



Plant America: Beautification, Conservation, Education

Landscape Design Newsletter

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Landscape Design 101 Series

Part Three

A Star-Studded Cast

Plant Selection for an Outstanding Performance in Your Landscape Design

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Have you ever watched a movie where the storyline is perfectly matched with a cast whose talent stirs it into a masterpiece? Pairing the right actor with the right part is vital to a film's success. Casting in landscape design is just as important. In the first two parts of this four-part series, Landscape Design 101, we have identified the functionality of the landscape (The Plot), we've defined the structure of the landscape (The Script), and now, in Part Three, we are ready to discuss the importance of selecting the best plant material for each part (The Cast).

With carefully defined rooms, hardscape that supports your desired function, and a theme to fuel your creativity, the stage is perfectly set for the final layer of your landscape design - the plant material. Our focus in this article will be the aesthetic elements of plant selection, covered in three general categories. Before we jump into these categories, let's review a quick checklist of the minimum requirements for a plant to be considered for any part of your landscape plan. They don't make the cut if they don't check these boxes!

- Check the plant's Hardiness Zone (Make sure it will thrive in your location) <https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/>
- Make sure you know the plant's sun/shade preferences.
- Know the plant's soil and water preferences.
- Know the invasive species, and do not include them in your plan!
- Native species and providing for wildlife and pollinators is a bonus!



Before we get to the meat of this article, allow me one more word about checking a plant's performance in your area. Find a knowledgeable plant person in your hometown who can help you. Lean in...this is the best advice you will ever get from one of my articles. Make a big batch of Laura Bush's Cowboy Cookies (I'll send you the recipe if you need it) and take a box to a seasoned landscape installer in your hometown. Most plant people I know will tell you all their secrets for those cookies! No one knows plants like those who plant them and must replace them when they die. These special people are usually found at nurseries that sell plants *and* provide installation services.

Last warning... beware of those pretty plants making eyes at you as you push your buggy down the garden aisles of the big box stores. They may look great right off the truck but not grow where you live. Check those hardiness zones to find out!

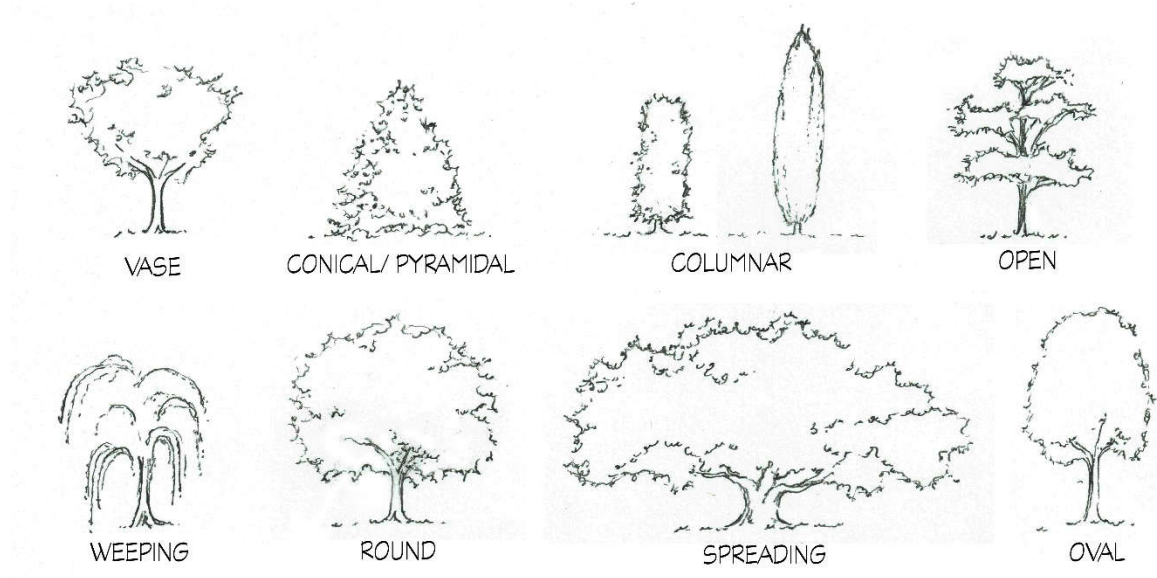
With that business covered, we can jump into three groupings of aesthetic plant traits to aid you in plant selection. Let's begin our discussion with Form and Size, then move on to Texture and Color, and lastly, explore the qualities of Movement, Sound, and Smell.

