

Do-It-Yourself Home Landscape Design

By Mark Gilliland for The Hudson Independent

Yes! This year will be different! This year you've promised yourself to undertake a complete yard makeover – get rid of the old leggy Rhodos and chewed up Arbotvitae. But you feel the need for “instant” landscape design training to really succeed.

Reference books are available at all levels of detail on topics ranging from landscape design history to plant horticulture, “hardscape” design (ex: patios and pergolas) to color palettes and bloom times. Spend a hour in the Gardening section of Barnes & Noble flipping thru some titles to see what you respond to in terms of content, language and layout. Too many to buy at once? Try Amazon.com's used books link for a steep discount.

Here are a few authors I recommend: Gordon Hayward, esp. "Garden Paths" and "Stone in the Garden"; Richard Darke; Tracy DiSabata-Aust (“The Well Tended Perennial Garden”); and John Brookes ("Garden Masterclass" – a book which covers the whole gambit of design ideas, along with its companion "Garden Design Workbook" which is a step-by-step guide to imagining, creating and drawing landscape plans.)

Subscribe to magazines that will give you visual ideas as well as present selected “plants of interest” each month. My favorite general purpose publications are "Fine Gardening" and "Garden Design.”

Visit various gardens in person – those of friends, neighbors and historical sites such as Stonecrop in Cold Spring, Kykuit in the Tarrytown area, or the esplanade along Manhattan's west side from 49th Street south to the Battery which contains world-class urban gardens including the Irish Famine Memorial, the Holocaust Memorial Garden and the 9/11 Memorial Gardens. Don't forget the New York Botanical Garden or the Garden Conservancy's Open Days program for access during the growing season to exquisite private gardens.

Some of my personal design inspirations include: Andy Goldsworthy whose sculptural work is often quite temporary – like stacked ice forming an egg-shaped cairn which slowly melts under the winter sun. His installation work is at Storm King and at SUNY Purchase. Fernando Caruncho (the book: "Gardens of Paradise - The Gardens of Fernando Caruncho"). Then there is a series called "Small Books of Great Gardens" from The Vendome Press. The two that I refer to often: "Majorelle" (an exquisite garden in Morocco) and "Alhambra" (in Moorish Spain).

Research online (and via books) garden themes such as Japanese meditation gardens, butterfly gardens, water gardens, shade gardens, moon gardens (white, evening blooming, scented flowers), rain gardens, and so forth.

For ideas about plant materials, find a few nurseries around your area and walk thru them periodically during the growing season. See what's being sold and what's blooming when. Typically plants will be divided into sun vs. shade, by trees & shrubs vs. perennials vs.

annuals, sometimes into deer "proof", "native" and so on. Study the plant tags! Its a fast way to get both a visual and a horticultural education.

Lasdon Arboretum in Somers maintains a "synoptic garden" - a winding set of paths which have specimens of a over one hundred types of shrubs, several cultivars for each species, all organized in alphabetical order by botanical name. A stroll thru this garden is a fascinating way to see and compare plants during all four seasons.

In thinking about gardens and landscape, think about desired use: shade trees, wind breaks, flowering trees for "eye appeal", cutting gardens for flowers, foundation beds, veggie gardens, play areas, compost area, patios, walkways and so on. Consider who will be using the yard/gardens - your children and pets? Wildlife? This influences plant selection and placement, for sure! And who will be caring for the landscape? Mowing lawn, watering beds and raking leaves is one thing. Tending a perennial border is yet another level of commitment!

Don't be afraid to try things out! Experiment. Garden design is about learning new things – learning about your plants, about the seasons, about wildlife, and sometimes about how to kill a plant or two. A good gardener reads up about a plant before selecting it for a specific location, but they often try and “push” a plant into a less-than-ideal spot simply because it will look good there.

Soon you'll be ready to discover Gertrude Jekyl's notion of "genius loci" - sense of place. The land will speak to you as you study it, and will naturally invoke design ideas in harmony with the geography, the climate, the ecology and the history of the place. That is when you've touched the heart of Mother Earth.

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