



PLANNING YOUR GARDEN FOR FUNCTION

When visualizing a garden, it is easy to get swept away by images of glorious flowers or vast green grassy expanses, but before planting, it is wise to think about function first. Just as a house is organized into rooms for various activities, a good landscape design organizes outdoor spaces by their anticipated uses.

Functional areas can be separated into “rooms” with shrubs, walls, half walls, fences, arbors or trellises. Think about how large the areas need to be to function properly. Don’t plan them too small—remember that scale appears different outdoors than it does inside.

Consider the ways you will use your space and what you want that space to do for you. Depending on your needs and lifestyle, your garden areas might include:

A reception area

Just as a foyer serves as an entryway into the home, a stoop or front patio serves as an outside reception area for guests to gather and converse. Plan on a large enough space to accommodate several people.

A space for entertaining
Most people want an outdoor space where they can dine and/or cook. Allow a minimum space of 20’ x 20’ to accommodate a table and chairs. Would you also like a fire pit or fireplace? Will you have large gatherings or smaller groups? Consider the views from the outdoor dining area. Do you want a fountain or water feature? What about other focal points? Is privacy or screening a concern? Is your planned entertainment area in full sun? Think about putting a roof overhead in the form of an arbor, gazebo, or a tree, to add shade and provide enclosure.

A space to play

Consider any children’s play equipment needed and the space that will require. Also think about the playing surface—sod, bark, sand, shredded rubber, etc. Do you want to be able to see the play area from the house or do you want it to be hidden? Do you need to fence in all or part of the yard for your pets? What about your own outdoor activities? Is a pool in your plans?

A space for utilitarian items

Plan a space for items such as trashcans, firewood, compost piles, etc. Although you’ll probably want these areas to be

out of sight, they still need to be convenient—plan access to them with walkways wide enough to accommodate a wheelbarrow and other equipment you’ll be moving back and forth.



A place for storage

Do you need extra space for garden tools, mowers, etc.? Besides providing storage space, a shed can also be an ornamental feature. Place it in an accessible area and consider dressing it up with plantings, trellises, or window boxes.

Perennial and mixed borders

Plan perennial beds wide enough so that plants are not just lined up in rows, but narrow enough so that they can be accessed for maintenance purposes—about four feet is a good width if your bed consists of only flowers. If you are doing a mixed border with shrubs and trees, you’ll want your beds to be wider. Plan proper spacing to allow for the

mature size of trees, shrubs, grasses and groundcovers so pruning is not necessary. Bear in mind the sun, moisture and soil conditions in the area you are considering.



Think about how much time you have to spend on maintenance of your space. If time is at a premium, you might want to consider a lower maintenance shrub bed rather than an ambitious, large-scale flower garden. If water is a concern, choose more drought tolerant plants such as sedum, catmint, candytuft or Russian sage. Many ornamental grasses are also drought tolerant, and they are very low maintenance.

A specialty garden

Accommodate interests or

hobbies with a specialty garden. Place a kitchen or herb garden near the back door where plants will be convenient for harvesting. Maybe you have room for a small orchard or fruit trees, which can be very attractive. If space is an issue, an espaliered plant takes up very little space. You might want a separate area for a cutting garden so you can feel free to harvest at will without destroying the look of your flower borders.

Those who have an interest in birds or butterflies may want to plant a garden especially for them, complete with feeders and a water source. A well-placed bench will provide a delightful place to sit and enjoy this type of garden.

Consider the views

Do you want to borrow a pretty view into a neighbor's yard or do you want to screen out an unsightly one?

Can you utilize your side yard?

Side yards can be more than just

a path. Depending on the exposure, they can be turned into a lovely sitting area, an herb garden, a shady retreat, etc.

Are you making the best use of your front yard?

With a little planning, the front yard can also do double duty as an entertaining space. Screening near the sidewalk will make the front area more private and easier to utilize.

Provide access to "rooms"

Think also about circulation through your spaces. Plan for walkways to provide a way into the various areas. For an access path to be functional, it must be a minimum of four feet wide, and five feet is preferable.

As tempting as it is to rush out and plant with the first warm spring weather, take a little time first to consider what you want your landscape to do for you. You'll be glad you did.