1. Form and Size (Growth Habit)

At this point in the design process, your planting areas or beds are loosely defined. The next step is to assess the desired form and size (growth habit) of the plants needed for those areas. Do you need something tall, short, spreading, or narrow? What plant will fit the part? Where will the trees go, and where will the shrubs go? It is helpful to have a list of plants, arranged into categories, that serves as the palette for the project (remember the only plants on this list are ones that have checked all the boxes in the discussion above). This list is organized by annuals, groundcovers, shrubs, and trees. When scanning the list, the first trait we're looking for is the desired form, size, or growth habit that would work best for our design intentions.

How do you know the growth habits of a particular plant?

When you research a plant, there will usually be a reference to its growth habit. This will refer to both its form and size. The graphic below illustrates many common industry terms used for tree forms. Shrub forms go by many of the same terms, so for shrubs, think of the same general shape (without a trunk). Another part of a plant's growth habit is its mature width and height. Remember that the maximum size of some plants, especially trees, may not be reached in your lifetime. I have also found that some plants grow larger and faster in the deep south than published (especially hollies!).



Trees and Large Shrubs usually play one of the following roles in the landscape:

- Anchors / Vertical interest
- Frame Views
- Screen Views
- Provide Shade
- Heirlooms – provide a legacy that can be passed down to future generations.

Smaller shrubs, groundcovers, and annuals or perennials usually accomplish the following:

- Fill in Planting Beds to Define Open Areas
- Provide Seasonal Interest
- Visual Transition to Bring the Eye Back to the Horizon or Ground Plane

Let's look at an example of choosing a plant by its growth habit to fit a design element in your plan. Remember portals from the last article? Let's say you have a portal as a transition from a small side yard into a larger open space in the backyard.



Above: Natural Arch Created by Two Trees
Right: Arches and Architectural Elements mimicking the Natural Form

What kind of tree form would work well to frame a portal? The arching branches of two vase-shaped trees meeting each other create a beautifully framed portal. This shape is supposedly the inspiration for the Gothic arch and other architectural elements.



Perhaps the portal sits in an area that is not large enough to support two broad canopied, vase-shaped trees. Columnar trees also work well to frame a more formal portal, mimicking two decorated soldiers guarding a gate. However, two very tall, narrow, columnar trees, such as Italian cypress, would dwarf the proportions of the opening when they reached mature height. With this in mind, you have narrowed your options to a shrub with a columnar form and manageable height. You look down your shrub list and find *Podocarpus macrophyllus*, which perfectly fits this preferred growth habit. Podocarpus wins the part!

When considering the size of a plant in a landscape plan, the rule of thumb is that you want layers of plants to step down toward the viewer. For instance, shrubs behind groundcover and groundcover behind grass. It is also important to remember that very few plants will stay the same size once planted. If you need a plant to remain a specific size, it is important to research if and how that plant could be maintained to that size. Some plants are more forgiving as to how they respond to trimming. Chinese hollies are very tolerant of trimming and stay full when trimmed properly. For example, my neighbor has a great hedge of dwarf Burford hollies next to his house. He can keep a level top trimmed on plants planted on unlevel ground. In contrast, other plants, such as cedar or oak, can develop unsightly shapes when their leader is cut.



Above: *Ilex cornuta* 'Burfordii Nana' Hedge trimmed level at the top
Below: Texture Study - Smooth Crape myrtle Bark Paired with the Soft Texture of Tiny Blue Flowers



2. Texture and Color

Next, let's explore the magic of texture. Various leaf and bark textures add rich diversity to the plant palette, but did you know they can accomplish a visual magic trick? Fine-textured plants can make small spaces look a little roomier, and large spaces can appear more intimate with the use of coarse-textured plants. How does this work, you ask? Fine textures in the landscape visually recede, while coarse textures visually project forward. Simply put, fine-textured plants appear farther away than they are, and large-leaved, coarse textured plants seem closer. The size of the leaves is used to manipulate our sense of scale in landscape design. Just as in architecture or any other art form, it is crucial to

maintain a balance of scale and proportion. For instance, a lot of coarse texture can be overwhelming in a small area, whereas large areas with all finely textured plants are in danger of appearing washed-out and uninteresting. It is important to find balance in the use of each.

