental in landscape design, I would argue that there is something even more important than the existing conditions of a site. It is a clear understanding of how the site will be used and who will use it. In this issue of the Landscape Design Newsletter, we will explore the importance of the functionality of a landscape. This article will serve as Part One of a four-part series reviewing the basics of Landscape Design.

Any successful landscape design begins with exploring three questions concerning function: How will the landscape be used? How will the landscape be viewed or experienced? And finally, how will the landscape be maintained? If the answers to these three questions are clear before pencil hits paper, the likelihood of ending up with a beautiful and enjoyable landscape is much greater. Let's begin with the first question.

How will the landscape be used?

Have you ever purchased a pretty new dress only to try it on at home and decide it doesn't fit quite right? A beautiful landscape that functions poorly has that same uncomfortable aftertaste. At its best, landscape design is a process of many carefully thought-out layers, designed and applied individually, one on top of the next, to reveal a final design that is both functional and beautiful.

Ideally, the first layer of site planning begins with building placement. We often start with the building already on site, but if not, the first considerations are site drainage, required setbacks, and orientation. Careful building placement helps to avoid costly drainage problems, vehicular access and parking issues, and also helps to maximize cross breezes and take advantage of beautiful views. For more extensive properties, desired approach, views, and vistas may have more weight. For instance, Thomas Jefferson sighted Monticello so that an approaching visitor caught small glimpses of the house before experiencing the whole thing. Little appetizing views built interest before the visual feast of the entire estate.

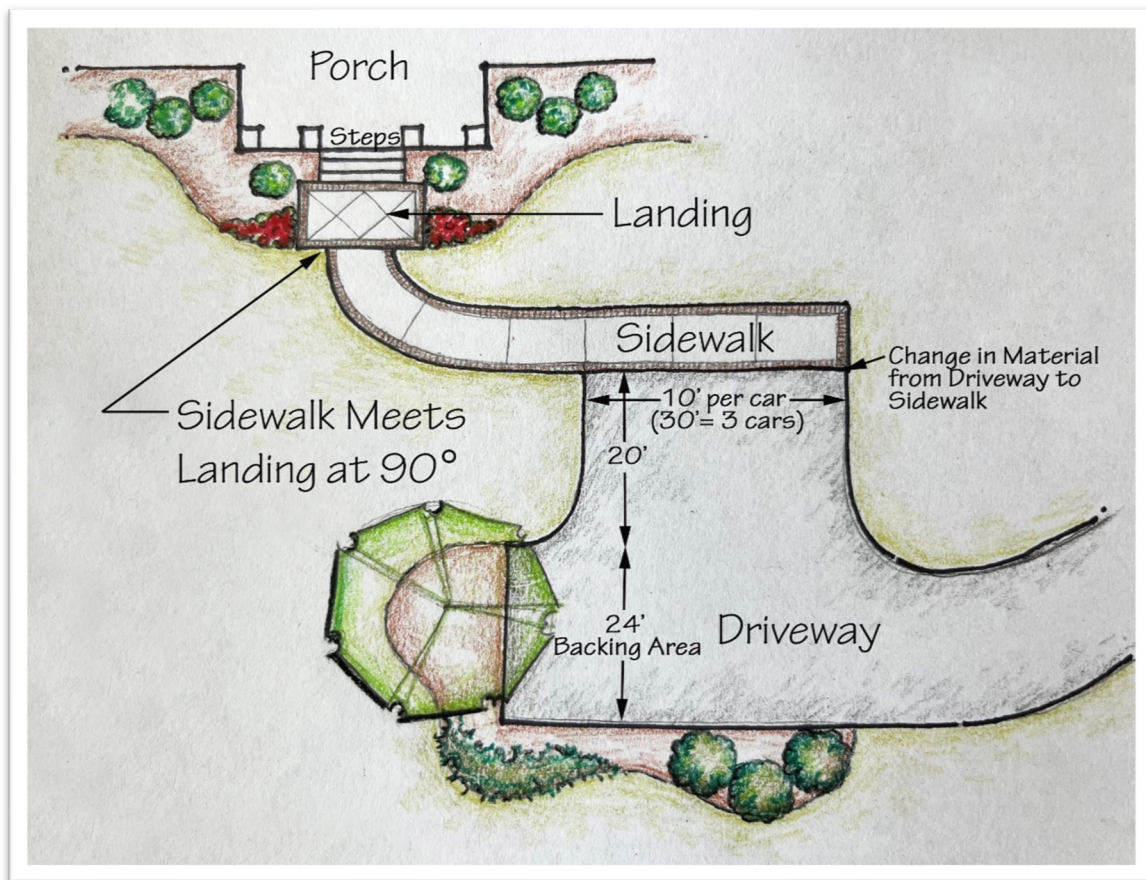
For the purposes of this article, we will focus on residential landscaping with an existing home on site. In this instance, the first layer is the hardscape, a term that simply means the built element in the landscape. This can be paving or gravel used for vehicular or pedestrian use, retaining walls, patios, pool decks, sidewalks, etc.



