

The Garden Tutors



GARDEN DESIGN & EDUCATION

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Easy Care Garden Design

Easy care design sits on four legs. First is giving your plants enough room. Second is choosing reliable plants that perform where you plant them. Third is to keep weed control issues in mind as you design. Fourth is an irrigation system that works.

Enough Room

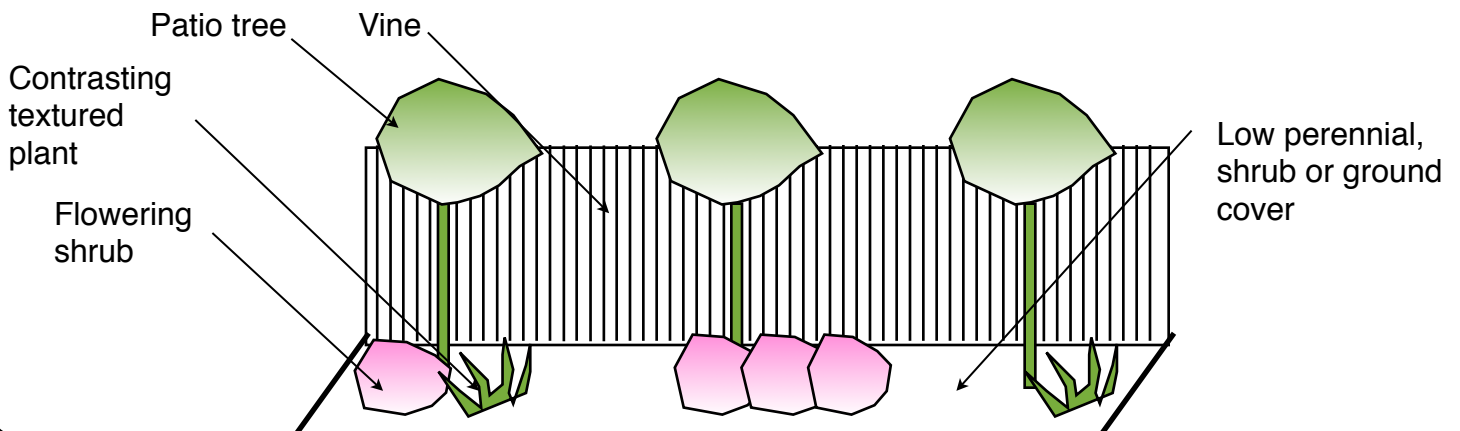
We all need enough room to grow properly. Giving your plants enough room can be trickier than you might think. First, living in California, plants get larger than the literature says and they get larger faster than predicted. Second, we don't pay enough attention to the width of plants. Often we are only looking at height. Remember if we are trying to keep something smaller, most often we are keeping it shorter and narrower on all four sides. Something that we are trying to keep at half its ultimate or even usable height means we are having to control its growth by not half its regular size, not a quarter its size but an eighth its size. No wonder almost everyone's garden is overcrowded!

We have three choices here.

First is to make the planting beds large enough to carry the plants you want to use and give them enough room between to allow for the width. Remember, you don't want a jumbled mess; keep some separation between different kinds of plants.

Second is to revise your plant choices to fit the room you do have! Again give more separation between different kinds of plants.

The third choice is my favorite technique. Think in three dimensions so you blend small trees, patio trees, vines and plants that grow to different heights and sizes and with different textures together. Give the interesting plants enough separation from the background to allow them to show off.



Reliable Plants

Reliable plants means plants that are adapted to our climate and are placed in an appropriate location. Using plants that are not dependable is not always a mistake, as long as you realize it when you do it. For instance, we sell a lot of bougainvillea and tropical hibiscus that we know are marginal here. The summer color makes people willing to keep using them.

More of a problem are plantings where the sun/shade balance is wrong. Often people misunderstand the difference between shade and deep shade. Most blooming shade plants like azaleas, hydrangeas, and camellias like light to medium shade and do not perform well in deeper shade. Few of the deeper shade tolerant plants do much blooming and you have to work with foliage color and texture for visual interest.

Weed Control

Controlling weeds is the most thankless part of caring for a garden. We recommend lots of mulch for two reasons connected to weed control. First is that a two inch mulch of humus or mini bark smothers weeds and prevents weed seeds from germinating. Secondly it makes pulling weeds much easier and you don't leave a viable root behind. There are other benefits including keeping the soil and roots cool and the fact that as the mulch breaks down it creates a dramatic improvement in the soil texture and nutrient retention.

You need to remember when you use small scale ground covers that you will find it more difficult to spray out weeds. You need to be consistent about keeping any weeds from setting seed!

In any case, using pre-emergent can be helpful keeping weeds under control. for organic gardeners there is a corn gluten product that acts as a pre-emergent if applied regularly.

Irrigation

Irrigation is an obvious issue but most people are just worried about making sure that everything gets watered. This is critical but not the only thing to be concerned about. People also need to remember that too much water can be a problem also. This is often a problem when shaded areas are being irrigated with sunny areas. To keep the sunny areas watered the shaded areas get too much water. This may require a complete revision of your irrigation system or turning off the irrigation for the shade and hand watering as needed.

A completely different problem is over extending your water supply. Don't design your system to the limit of the water pressure available. You may not be aware, but water meters are going to be required by 2011. Water meters lose water pressure and those systems designed too close to the limit will fail when they are installed. In addition, as a neighborhood matures and more houses are built, pressure drops. As a neighborhood matures the water mains calcify, pressure drops. A pressure drop causes unexpected dry spots that are difficult to correct without major changes.