



Plant America: Beautification, Conservation, Education

Landscape Design Newsletter

Winter 2023-2024

Landscape Design 101 Series

Part Two

Good Bones

(The Structure of a Great Landscape Design)

By: Suzanne Finger, RLA



“It has good bones!” That’s what was said on the first walk-through of our last renovation project. Looking past the cracks in the walls and rotten floorboards, we focused on the potential the old house offered. The outer brick shell hemmed in an efficient arrangement of interior rooms, with many key living areas sporting period fireplaces as interesting focal points. Although practically a gut job, the structure provided the perfect base layer for new finishes that would ultimately create the home we now love. Likewise, a great landscape design must begin with “good bones” or a structure that will support the subsequent layers of planting design. Creating that important base layer in the landscape is the topic of this Landscape Design Newsletter and comprises the second part of a four-part Landscape Design 101 Series. With our toolbelts equipped from Part One with a clear understanding of the site’s functionality (how the site will be used, experienced, and maintained), we can confidently jump into creating the structure of our landscape design.

Designing a landscape is designing an experience. It is an experience that can be seen, smelled, heard, and felt and will ultimately leave an impression or memory on anyone who experiences it. The fun task of crafting that experience begins with deciding what kind of take-away you want your visitor to have. Think of this task as identifying a theme or personality for your landscape. Is it to be a showcase of color? Is it a grand dame of simplicity and formal lines? Is it all about the natural landscape it is nestled in? Thankfully, we are not starting from scratch because the site's functionality has been studied, and you know how you will use and view the different areas of your landscape. Let's look at a practical way to approach the next steps of designing the "bones" of your landscape design.

1. Personality and Theme



Why is it important to think of a personality for our design- doesn't it just need to be attractive and functional? I'm so glad you asked. Think of writing a research paper without a topic. It might take the reader a while to understand what they are reading. Imagine stepping into someone's foyer decked out in chinoiserie on every surface. Then, you're invited into their modern, mid-century living room with fat green lamps and large barrel shades, and after that, you pass through a frilly French country kitchen on your way to a dining room that looks like it was extracted from Williamsburg.

Although each room may be lovely and each style immaculately curated, you may feel a bit jarred from one room to the next and leave with the idea that the home has a personality disorder. There's a reason most of us stick with one general style throughout our house and may introduce a pinch of something different for fun with a powder room or piece of furniture here or there. Consistency or repetition of an element in design brings comfort and adds to the enjoyment of an experience. Establishing a theme provides that needed consistency.

Think of notable landscapes you've experienced and the signatures they carry. Augusta National has its azaleas, and Disney has its consistent walkways, fences, and site furnishings. Bellingrath Gardens may repeat the same annuals in accent locations throughout the property, such as their cascading mums in the fall. Most public gardens are careful to use the same hardscape materials and site furnishings to provide a sense of place and identity. To relate this to the residential landscape, I recommend my clients stick to hardscape materials that echo the home and use as few materials as possible. Two materials are ideal, and three are pushing it. If you have lighting or other metal elements, keeping the finishes consistent is best.

2. Existing Conditions

A closer look at your site's existing conditions informs the rest of the design process and can even help put a finger on your landscape's potential theme or personality.

Just like people, a site's existing conditions or personality traits can be assets or potential liabilities. In other words, our goal is to create a landscape that charms one outside for a visit, not one that inspires you to shut the blinds! Identify the personality traits that make your site unique and those that perhaps need modification. Keep in mind that you are the designer. If your existing site has little to offer, never fear! You can weave the needed personality into the fabric of your design.

Most existing conditions fall into one of the following basic categories: sun/shade, soils, topography/surface drainage, notable existing plant material, or site elements (i.e. beautiful view or swimming pool). A quick documentation of these conditions may look like the following:

The site is sunny on the south and west side and shady with mature trees on the north and east. The elevation drops significantly to the south, with a beautiful view of the golf course. The soils in the southeast corner remain wet and hold water after a significant rain, and the plants struggle in that area. The front door is hidden by an overgrown stand of azaleas, and there is no clear parking or pathway for a guest. Three beautiful mature, specimen white oaks are in the front yard (north).

An example of how this simple observation may inform your design, is in the following ways:

The new design needs to consider the following: The view of the golf course needs to be preserved and perhaps enhanced by framing the view, being mindful not to block the views from inside the house. The three oaks in the front yard need to be protected, and a clear parking area and path to the front door need to be defined. Some shade trees need to be introduced on the west side of the house. There appears to be a drainage problem in the southeast corner that needs attention.

Documenting the existing conditions may have helped you develop a theme for your landscape. Finding the theme or personality to drive your design is like thinking of a jingle for a product you are selling. This helps to get your design juices flowing and feed your creative thinking. In this example, you may be humming something about the verdant view of the golf course and designing a fun and attractive way to get there. Or, if you're not one to wax poetic, make some bullet points of the things you desire your landscape to accomplish.