Let's look at an example. If you were to design a tiny courtyard garden, you would want to use fine-bladed grass (this trick even pertains to sod). For the "walls" or planting areas of the courtyard, you would choose plants with smaller, finer textured leaves such as boxwood or loropetalum. It is okay to introduce a focal point in a coarse texture; you just use it sparingly. In contrast, to make a large area appear more comfortable and approachable, you employ plants with large glossy leaves, such as viburnum to visually pull the plantings closer to the observer.



Just as we like to add a little sparkle to our wardrobe for special occasions, a smooth, glossy leaf can help add a little bling to our landscape. The reflective quality of many glossy leaves, like that of holly, magnolia, or camellia, to name a few, dress up our landscape as the sun dances off their leaves on a sunny day.

There's another role texture plays in the garden experience, and I bet you already guessed it. It's the sense of touch. Be sure to identify the places in your planting plan where you can incorporate plants that have a pleasing feel when touched. This element is easy to introduce in pots near a walkway, such as lamb's ear or Artemisa (one of my favorites for touch and smell). This is especially important when designing an Enabling or Accessible Garden.

Left: Ilex x attenuata 'East Palatka' sparkling in the sunshine

Now, on to a more colorful conversation... A garden without color interest is a garden without interest. However, if not carefully planned, too much color can look like a 1980's floral sofa. Y'all *all* know what I'm talking about! When it comes to color in your plantings, remember these four points.

- Keep it Simple
- Incorporate Different Shades of Green
- Balance Color Throughout
- Make it Count!

Plan the color palette of your landscape as you would the colors of a room inside your house. Choose colors that complement one another and are versatile through the different seasons. Be sure to note the fashion diva plants who must put on different color outfits in the fall as well as those who shed their leaves altogether. Also, remember that you may have multiple rooms in your landscape that can support different color schemes. This works just fine if you experience only one room at a time.



For the sake of simplicity, many landscapes use white flowering plants over the entire landscape, with color introduced only in accent areas. I love this time-tested and elegant approach; however, what fun it is to visit a color-saturated landscape! Who hasn't goggled over Callaway when it's blanketed in blooming azaleas dressed in every color known to man? A parade of colors in a venue like Callaway is thrilling, but we may desire something quieter when it comes to home. White flowering plants are plentiful and play well with others. They will not create an unpleasant pairing with other colors, and they show up well, even at night!

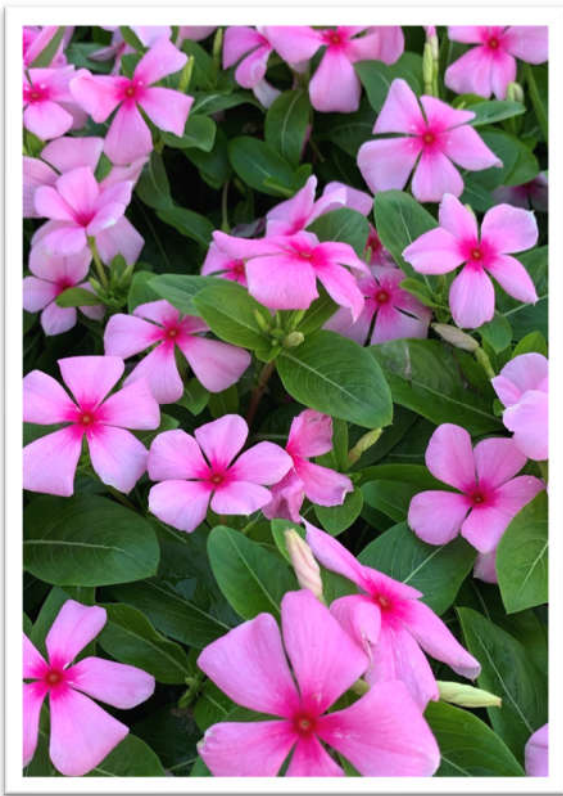
Left: Kousa Dogwood Flush with White

Have you ever considered carrying an interior color scheme out into the landscape? When a focal point in the landscape is visible from an interior room, coordinate the plantings with the drapes or accent colors of the room to seamlessly pull the beauty of the landscape indoors. Pots full of colorful annuals are an easy way to achieve this.

Most of us can put an outfit together without consulting a color wheel, and the landscape is no different. A solid grasp of color theory is fruitful with any visual art form, but there are some fun shortcuts! Anything you like can become an outlet for inspiration. One of my favorites is fabric. I love to take a lovely floral pattern and find plants that mimic the same color scheme. Paintings or china can also work well to inspire your color palette.

