



Harmony and Style in the Garden

PROFESSIONAL TIPS FOR ACHIEVING THE LANDSCAPE OF YOUR DREAMS

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Chicago-based landscape architect Brian Kay gets right to the point when it comes to talking about garden design.

“Allow us to clear up a landscaping myth right away,” he says in the introduction to his book, *Yard and Garden Makeovers: Your Guide to Creating a Beautiful, Logical Landscape* (2008, Ball Publishing, www.ballpublishing.com). “Good garden design is not limited to the rich and famous. No matter what size your property, the design process is the same. We can’t say it enough: Good design is for everyone.”

Kay and his father, George Kay, with whom he’s been designing residential landscapes since 1979, collaborated on the book, in which they share professional strategies for creating outstanding yards and gardens within practical limitations. “There is a logical process to achieving your personal landscape vision,” notes the design team. “With thoughtful planning, the enjoyment of a warm, welcoming entrance, a wonderful patio setting, and the beauty of plants and nature can be attained by all.”

Good garden design principles are timeless. What is the difference between landscapes that are uninspired and ones that are great? The designers contend that the differences are functionality, proportion, and a sense of belonging. “Each element in the landscape contributes to a grand sense of harmony and affects the beauty and balance of your garden,” says Kay. “The layout and location of each one—patio, walk, wall, sculpture, planter, bench, grill, furniture, play set, pool, gazebo, storage building—must have a meaningful place in your landscape.”

But how to achieve it? There’s no need to guess, says Kay. Here are some simple principles to bear in mind as you embark on your landscape renovation:

Focus on function.

How do you use your yard? Answering this question is the first step in determining how to arrange the hard surfaces and planting areas, so think about your lifestyle. Do you play with kids in your backyard? When you’re walking a visitor to her car, where do you pause for that parting conversation? Remember, “form follows function” is the time-honored essence of design. But even when your yard is functional, it can still be beautiful.

Consider the hardscape.

Once you figure out where your walls, patios, and structures will be placed, you’ll be left with planting areas. The subtle balance between hardscape and planting pockets is what creates the sense of meaning in your landscape.

Plan the composition of plants.

Which plants are most important? Start with big plants and then move to shrubs, vines, ground covers, and beds of flowers.

Shade trees and large evergreens are tremendously important to the vibe of a landscape—they add warmth, depth, and a comforting feeling of enclosure, not to mention a cooling breeze on a hot summer day. But because they take the longest to mature, you’ll want to start with them first.

Strike the right proportion and add depth.

Where will each plant thrive? The answer is another question: How big does the plant get? Think long-term when you plant, especially with trees. Avoid planting too close to the house, lest you have to butcher your beautiful tree in a few years. Learn the mature height and width of your trees and plants before you place them in the ground.

Create focal points and enhance views.

What do you see when you look out your windows? If you’re on a large property, you may look out on a beautiful wooded area or an attractive open space, which may not require any enhancement. But if you’re on a smaller lot with neighbors close at hand, unsightly views can be plentiful. Rather than planting everything so close to the house that you can’t see it when indoors, arrange your plants to improve your views from inside, and your landscape will look better from every angle.

Match the landscape style to your house’s architectural style. Does your home have a distinctive architectural style, such as Greek Revival, Classic Farmhouse, Mediterranean, or Victorian, to name a few? If so, you’re fortunate indeed, as fewer and fewer homes have architectural integrity or style. If the design of your home is symmetrical, it may lend itself to a formal landscape. If it’s contemporary, large architectural or tropical plantings may suit its style. Consider the overall impact of the design—it will be stronger if you’re consistent throughout.

Maintain your privacy.

Only you can determine how much privacy you need. Feelings range from “I like being able to see the cars go by” to “I don’t want to talk to my neighbor every time I go outside.” If you plant along your property line, you can feel comfortable in your own space and screen objectionable views. But privacy plantings should be creatively placed to do their job yet avoid sending the message: “Keep out!”

Avoid making mistakes.

Unlike the construction of a home, everything doesn’t have to be done at once. Take your time, live in your space, and consider your options as you develop a master plan that can be executed in phases if necessary. The Kays’ book—filled with accessible, practical, and creative tips for a stunning residential landscape—is a great tool to help you achieve your goals. ■