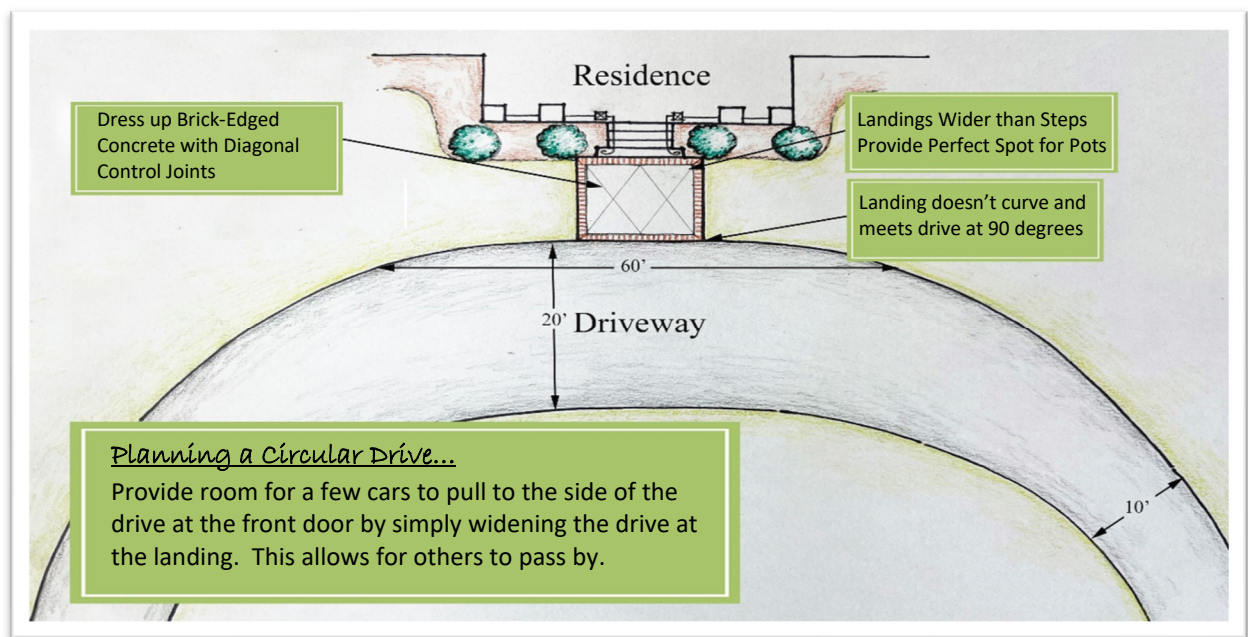
Let's consider vehicular hardscape first. Providing vehicular circulation that is easy to understand and navigate can add to the property owners' daily experience as well as a visitor's first impression.

The following are some quick rules of thumb for vehicular design that can make getting in and out of your property a breeze.

- Always plan for an adequate turning radius for vehicles. Only put curves in driveways when they have a purpose and provide ample paving so that it's not hard to stay on the pavement when making a turn. This might mean widening the pavement on a curve.
- Plan for a gradual change in grade from the driveway to the street so that lower cars do not scrape their noses or back bumpers. Streets are usually crowned in the middle and slope to a gutter to provide adequate drainage. A steep driveway entering the street creates a vertical "V" with the gutter at the lowest point. When the front tire hits the gutter, the nose of the car can scrub the pavement rising from the gutter; likewise, when the back tires cross the gutter, the bumper can scrub the pavement rising from the other side.
- Parking areas must be roughly ten feet wide and at least eighteen feet long for each car. Leave at least 24' behind a parking space or garage for backing. If possible, plan a walkway across the front of a parking area where the cars nose-in. This is the most welcoming way to exit a vehicle and know right where to go. Also, the guest does not have to walk behind the car to get to the door.