3. Hardscape



Part One helped equip you with an understanding of the functions you need to incorporate into your plan and your pedestrian and vehicular needs. Now that you have a thorough knowledge of your site and a theme to guide you, it's time to sharpen your pencil!

Start with the hardscape. Use the dimensions you learned in Part One to draw out any paving for driveways, parking areas, patios, landings, and walkways. Be careful to locate and identify the trees you are saving. Research your municipality's building codes to know how close hardscape can come to your property lines (setbacks) and how much impervious surface you are allowed to have. An impervious surface is anything that does not allow water to pass through to the soil. This can be buildings, pavement, or, in some cases, compacted soil. For example, in my neighborhood, we are permitted only 30% coverage of our lot with impervious surfaces.



4. Rooms

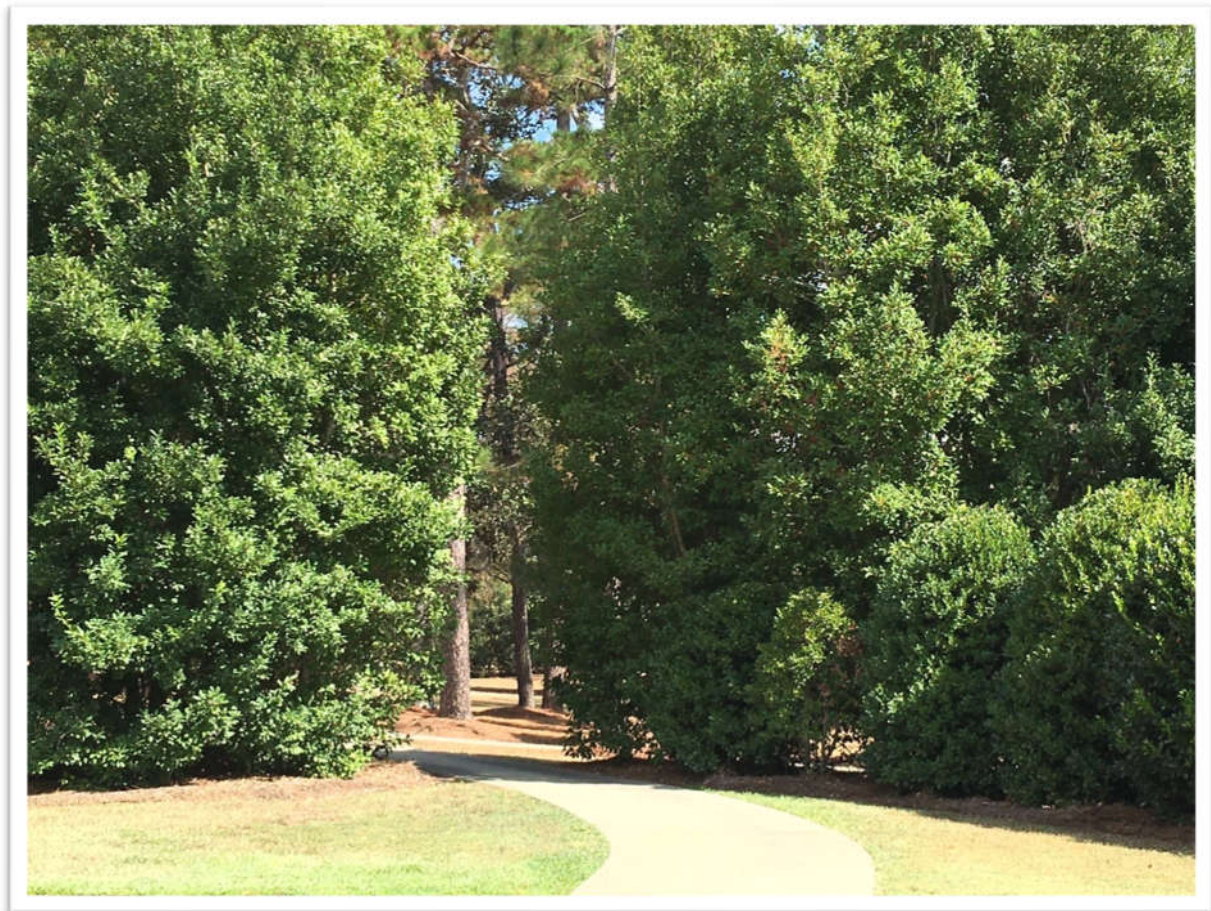
Now that the hardscape layer is documented, you are ready to design the "rooms" of your plans. Did you know humans are comfortable in defined spaces, even outside? It is a pleasant experience for us to step into a space we can quickly understand, determine its boundaries, and clear entry or exit points (portals). We also enjoy the excitement of moving from one open

space into another through a portal, especially when the view to the next space is hidden until passing through the portal. Now, with all this talk about portals, before your mind wanders to Star Trek and other dimensions, let's talk about what these walls and portals are, how to construct rooms with walls and portals, and look at some examples. **Rooms** and **corridors** in the landscape are like rooms in a building in that they consist of walls, doorways, focal points, and sometimes windows. Can you find the rooms in the plan below?



