

Structure in the Landscape

A landscape can be developed in a variety of ways. One of the easiest is to think about it in the same sense as a house. At its most basic a house consists of walls, ceiling and a floor. A landscape has the same elements but instead of (or in addition to) concrete, wood or metal, the walls, ceiling and floor in a landscape will be made primarily of plants.

The structure of a landscape is usually established with a combination of manmade and plant materials. A landscape can be a single cozy area or a series of “rooms” in a large expanse. It could be an estate-sized garden or a tabletop fairy garden. For a small cozy area, the structural elements are usually small scale and the plants medium to fine-textured. Larger expanses will accommodate larger, bolder materials and plants.

Walls can be made of low to very tall plants that grow in an upright, shrubby form, in addition to the more traditional fences and stone walls. In the right environment a waterfall or tall fountain can create an unusual, dramatic wall.

Shrubs growing at eye level or below define space and create enclosure. Larger shrubs are commonly used to define space and block unwanted views. Dense evergreens provide year round screening, offering the most privacy. Deciduous plants have bare branches during the winter, creating semi-transparent screens and allowing glimpses into other spaces.

Trees extend above the walls, forming the garden ceiling. Ceilings can be suggested or created with medium to tall trees, large vase-shaped shrubs or pergolas. Overhanging trees, pergolas with lattice tops, and trellises topped with vines permit water, air and light to filter through to the plants below.

The mature habit of a tree should dictate what variety is selected for landscape ceilings or walls. Some of the nicest trees for enclosure have a vase-shaped growth habit, such as Honey Locust. Consider also the quality of the tree canopy. A honey locust has a vase-shaped, light and airy canopy while the canopy of a Norway maple is dense, heavy and broad spreading. Each will create a different effect in the landscape and also will determine what kind of plants can be grown on the lower levels.

The landscape floor is usually composed of low plants, paving and mulches. Ground treatment, whether manmade or plant material, is fundamental to the structure of the garden as a whole. It establishes a base from which the rest of the garden grows. It outlines both visually and spatially the places where people will move through the landscape. Paving is solid, leads the eye strongly and suggests to people where they should walk or sit.

Structural elements may be seasonal or permanent. Annuals and herbaceous perennials grow and create structure in summer but disappear in winter. Leaves disappear from deciduous trees. Evergreen leaves may change color or shape with the seasons but

otherwise remain in place. Hardscape features such as paving, walls, fences and buildings can remain virtually unchanged throughout the seasons for years on end.

Smaller freestanding garden structures are semi-permanent and can be moved around the landscape as desired. Trellises, arbors, seats, and benches all form moveable walls. Container gardens combine sculpture and plant material and are especially useful in places where plants won't otherwise grow.

As with a house, once the basic structure is complete, the details are filled in. Accents of color and texture in the form of smaller plants, flowers, pottery, sculpture, cushions and other outdoor soft furnishings fill in and refine the personal ambience of a landscape.

Unlike completed architecture, a landscape is continually in transition. It is an evolving, living design with no "final" version.

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