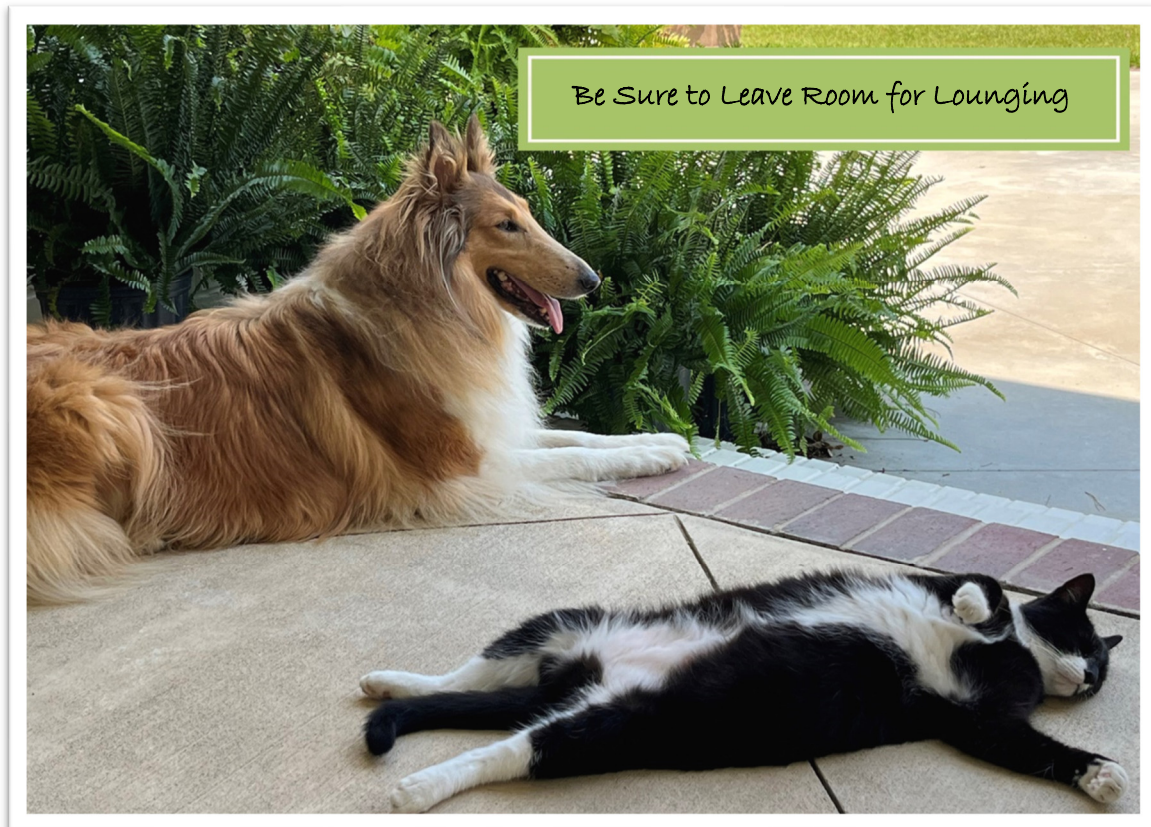


- Change pavement materials with uses. It is a comfortable and intuitive experience when walkways are one material and vehicular paving is another. Step up the quality of material for walkways. For example, if you have gravel or asphalt for vehicular areas, dress up your walkways with brick or brick-edged concrete. It signifies that the pedestrian has priority. This is particularly helpful with circular drives that connect to a landing at the front door. It provides the landing with a visual sense of hierarchy in materials and safety.
- Circular drives are very serviceable for guests and can eliminate backing and save your mailbox from succumbing to the bumper of Aunt Betty's Buick. I've found that one of the best ways to provide guest parking with this design is to widen the part of the drive that is near the front door so that a few cars could park on the edge and others can still pass (roughly 20' wide for at least 60' linear feet). It is easy to navigate, and no one gets blocked in by Aunt Betty's Buick because it will be another hour before she quits talking.



On to the pedestrian layer... Let's start with the front door. Few of us have a mat at the front door that reads, "Oh, It's You Again!" We want our homes to be as welcoming as the current cover of *Southern Living*. This begins with a gracious landing at the front door. The dimensions of the landing should be, at a minimum, the width of the steps and preferably wider to accommodate two pots for annual color. The depth of the landing should be at *least* five feet, and the more steps, the deeper the landing needs to be for a comfortable visual as you descend the front steps. First impressions are essential, and a home is much more welcoming if, as guest parks, they have a clear, visible path to the front door. Even if you do not have a sidewalk leading you to it, a large landing is a welcoming and serviceable gesture. How often have you visited someone and stood and chatted at the bottom of the front steps before finally leaving? The landing is an excellent spot for that lingering talk as well as a couple of potted plants for a pop of color in front of the house.