Walls are created by plant material that provides vertical interest on the edges of an open space. These plantings can be tall or short, varied, or mass plantings of the same plant. Often, these plantings define the edges of an open space and frame or screen views. Eye-catching elements incorporated at key points in these plantings become focal points for the landscape room, much like a fireplace does for an interior room. At this point in the design, you do not have to identify the plant material; just note the role the plant material will play within the wall, such as “tall mass

planting to screen view,” or “annual bed to be focal point of landscape room and provide interest from dining room window.” Your design at this stage should have the hardscape clearly delineated, but the rooms should look more like a bubble diagram. The more accurate definition of bedlines is coming in just a bit, so hang in there!

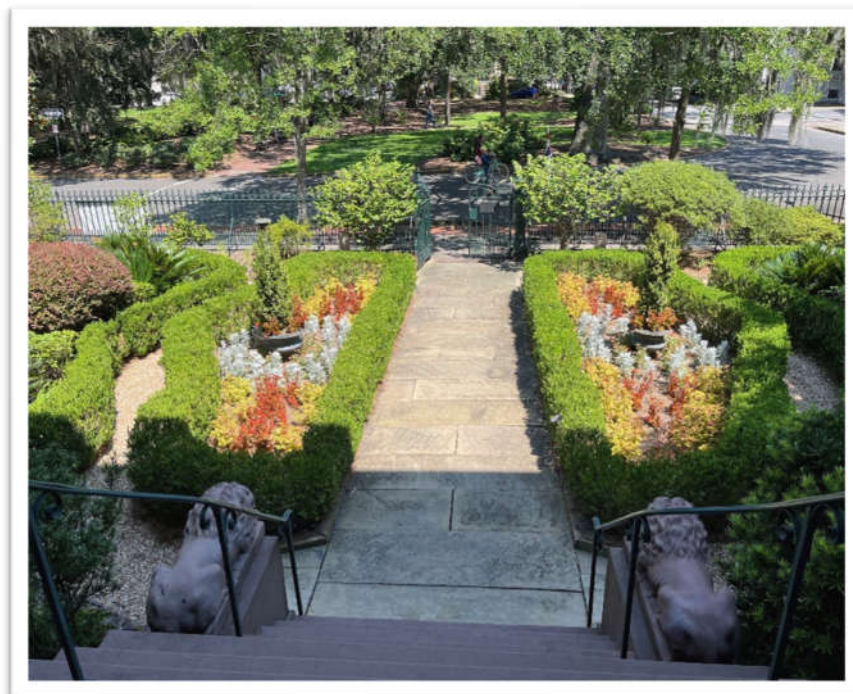


Portals are like pinch points where planting beds come close together and create a doorway to another open space. Hardscape can also provide portals in the form of a gate or opening in a fence or garden wall. There are also narrower landscape rooms that act as **corridors** to move you from one larger room to another. Often, the area to the side of a home on a site makes an excellent landscape corridor. These can be exciting little intimate spaces full of fun details.

The smaller the space, the more we appreciate the detail included in the design. I learned the thrill of small garden design while interning with a landscape architect in Charleston, South Carolina. Every little espalier, brick design, fountain, or tiny annual bed is observed as if under a magnifying glass. Textures, colors, smells, and sounds are experienced with heightened sensitivity, and the result of a well-designed small space can be magical. If you need inspiration, visit Charleston and tour homes and gardens in the “South of Broad” district.



The styles of landscape rooms can be as assorted as a box of chocolates. Formal, symmetrically shaped lawns hemmed in by boxy hedges are a classic, like the garden at the Crane Cottage on Jekyll Island (pictured above). Some are irregularly shaped lawns with soft, texture-rich plantings as walls.



Landscape rooms can also be designed with no lawn space and contain defined areas of hardscape or lower plantings with hardscape. Parterre gardens are a great example of this (See image left). Corridors can be just as varied, sporting formal, linear beds on either side of a lawn space or soft, curved beds on either side of a meandering hardscape or ground cover.

