

Identify and Create Your Garden Theme

Say goodbye to farm faux pas by decluttering your garden. Learn how to develop a theme for your gardens.

By Rick Gush

In This Article ... What Is a Theme? The Power of Repetition Aesthetic Mistakes to Avoid (and 2 Tricks!) Find Ways to Manage Clutter Will We Still Ignore All This Advice? 5 Transplanting Tips Make a Nursery: 4 Tips

Portuguese Landscaping: Retail nursery workers in California during the '60s used this ignorant term to describe the haphazard way that most homeowners planted their gardens.

“One plant of everything they liked in the nursery,” the savants would snicker.

What they were referring to was the way that too many different elements in a garden create a sense of clutter that prevents the garden from achieving the calm and elegant serenity that a good garden design can provide.

Actually, gardens in Portugal tend to be the opposite of cluttered: They are generally simple arrangements with repeated structural elements and plant use and an occasional brilliant flash of color that collectively creates the idyllic calmness of a great garden.

By contrast, what American gardeners usually produce might--most politely--be called a “cottage garden” effect, with a cacophony of materials, textures and colors, splashed awkwardly across the demarcated rectangle that is the yard.

This hodgepodge arrangement is the natural way our gardens evolve. With a little foresight and self-control, any garden or farm can be transformed into a more powerful presentation. This forced calmness can make any farm garden more impressive and beautiful.

Obviously, a good garden provides enjoyment for the residents, but improving a farm garden can have beneficial effects on a farm business as well.

Visitors will automatically perceive the whole farm as more powerful, more vibrant, and more successful if it has attractive and well-maintained grounds. If a small farmer derives some of their income from on-site sales of their products, a more organized and powerful-looking garden will give customers a greater sense of confidence in the farmer's products.

What Is a Theme?

People often think a garden is made up of just plants and trees, but the physical structures found in the garden are equal partners, and even the most tasteful plantings won't bring together a great garden if the buildings, fences and assorted structures of barns and outbuildings are themselves a grab-bag of styles.

5 Transplanting Tips

Transplanting isn't really so difficult, and the ability to make significant adjustments to existing trees and shrubs can have dramatic, positive results for an older yard.

With a reasonable amount of care, transplanters should average about a 75 percent success rate. Make sure to protect the trunk and any branches that might get damaged during the lifting process. Cut the tree back as much as 50 percent prior to digging, if possible.

The hardest work is digging the rootball. A good job here will make the move easier and the transplantee happier. Remember to plan the job according to how much weight you can move.

Use Vitamin B1 and light fertilizer both before and after digging. Once replanted, water enough to wet the soil, but do not give too much water for the first few weeks or months, unless the season is very dry.

A good idea is to dig in stages, say one-third at first, then another third in a month, and the final third a month later. This gradual digging lets the plant grow more functioning roots in the rootball area.

Choose the right season to transplant. Late fall or winter is the best transplanting season for most deciduous and

coniferous plants, but spring or summer is best for palms and evergreens like citrus.

Top On the other hand, structures made of similar construction materials and painted in a farm-wide color scheme present the perfect backdrop for a stunning planting arrangement.

The components of a garden are like the spices and ingredients of a recipe. Good cooks know that a delicious dish is most often created by combining only a few key ingredients and spices, while novice cooks often use too many different ingredients, adding this spice and that in a poorly targeted attempt to create a tasty combination. For example, marjoram might be a wonderful flavor, but it doesn't combine well with just anything; when mixed with too many other spices and flavors, it can easily be lost or produce awkward flavor combinations.

The same is true in gardens. The theme is like the recipe; a good balance of structural elements, paint colors and planting materials makes a great garden.

A garden theme, then, is a deliberately short list of desirable elements. What color will the buildings be? What color will the trim be? What structural materials will be favored? What trees will be used? Where will the shrubs be planted? What species will make up the bulk of the plantings, and what species will be the focal points?

Top

The Power of Repetition

The most effective tool in propagating a theme in a garden is the repetitive use of thematic elements. As delightful as a multitude of different and interesting species scattered about may be, a more homogenous garden is more relaxing and has a more powerful aspect. The same rule is true of the structural elements. A garden with a green fence, a white barn and a yellow house looks messier than a garden with all the structures painted according to a deliberate scheme.

Once a theme has been decided upon, it should be propagated. This means that if all the other outbuildings are painted white, it's a good idea to paint the new chicken coop white also. If some structures include different building materials, steps should be taken to de-emphasize the unlike-materials. A theme is usually not imposed instantly on a garden, rather it's found, nurtured and gradually propagated.

Certain pleasing elements within the existing garden are favored and encouraged, and other less appropriate elements are phased out. Propagating a theme is a gradual process.

Hardly anybody builds their dream garden from scratch; we usually inherit a mixed collection of buildings and plantings, then we proceed to modify the arrangement to suit our own needs. Imposing a theme on a farm garden and property is almost always a matter of figuring out ways to make all of the disparate elements in a farm garden more uniform.

A good exercise to use when evaluating one's garden is to take a walk around the yard.

Make a Nursery: 4 Tips

Because the worst-looking part of many gardens is the accumulated clutter of potted plants, making a deliberate nursery area is a great cleansing action that results in an instantly better looking garden.

We can't seem to stop collecting cute little plants in pots, but there's no reason that tendency should ruin our garden's potential. If at all possible, locate the nursery so it receives morning sun, as this is the most gentle light. Too much sun or too much shade are both bad for nurseries.

