



Plant America: Beautification, Conservation, Education

## Landscape Design Newsletter

Fall 2024

### Landscape Design 101 Series

Part Four

## The Secret Ingredients

Tips to Creating a Timeless and Enjoyable Landscape Design



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**W**hen I told my grandmother I decided to pursue a degree in Landscape Architecture, my statement was met with a quizzical brow. She looked at her barely five-foot tall, allergy-prone, fair-skinned granddaughter and understandably asked, "Why?"

*I can't remember my response exactly. I loved art. I loved horticulture. I was constantly in awe of and inspired by the beautiful creation God allowed me to live in. Beyond that, I'm not sure I had much of an answer other than it seemed a blend of my interests. After having about three decades for the question to steep, if you were to ask me today why I enjoy what I do, I would tell you that I enjoy creating art that we inhabit. As gardeners and landscape designers, our art is not confined to a frame on the wall. We can walk through it, smell it, hear it, dig our toes into it, and most importantly, what we design can enrich the lives of others.*

*In this final issue of a four-part Landscape Design 101 series, I hope to inspire you to not only enhance your own landscape design but that of your community as well. First, we will take care of a little housekeeping and wrap up the basics of landscape design by shedding a little light on the mysteries of plant placement and spacing. After that, I will share some time-tested secrets to creating a timeless and enjoyable landscape design*



*Live Oaks we enjoy because someone planted them long ago*

## Plant Placement and Spacing

Among landscape architects and designers, this topic can get as heated as a debate in the South over sweetened cornbread. I hope my views on the matter will set you free from the bondage of the plant-spacing nazis. We all know that there are published descriptions of the mature sizes of most plants available in the landscape industry. These are helpful guidelines to remember while selecting plants for our landscape plans. Nonetheless, please keep in mind that these are guidelines and *not* rules.

Depending on the plant's growth rate, soil, water, and sun/shade conditions, it may not reach its published mature size - ever or in your lifetime. It might even exceed the size in your area. Even within the confines of our great state, there is a huge difference in growth rate for certain plants between the Coastal Plains and the Piedmont. Knowing how a plant will perform in your area and matching that to your design intention is essential. This is especially tricky with new introductions to the nursery industry. There is limited information as to exactly how large the plant will get over time in certain conditions. Most of us can attest to this after witnessing many corners of ranch houses gobbled up by the Burford Holly, which was initially praised as the perfect corner-enhancing foundation plant. Now, some of the first introductions of the loropetalum have followed suit.

With all of this in mind, I believe that a designer, armed with the knowledge of the plant's growth rate and habit, should place plants as close or as far apart as they wish according to their design intent. I have had individuals tell me, in a whispering hand-over-mouth kind of way, that so-and-so planted those such-and-such plants too close together and then step back to watch an anticipated expression of horror

come over my face, only to be disappointed when that didn't happen. When plants are planted close together, alarms do not go off, and the plants do not suddenly die, as some seem to believe. Walking through the woods, you might observe two oaks growing only a few feet apart. One branches out on one side, while the other branches in another direction. They grow alongside maples, pines, hollies, or whatever may grow in your area. Thank goodness they are not regularly spaced! Our woods would lose so much of their beautiful, natural character if that were the case. Now, might those two oaks grow to the full potential size of their species? Perhaps not because they will compete for sunlight, water, and nutrients, but that's okay, and the resulting smaller size is okay. It wouldn't hurt the environment at all. This is also the case with shrubs. The designer may intend for a shrub to stand alone in the design, or they may intend for it to be part of a mass planting. Its spacing will differ depending on the design intent. Certainly, you do not want to plant any more plants than necessary to achieve the desired aesthetic within the desired time.

The majestic live oak is native to my area, and I love to incorporate it in a planting plan where, over the next 100 years, it can stretch its limbs to cover an expansive area for generations to enjoy. In other applications, it works well as an evergreen shade tree planted in an allée or as a street tree. In these situations, they are planted closer together so their canopies will touch each other and ultimately combine to create the desired aesthetic. Likewise, the 'Little Gem' Magnolia, despite its name and dwarf size, still can reach 25-30' tall, and yet it works beautifully when planted close together and trimmed as a hedge.

## Planting Design Tips

The following tidbits I have gleaned from over 25 years in the industry. I hope you enjoy employing them in your planting designs!