Right: Varied greens provide contrast and interest





Above: Annuals like this vinca provide powerful saturated color for accents in the landscape

When pondering color in the landscape, remember, it's not just the blooms that count! There are countless shades of green, and leaves can play more than supporting roles. There are yellow greens that can bring a kiss of sunshine on the cloudiest day and super dark greens that create depth and stability to other colors.

Think of your landscape as a painting. Take a mental photo of each significant "view" of your landscape (i.e., front of your house from the street). Then, analyze each view to see if there is a balance of color. Repeating the same color in different landscape areas helps achieve balance and visual comfort. In other words, if you put one here, put one over there somewhere too.

Annuals can be costly in time and money, but they are powerful at packing that punch of color that makes a landscape sing. Their strong, saturated colors capture our attention and are great tools to direct the eye to a desired focal point in the landscape or the front door. Just a few carefully placed annual beds or pots can do a lot of heavy lifting in the landscape and can be easily changed in different seasons.

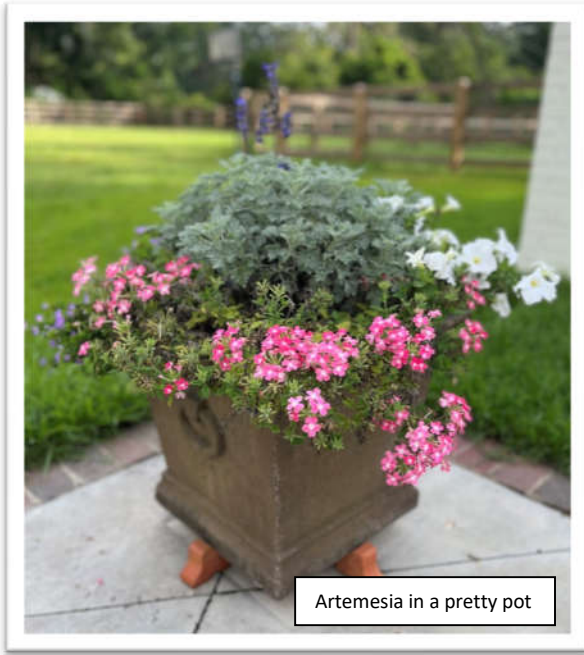
3. Movement, Sound, and Smell

These last three elements often take a back seat to the visual aspects of design; however, they play a vital part in creating a memorable landscape. Visual elements like color are more of a static experience, where movement, sound, and smell are interactive. Think of swinging in a hammock between two palm trees, only steps from the ocean. The smell of salt air fills your nose as you stare at the palm fronds above, moving back and forth with the wind. The soft swishing sound of the leaves rubbing against one another adds to the soothing sound of the waves rolling onto the beach. Compare that experience to sitting in a hotel room looking at the same landscape through a window. Although it is a lovely view, much experiential richness is lost.

There are many plants, like palm trees and ornamental grasses, that capture breezes and move in a mesmerizing way. Not only is this pleasing and relaxing to watch, but the movement generates sound, adding another layer of enrichment to the landscape experience. Nothing says home to me like the soft whisper of wind blowing through a tall stand of pines. The movement of plant material also manipulates light and shadow in the landscape. The swaying leaves of a black walnut tree in the wind can create a beautiful show of dancing light and shadow on the ground or a nearby wall.



Above: Muhly Grass Sways with the Breeze



Artemesia in a pretty pot

We've looked at how the landscape can delight our eyes and ears; now, let's look at what it offers our olfactory senses. Our southern noses are blessed by a lengthy list of fragrant plants that call the south home. Before wrapping up a landscape plan, make sure to check the box next to "provided seasonal fragrance." There are flowering and herbaceous plants, trees, shrubs, and perennials that fit the bill; magnolias, roses, tea olives, rosemary, gardenias, and artemisia, to name just a few. It is also a helpful tip to identify where your prevailing winds come from. In our area, the common southwesterly winds can take the scent of a well-sited tea olive (*osmanthus fragrans*) across a south-facing porch and through a whole house when it is blooming in the spring and again in the fall.

Now that you've reviewed the process of plant selection based on form and size, texture and color, as well as movement, sound, and smell, the stage is set for a showstopping landscape design!

All Drawings and Photographs by Suzanne Finger