

Gardening in Small Spaces

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June 29, 2003



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County Extension: Careful use of color and limited use of garden accessories can make a small space interesting without appearing too cluttered.

Gardens are getting smaller and smaller. As land gets more expensive, some people choose to spend their money on a larger house on a very small lot. Others buy condos or townhouses with tiny patios and a few plantings near the front door. Retirees are ready to downsize everything... house, garden and the work their upkeep demands.

Whatever the size of green space one has, it is possible to create an outdoor area for family living, privacy and pleasure. In a small garden, each detail is important. Plant selection, color themes, fences and paths, and use of garden ornaments are different in the smaller landscape.

The temptation to fill every square foot of space with a plant should be avoided. In small gardens, less is more! A few spectacular plants of a compatible color theme are more likely to provide a tasteful palette.

Place plants in layers. Instead of a large bushy tree, select a dwarf one that flowers in spring or one with a slender shape that is evergreen. At its feet, plant low-growing azaleas or other shrubs, perennials, annuals or groundcovers. Take care to choose plants that do not

reproduce by runners or seeds. Aggressively invasive groundcovers such as ivy, Boston fern, and the old spreading type of liriopse should be reserved for large expanses of shaded areas. Near patios and courtyards, other types of ferns and hostas will add color and texture variation.

Space in a small flower bed can do double duty if one plants daffodils and other spring blooming bulbs down deep and cool-season annual flowers such as pansies, petunias, alyssum, and other shallow-rooted flowers in the upper layer of soil. After the bulbs bloom and the foliage begins to turn yellow, the annuals will begin to bloom, hiding the now unsightly bulb foliage.

Flowers of one or two colors, placed against backgrounds of various shades of green foliage, catch the eye in a small space, whereas flowers of all hues and shapes jostle for attention. Color themes might be pink and red, blue and purple, yellow and gold, white and silver or contrasting ones such as purple and yellow or blue and white.

As with the use of color, too many garden accessories can clutter the small space. It is best to use one primary accessory... bench or chairs, decorative pot, arbor, trellis, water feature or statue. Too much garden art could overwhelm the plants.

The homeowner with no planting area at all may still garden. Window boxes and hanging baskets can be used to add beauty. Tomatoes and lettuces can be grown in bags of potting soil, while herbs are ideal for planting in ornamental pots and planters. Dwarf rootstocks now enable the gardener to plant lemon trees, even pears and apples, in large tubs on a sunny patio.

The entryway of your home sets the first impression. It may be a welcoming oasis from the sun-baked street or driveway, or so hidden the visitor has difficulty finding the front door. If there is only a small planting area at the entrance, the homeowner can create an inviting look with a small tree such as a crepe myrtle that offers shade and flowers in summer and an interesting bark sculpture in winter. Make sure you select a small variety that will not push up against the house as it matures. Resist filling the space with large shrubs.

Vines trailing around a lamppost or on a trellis against the wall of the house make a good accent, as do seasonal annuals planted in the flowerbed around the tree. An arbor for a climbing rose or clematis can frame the entry roof line. Where there are only concrete walks around the entry, the look can be softened and brightened with a multitude of flowers, small palms and vines planted in pots.

These principles of gardening in small spaces solve the dilemma of those who might miss their former residences with expanses of lawn, towering trees and large varieties of flowers and shrubs, and the dilemma of older folks who want only a small area where they can continue to create beauty without taxing their reduced energy levels.

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