Think through how you will navigate between the different elements of your property. Perhaps you have an outbuilding such as a garden shed, greenhouse, or pool house. How do you walk between the house and these other elements? Make sure you have a pathway planned out that gets you there in an efficient way. Is this path just for one person, or do you want a walk wide enough for two people? Is there a place you like to sit and have your morning coffee? Perhaps some stepping stones can keep the dew off of your slippers. Thinking through your daily activities proves to be tremendously helpful in the design process.



A few rules of thumb for residential paving:

- A sidewalk needs to be at least 5' wide for two people to walk comfortably side by side.
- Would you like a large patio to host a child's birthday alfresco? A standard picnic table needs a space at least 15' by 12' deep to feel comfortable. Before designing an outdoor hardscape, consider how you would like to use an area and the furniture you would place in it. Be sure to plan for room around a table to push the chairs back and stand or enough room to walk behind a chair while someone is seated.
- Brick-edged concrete is a less costly alternative to an all stone or brick paving and can be just as lovely, especially when the concrete has control joints cut on a diagonal.

- Want to accommodate lawn games? The Internet is an excellent source for sleuthing out the dimensions of lawn space needed for many outdoor games. Badminton is a great choice because the net can be unrolled, staked up in a jiffy, and taken down without any remnant after the grandkids are gone.

What are some other ways you might use your landscape? How about a vegetable garden? Plan for a convenient placement near a water source and close enough that you won't mind running out of the kitchen for a snippet of basil or snatching that ripe tomato for your salad.

Have the desire for a fire pit? Look for a level spot. Be sure to provide ample space to put chairs around the fire and, of course, not too close to the house and not under the big limb of that favorite tree. Ambient lighting is helpful around a firepit. A bright fire can make a glare, so it might take a minute for your eyes to adjust to dark surroundings when navigating to and from the area. Uplighting in the landscape can be a nice way to safely light a path and ease that transition.



This wide and welcoming landing not only provides a path from on-street parking but makes a seamless transition to and from the city sidewalk.

Once you've provided for the comfortable use of your landscape, you can move to the next question that informs the next design layer.

How will the landscape be viewed?

Unless you regularly float above your house in a hot air balloon, it really doesn't matter what your site looks like in plan view. It matters how you experience the landscape on a daily basis. If you are a passerby on the road or walking through your landscape, you view your landscape while in motion. In contrast, while you are in the house looking out, you are more likely enjoying a more static perspective. How you view different landscape areas should inform the design in a significant way.

Let's start on the inside looking out. Think through the spots in the house where you enjoy a view of your landscape. Is it through the kitchen window over a sink full of dishes? Perhaps the view from the breakfast table or the sofa in the living room is one you enjoy often. These are the perfect areas of your landscape to invest in to get the most enjoyment out of your landscape design. For example, save the colorful seasonal annuals or perennials for these locations to create a lovely focal point, then frame the view with trees or taller plant material on either side.

From the perspective of the outside looking in, there are two essential design tips to remember. First, transition from less formal lines and softer plantings near the edges of the property to a more formal treatment the closer you get to the house and, ultimately, the front door. This eases the eye from the surrounding landscape to the house. A formal planting design that doesn't soften up on the edges of a property looks as if it fell from the sky. One with a soft transition back into the surrounding landscape looks comfortably snuggled into its place as if it naturally grew out of its surroundings. Using the same construction materials of the home in the hardscape of the landscape can also help with this transition. It is a good design rule of thumb to keep the number of materials at a minimum anyway.

Second, to create a dynamic experience for anyone walking or driving through the landscape, it is a practical design method to divide the landscape into separate rooms. Some rooms could be expansive with open lawns, whereas some may be small and intimate. This treatment allows for the experience of entering and exiting separate "rooms," which provides excitement and interest. We all love anticipating a surprise and wondering what could be around the corner! Is anyone else having flashbacks to Mary Lennox unlocking the ivy-covered door to discover the Secret Garden? We will discuss this topic in more detail in the next article, but it's important to know that there are many ways to create the "walls" of an outdoor room without employing the masons of a eighteenth-century manor.

How will the landscape be maintained?

