

Theme Gardens: A Reflection of the Gardener

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The challenge for most gardeners is creating a design. If you hit this roadblock, clarify a theme and it will help you determine a layout and identify plants.

Unfortunately, most garden books only vaguely refer to the concept of a theme and rarely explain what it means, leaving the definition defined by each gardener. Because people make gardens for different reasons, the key factor related to creating a garden is to do what pleases you. So, the question is: "Why do you want to create a garden?" The answer is your theme.

A theme can vary from a collection of plants that are referred to as "heritage" or mentioned in the Bible, collected during a gardener's travel, collectively mimic a favorite piece of handwork such as a quilt, or consist of an array of selective color, vegetables, or herbs, or a specific season, mood, or artistic style.

A Theme of Season

Most gardens are created to peak at a certain time of the year or day. One example, a spring garden, is ideal for a woodland space. It works well for gardens shaded by deciduous trees, because the flowering plants take advantage of the sun that reaches the ground before the trees leaf out. This type of theme attracts resident and migrating birds, luring them with insects that flock to the early flowers. On the other hand, a summer garden requires at least four or more hours of direct sunlight. For people that have summers off or tend to spend more time outdoors in the summer, it makes sense to plant this type of garden.

In contrast, an autumn garden while it can include frost-tolerant flowers usually has as its primary focus the striking color of foliage. And, a winter garden can simply be the by-product of any of the other seasonal themes. The elements used to create interest are structures (both natural and built) that retain their shape and other physical characteristics all year. This type of garden is most beautiful in the winter, because its framework is clear, having no foliage or flowers, to compete with or obscure it.

Another garden similar to the seasonal theme is a garden that comes alive at a specific time of day. This style for example could be a moonlight or evening garden which makes use of light colors, intense fragrance, strategic lighting, lacy foliage, and other elements that provide interest during dusk and darkness.

A Theme of Mood

A garden's mood can vary as much as its theme. It can refer to the visitor's mood, when a design is intended to provoke specific emotions such as nostalgia, awe, happiness, amusement, or serenity. Water gardens and water features typically provoke a sense of relaxation and serenity. Another definition of this style of garden refers to the garden's "feel of space." In other words, it provokes a feeling of drama, romance, or secrecy. When considering a design that creates mood, be aware that most people tend to experience similar reactions to color and are uncomfortable when the space is too enclosed.

This year's Shepherd Park Garden Tour in the northwest DC neighborhood bordering Rock Creek Park was defined by themes. Pictured with this story are several selections from that tour. Each home garden on the tour was defined by its overall focus and feel – both how the garden is experienced and perceived by the visitor and how it was envisioned by the gardener.

Pictured at left is the "English Garden" of Philip McClain and Phillip Scribner. This front garden features many deer-resistant plants. The 1937 stone Tudor house is a perfect partner to the English look.

Pictured below is the "Romantic Garden" of Corinna and Larry Posner. The arden has a European-tough and boasts a rich palette of textures, colors, and blooms.





Pictured at left is the “Garden of Rooms” of Tamar Hendel. This side garden with its Wisteria, Clematis, and Rose arbor divides the swimming pool from a formal boxwood garden. The yard was enjoyed by the homeowners four children and is now a playground for her grandchildren as well. It contains spaces for private reflection as well as sports and gatherings. Befitting an art instructor, Tamar delights in the contrast of plant textures and colors.

Pictured below is the “Intimate Garden” of Robert Spagnoletti and Bernard Lewis. According to the homeowners, it “provides a serene respite from the hustle and bustle of the city.” Pictured here is a Japanese maple they are training to espalier along the garage wall. Even in this small space, they have created a comfortable and inviting space. By day, it is full of interesting color combinations and, by night, it is highlighted by a newly installed lighting system.

A Theme of Color

While a theme of season, mood, or activity are viable designs, additional options could be a collection, natural community, or edible flowers. Some choose color themes that coordinated with their homes or appeal to their senses. Others go with the latest trends from blazing hot tropical hues to cool, relaxing tones.

Still, for the years of 2006-7, the theme in Virginia is color; specifically, red, white, and blue. In 2007, the commonwealth will mark the 400th anniversary of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the Americas. The 18-month-long commemoration begins in May 2006 and features educational programs, cultural events, fairs, and various live and broadcast entertainments sponsored by Virginia and cities and towns across the commonwealth. (See article on page 25.)

Your Theme

Whether a collection of varieties of one plant, such as roses, or a mix of different genres, don't let the roadblock of a design hinder your gardening effort. Clarify a theme, determine a layout, identify plants, and make your garden theme a true reflection of you and your interests. 🌿

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