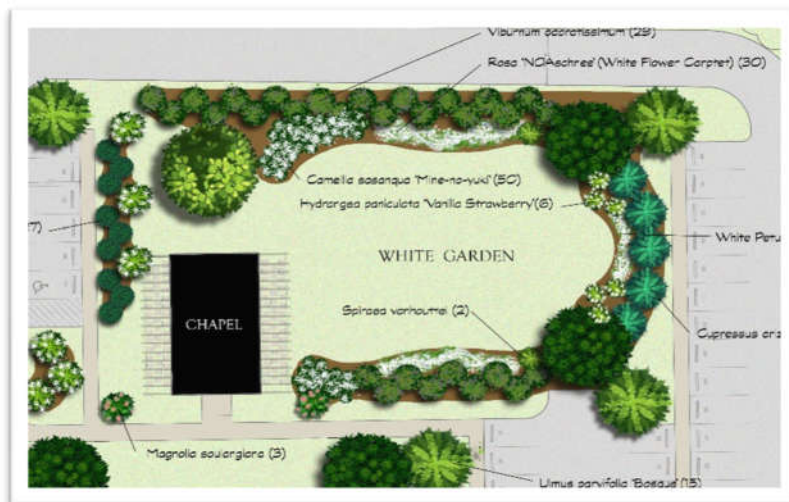
5. Bedlines

Lastly, we'll discuss the basics of bedlines. Think of bedlines as the baseboards of a room. It is where the edge of the open space meets the plantings of the wall. Our eyes instinctively want to follow lines in the landscape. That is why viewing a landscape with well-defined, crisp bedlines is so satisfying. In the south, a fresh application of pine straw, rolled neatly at the bed edges, leaves the whole neighborhood thinking you've re-landscaped. I'm plum giddy when that happens to my front yard! This looks especially nice when the bedlines are well-designed, so let's jump into discovering the best practices of bedline design.

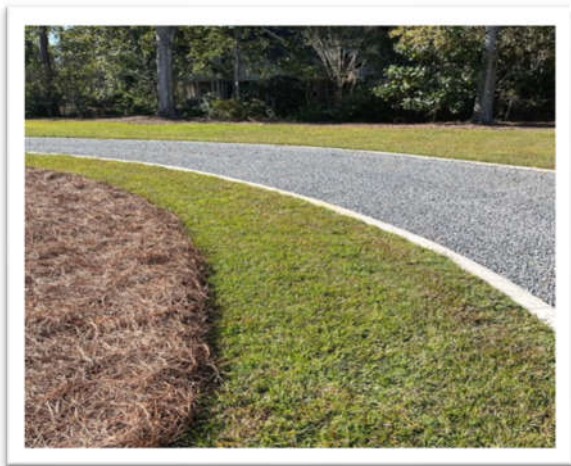
Bedline Rules of Thumb:

- Minimize the number of curves and make them look purposeful
- Include the majority of tree driplines within the bedlines
- Maintain at least lawnmower width between planting bed and hardscape edge
- Minimize bedlines at hardscape edges
- Keep curves no tighter than the turning radius of the lawnmower
- Intersect hardscape at 90 degree angles

Bedlines should never be an afterthought to the plantings, and plantings never an afterthought to the bedlines. In effective landscape design, the two are designed together. Large sweeping curves are beautiful when they appear purposeful in relation to the plantings in the bed. In contrast, super curvy bedlines that do not correlate to the plantings they contain can be busy and unsettling to observe. Try to keep curve radii no smaller than necessary and certainly no smaller than the turning radius of the lawnmower. If an area of lawn is too tight to get into with a mower, whoever is maintaining the yard will have to cut that small area with a different piece of equipment, and it will eventually look different than the rest of the lawn. One way to ensure your curves look purposeful and your plantings and bedlines work well together, is to identify the outermost points of a curve in a bedline, either convex or concave, and use that point to center a mass planting or specimen tree. See the plan below as an illustration of this concept:



Next, size your planting beds so that the plant material has a bit of breathing room from the edge of the bed, and always consider placing the majority of the dripline area of a tree in a planting bed. If a large area of lawn falls under the shade of a tree, the lawn in that area may struggle or at least grow differently from the rest of the lawn.



Another good practice is to maintain at least a lawnmower width between a planting bed and hardscape edge. This allows for the entire lawn to be maintained with the same piece of equipment, which cuts down on maintenance time and ensures a uniform cut. I also like to minimize the adjacency of a bed and hardscape area. Sometimes, it cannot be avoided, especially when a bed crosses a hardscape, but in general, it is a much cleaner look to transition from lawn to hardscape than mulch to hardscape. Mulch is hard to keep from blowing or washing onto the pavement.

Lastly, when a bed needs to intersect hardscape, it should do so at a 90-degree angle. Any other angle creates an acute angle in the lawn or planting bed, which is less attractive and creates a space that is difficult to plant or maintain.

Once you have established the good bones of your landscape design, you can be assured that you have the perfect foundation for the rest of your design!