Keep a hose handy, preferably one for nursery use only. For zealots, an automated drip irrigation system is marvellous for potted plants.

Situate the planks or other bench structures so the pots sit high off the ground. This makes the plants easier to care for and observe.

Shadecloth or other overhead coverings can also protect the nursery from falling debris. Side panels can protect from prevailing winds.

TopNote each of the different elements, both plants and structures, and ask if each of those elements should be part of the desired theme. If so, determine if there other locations in the garden where it might be appropriate to consider using that element again. In other words, if you see some bricks you like, think about where else in the garden bricks might be added.

Keep the same farm of mind when observing and selecting plants. Unless you're building a botanical garden, selecting too many plant species is inappropriate. A powerful garden is made by resisting the collector's impulse; scattering our botanical discoveries around the garden may amuse the horticultural explorer in us, but it won't make our gardens look nice.

Top

Aesthetic Mistakes to Avoid (and 2 Tricks!)

When attempting to build a more powerful garden, there are a few traps to avoid. One common aesthetic "mistake" gardeners often make is using too many commonly available, pre-made materials. Custom-made elements are always preferable. In the case of trellises, using the inexpensive trellises available at big box store nurseries may save a few dollars, but custom-built trellises--painted according to the thematic plan--will be infinitely more pleasing.

Storage sheds create a similar problem; inexpensive storage sheds built from a kit will always look exactly like inexpensive storage sheds and are unlikely to add to the charm of any farm. There's something about the sight of a cheap storage shed that makes visitors think, "Hey, I saw one just like that on sale for \$129 last week!" That's hardly a thought appropriate while visiting a breathtaking garden. On the other hand, a cute little, custom-built storage shed easily adds a great deal of charisma to a small farm garden.

Clever gardeners know how to paint an inexpensive trellis to quickly create a custom piece, and many gardeners use decorative coverings to mask their cheap storage sheds. Very clever gardeners would use this shed-disguising project as an opportunity to propagate their theme, perhaps constructing their trellises from the same wood that shows on the house eaves.

The two main tricks used in propagating a theme in a garden are:

transplanting misplaced trees and plants, and making a place to hide the clutter. It's sad to see a yard held hostage by a pre-existing plant growing in the wrong place, and nothing brings down a garden more quickly than the sight of a rusty bicycle and a pile of unused garden pots.

Most gardeners are reluctant to transplant trees and shrubs in their yards. The task sometimes seems both physically and botanically difficult, and gardeners can be unsure as to whether the transplanted plants will survive.

Often, the transplanted tree's survival is actually of little real importance because removing a tree that is blocking a viewpoint automatically provides a more powerful garden arrangement. Transplanting isn't really difficult (see sidebar for tips), but too casual an approach isn't best either. Yes, a bunch of dirt must be dug with the roots, and yes, moving that big mass of dirt and plant can be cumbersome and awkward. But, if you have a tractor or can borrow one from a neighbor, most transplantings, even of large trees, can be accomplished with reasonable ease. The results can be stupendous.

Top

Find Ways to Manage Clutter

Most of us are messy garden managers, and we strew our patios, porches, and exterior walls with all those extra toys and tools with which we amuse ourselves.

We have a tendency to accumulate things of variable usefulness, from the old boat motor we're going to fix up some day to the rusty bicycles that don't get used much to the half-used bags of barbecue briquettes and the inevitable collection of old garden pots.

Having acknowledged our own slovenliness, the first step to a more pleasing garden is simply hiding the clutter. As far as hiding the clutter is concerned, this can be done by creating deliberate areas, out of view of the garden center, where the accumulated debris of life can be inoffensively stored. Behind the barn, inside a shed or along the north wall, any garden will offer a variety of potential choices. A short section of new fence can create a new angle with any building--and a great deal of material can be concealed behind a fence.

Hide the clutter! It's a simple plan, but it works remarkably well. Just cleaning up all the distracting elements will automatically make any garden more attractive, restful and welcoming.

Hiding the clutter of a collection of plants in pots is a slightly different matter, but the positive results are equally impressive. The facts are that almost all groupings of potted plants look messy. Some of the plants may grow and flower abundantly, but the overall results will be mixed at best. Removing all the clutter groups of potted plants from the porches and patios can have an amazing effect on a garden. The best place for a collection of potted plants is in a dedicated nursery area, which is a very easy thing to construct. You'll need only a few planks mounted in a nice area that receives morning sun (see sidebar for simple instructions).

Top

Will We Still Ignore All This Advice?

It's amusing how easy it is to preach the virtues of powerful garden design through simplicity and uniformity, but for most of us this is just a dream, a reality that's almost impossible to put into effect. A whole range of different natural instincts within us push us towards cacophonous gardens. We're cheap and we have a hard time resisting "cost-effective" solutions. We're suckers for a puppy and the little almond tree in the nursery looks just like a puppy to us.

We're lazy, we lead incredibly busy lives and it takes an extreme focus to accomplish most projects, which means that they get postponed. Most of us love our gardens and have very romantic imaginations; this means that a garden project conceived is almost as good as a garden project completed.

The homeowner may proudly announce "We're putting the koi pond and Japanese garden over there." As they say this they can fully imagine the pond and garden in all its glory, but the guest will only see the patch of weeds that the space really is at the present moment.

It's unlikely that our gardens will ever develop to their full potential, but even taking a few steps in the right direction can bring forth a new, more pleasing garden. The Camelot that is a perfectly realized garden can remain our unobtainable dream.

Portuguese Landscaping ... don't we wish.

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Top

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