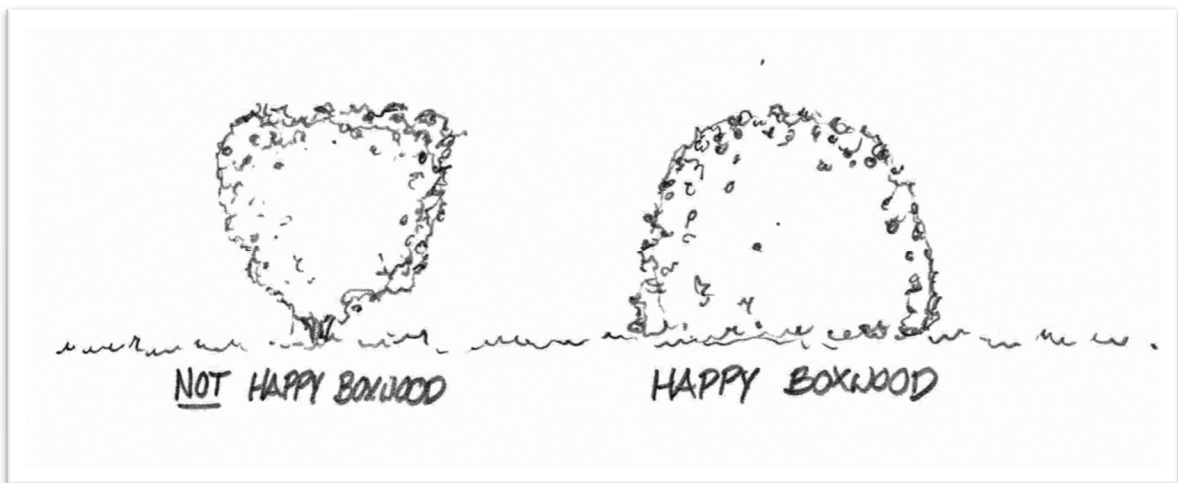


➤ Plant something that makes you smile or sparks a sweet memory. I can't see a planting of bright golden marigolds without thinking about my mama. She paired them with blue ageratums around the edges of a circular brick patio at my childhood home. Even if it's in a pot on the back porch, I love to have them somewhere in my landscape to remind me of her sunny smile. Is there something that you could plant that would bring a smile to your face?

*Mama's Marigolds*

- Hosting an upcoming shower or a dinner party and wish you could re-landscape? Crisp, edged beds, fresh mulch, and pots at the front door full of colorful annuals are the perfect ingredients for a quick-fix make-over!
- Foundation plantings have a life span. It is best to understand that and plan for it. It is sort of like the sofa that raised your children. There's a point where it needs to go and be replaced - and that's okay.
- Trim your trees and shrubs correctly. Trim suckers off the bottom of trees that are supposed to have exposed trunks and trim out limbs that cross the middle. Never limb-up a magnolia!!!! Trim shrubs so that the top is narrower than the bottom, even if only slightly.

*Shrub Pruning Graphic*



- Do something unexpected. See something fun and yet convention is holding you back? Go for it! Your friends and family will probably enjoy it too. It's *your* landscape.
- Before installing plants, place them where they are to go, still in their containers. Walk the site and look at the placement before they are planted. There is nothing like observing the plants in real-time. Things can look different in the actual setting than they do in plan-view. Subtle differences in grade, sun/shade, or how you observe the plant, can suddenly make you want to scoot the plants a little this way or that. Trust me, it's a lot easier to do before the plant goes in the ground.
- Plant for the future. My rule of thumb is to know that foundation plantings have a life span. They should be planted to achieve a more immediate aesthetic and can be changed out later, where plantings out further in the site are perfect for long-lived, native plantings that future generations will enjoy.
- If you are involved in a campus planning project for a municipality or institution, consider developing design guidelines and a gift guide. In the campus environment, minimize foundation

plantings, maximize long-lived shade trees, and have smaller garden areas where higher maintenance needs can be concentrated in one location. This reduces the maintenance burden on the campus as a whole. Have furnishing and signage guidelines that are available to donors. Many campuses and municipal properties have been reduced to yard-art displays by well-intentioned donors.

- A planting installation is only as good as the continued maintenance it receives. A gift of plantings without the gift of maintenance is a gift wasted.
- The best landscapes are those that everyone can enjoy. Invest in your community landscapes, especially in the areas where those less fortunate can enjoy them. We are all shaped and influenced by the beauty of our surroundings. The best talents we have are those we give away!



*Crane Cottage Garden, Jekyll Island State Park*

All Photos and Drawings by Suzanne Finger