

Outdoor design

Landscaping plan should follow guidelines

AP — When considering a landscape plan for your home, your plan might very well be different from your next-door neighbor's, even if your homes are nearly identical. That's because the tastes and lifestyle preferences of the owners do affect the decision-making process. Still, there are a few goal-specific rules and guidelines that should be applied to each site.

The first thing to consider is that the front of a home is different from the back, both physically and socially. For better or worse, the front yard is part of the larger community, while the back yard usually requires a private invitation.

The front is more formal, the back, less so. In addition, front yards are often lopsided, with the house, garage, driveway or entry door uncomfortably weighted to one side. And finally, the fronts of houses are usually dominated by hard lines, as viewed from the street. The line separating the yard from the foundation, the door from the walk and the vertical corners from the horizontal lawn all produce abrupt, severe edges.

A front-yard landscaping plan, there-

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fore, has several jobs to do. To begin, it must complement its surroundings — its neighborhood. Any striking departure from the norm should begin modestly near the street and then develop its full effect as it nears the house.

Above all, the front yard should be inviting, especially as you approach the front door. The plantings here should be chosen and placed so as to lead the visitor to the door and to focus attention there.

In addition to setting an inviting tone, these plantings should also break up the hard lines near the door. In practical terms, if the door waits at the end of a long walk, or driveway, the area near the door should be softened, to diminish that end-of-the-runway feel.

How are hard edges softened? By variety — specifically, by plants that vary in height, texture and color. The plantings near the door can be placed symmetrically, as when the sidewalk is centered on the property, or asymmetrically, as when the entry is off-center, right or left.

The same applies to a lopsided yard. If your house, garage or driveway hugs the left side, a prominent right-side grouping of plants can pull things back into balance. Similarly, the hard outside corners of a house can be obliterated by ornamental trees or shrubs, while the foundation line can be broken by shrubs, flowers and low-growing ground cover.

Side yards are transitional, both physically and visually. They either

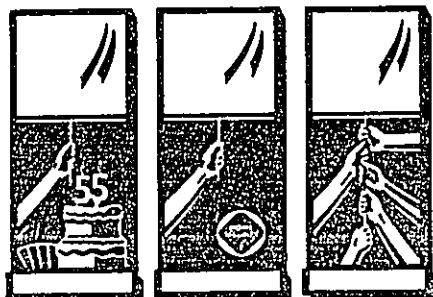
graft together the separate sensibilities of front yard and back yard or they deliberately separate them. When a side yard is wide and spacious, shade trees and evergreens make good punctuation points and function as good dividers. When side yards are narrow, shrubs and flowers can lead the eye toward the back yard.

While front-yard sidewalks are usually made of concrete, side-yard and backyard walkways can make good use of alternative materials.

Back yards are more casual. They can be cozy or structured. They can harbor Japanese gardens or sandboxes and tire swings. It all depends. If houses are like their owners, back yards are most like them. The plant selection should be less formal, with greater emphasis on variety and experimentation, and plant placement can be more relaxed — less orderly.

This is the place for wild clumps of tall grass, shade trees, vegetable gardens, fruited bushes, bird feeders, steppingstones, vine-covered arbors, a pool, horseshoe pits — it's your call.

Cyber from page 19



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For instance, you can request non-poisonous perennials suitable for zone 6 (that's where the minimum temperature averages minus 10 to zero degrees) that bloom all summer and are low maintenance. Punch that information into the Garden Encyclopedia program and it'll flash on screen 34 plant suggestions, including coral bells, hardy geraniums and a host of hostas.

If you want to narrow the search to plants with only purple blooms, the list drops to 10 plants. For red-only flowers, the list narrows to four.

Plants can also be searched by punching in a ZIP code.

Programs

The Better Homes and Garden program stands out not only for the pretty classical musical played in the background but the wide range of gardening tips it provides. There are garden layout suggestions, tips for each calendar month, plus a new quotation or tidbit of information every time the program is started. Among the many suggestions: Don't remove more than a third of the grass blade with each lawn mowing.

The landscape design programs — which include products like 3D Landscape, Key Home Gardener and Land-Designer — also provide databases of information as well as drawing materials to customize any landscape style. All use computer-aid design technology, or CAD, which is the same process that allows PC users to design cars or so-

Some provide design templates with a few ideas already sketched out as well as price estimators for equipment and supplies. A few, such as LandDesigner, allow you to "layer" your design with things like plants, structure and drainage.

One of the easiest, and perhaps most fun to use, is 3D Landscape. You start out by creating your design from a bird's-eye view, dragging a gazebo, deck or plant icons into your design based on specified property lines. But click on the program's 3D button and you can see the design in three dimensions, from several angles.

The program also lets you set the slope of your land, shows you how large your plants will grow over specified years and even illustrates how shadows will fall on your yard during a typical sunny day and at various times of the year.

Do professionals see these products as a threat to their businesses?

Joe Albizo, a spokesman for the National Association of Nurserymen, doesn't think so.

"Landscape projects can be very overwhelming. You have to think about shade patterns... drainage, the ecology of the site.

"Generic information just doesn't suffice. Most people will need to talk with a professional for the big projects."

But Tamara Attard, president and chief executive officer of Multicore, which puts out the Better Homes and Garden software, says future programs will allow individuals to "talk" with