You may employ a staff of gardeners to rival the queen. A new perennial bed is planted by the wave of your white-gloved hand and refreshed nightly before you arise to the sound of bagpipes on the front lawn. However, if you are like me and don a crazy-lady, long-sleeved, blue jean outfit topped off with a floppy straw hat, reserved explicitly for mowing and the only response to

your waved hand is a honk from Aunt Betty as she passes by to pick up Pookie from the groomer - the topic of maintenance resonates a little louder for you!

A low-maintenance landscape is something full of virtue. The desire to have it is admirable and, I dare say, obtainable with careful planning. However, it is critical to understand that a low-maintenance landscape does not look like a high-maintenance one. I would be a rich girl if I had a dollar for every time someone expressed their desire for a "low-maintenance" landscape. In addition, I would gain a hefty bonus if I also received a dollar every time someone requested a "no-maintenance" landscape. When this particular request is made during the client visit, it triggers a stock response. I stick my pencil in the little elastic loop of my notebook and point to a shady spot. As we step into the welcome shade, I tuck the photos she found on Pinterest of perennial beds lining the ancient walls of some English manor that employs a full-time garden staff into my notebook and smile politely. Our conversation usually begins with something like this, "Honey, a *no-maintenance* landscape doesn't exist. We could install artificial turf and silk flowers, but you would still have to maintain the turf and change out the faded flowers. We could pave the whole site in concrete, and you would still have to pluck the weeds popping up regularly from the cracks." Most of you are clutching your pearls and whispering, "Bless her heart!" because you know better. Especially us southern gardeners because we've all witnessed weeds the likes of greenbriar, skunk vine, and chamberbitter put a stranglehold on our plants that would rival a seasoned wrestler!

In this world of social media, bloggers, and influencers, only perceived perfection is presented, and anyone who can produce a believable photograph and claims a certain number of followers is an expert. As a result, we have a generation of people who cannot relate to the reality of the work behind authentic landscapes. They have tirelessly perused countless staged landscape photos and witnessed hundreds of miracle overnight house makeovers on TV in their lifetime and are now buying houses! Whew! Before discouragement sets in, there's hope. These young people are resilient. After the initial disappointment of learning that there is something called USDA Plant Hardiness Zones and that the plants they saw on their trip to Scotland won't grow here, they dry their tears, dust themselves off, and devote themselves to learning. I am finding this generation excited about working with the soil and the authenticity of growing their own garden. Fellow garden clubbers, we must see this as an opportunity. I certainly do. Let's spread the word about how important it is to design your landscape with maintenance in mind, highlighting the merits of using native plant material, the physical benefits of tending your garden, and learning about beneficial insects and the importance of mulch. The list goes on!

I like to highlight the following tips for keeping your landscape design within your maintenance reach:

- Simple can be beautiful. Keep the design simple with carefully selected native trees and lawn grass that is not finicky in your area.
- Plant trees in such a way that you can group them inside planting beds in the lawn. This allows you to mow around the bed and not around every tree. It looks better too.
- Keep the curves in bed lines no tighter than the turning radius of your lawnmower.
- Place annuals in pots at the front door to get the most potency out of the vibrant color, and it's not a big deal to change them out when they have faded at the end of their season.

- Minimize planting beds and invest in a thick layer of good weed-free mulch.
- Always provide plenty of room between your house and the foundation planting so trimming or weeding is not complicated behind the plants, and roots growing into the foundation do not become an issue.
- Never plant river birch near the house or septic field. Their roots are incredibly invasive. Do not plant crepe myrtles where they hang over any hardscape or cars.
- Crisp edges make any landscape shine. So, if you don't have time to do anything else, edge and mow.
- Don't plant vines on your mailbox. (That's more for the benefit of the poor mailman than it is for you).



Lastly, let's not forget the help of modern technology in the maintenance arena. You can now check the weather and program your sprinkler system from your phone to minimize water usage. Digital devices can monitor your soil's moisture and nutritional needs for accurate fertilization and watering.

My personal favorite, the electric auto-mower, is becoming a viable, lower operating-cost alternative to today's gas-guzzling lawnmowers. The auto-mowers are designed to cut in a random pattern and take only a fraction of the blade of grass on each pass. This minimizes thatch and promotes the overall health of the lawn. If only they made them look like sheep! I've been trying to convince my husband of his need for one of these amazing machines for quite a while now. I can report a small victory due to the installation of an electrical outlet in the column at the end of the driveway.

I will keep you posted! For now, I will continue to sport my crazy-lady outfit and drive off into the sunset on my trusty mower.

All Photos and Drawings by Suzanne Finger