



An Elegant *Escape*

TEN DESIGN TIPS FOR CREATING A STYLISH BACKYARD RETREAT

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Doesn't everyone dream of a tranquil place to escape the demands of everyday life? I remember for me it began around the age of 5 in a makeshift "house" created by my carpenter dad with a set of sawhorses and a sheet of plywood draped with old chenille bedspreads. Inside that simple space, I staged art experiments, tea parties, and sleepovers with my Shirley Temple dolls, all in my own imagined universe.

Garden writer Debra Prinzing explores grown-up sanctuaries in her new book, *Stylish Sheds and Elegant Hideaways: Big Ideas for Small Backyard Destinations*. She visited "close to 100

sheds in city gardens, suburban backyards, and quiet country fields," Prinzing says. "Some were elaborate and luxurious; others delightfully modest. But in as little as 100 square feet, I saw some amazing possibilities for private garden retreats."

Twenty-eight of the country's most personal and serene spaces are featured in an armchair journey that takes us from New York to East Hampton, Seattle to San Diego, and Atlanta to Santa Cruz, beautifully captured by Seattle photographer William Wright. With sample plans for building a shed, advice on the practicalities of decorating it, and intriguing stories of the

backyard philosophers who inhabit the ones in this book, there are infinite ideas to explore, depending on your space and ambition. Here are some things to consider as you begin planning your own stylish shed:

1. Check local building codes for zoning guidelines.

Sheds are usually categorized as an “accessory building” or “temporary building.” There may be a maximum size (often 100 to 200 square feet) under which you can build a backyard shed without a permit. Adding electricity, water, or other utilities will likely require a building permit. Be sure to ask how close to the property line or main residence you are allowed to build.

2. Identify the activities that draw you outdoors.

Are you creating art, making music, writing poetry, growing flowers, playing with children, stargazing, entertaining friends, or meditating? Virtually any personal passion can find a home in a small but distinct garden shed.

3. Consider the shed’s architectural role in the landscape.

Is it a design focal point or intentionally hidden from view? Will its outer walls support vines and climbing roses? Or will the shed be a backdrop for displaying flowerpots or artwork? Will it camouflage an unsightly view? Is it for pure function or pure folly—or a little of both?

4. Choose its placement in the landscape. Where will you site the pavilion, potting shed, or garden house? Can you orient it to allow sunlight to stream through the windows and French doors? Or will it be nestled beneath a shade tree to provide a cool summer respite? Is the ground level enough to accommodate the structure or will you need to excavate or add fill?

5. Think carefully about the interiors. So many people build architectural wonders and leave the inner spaces looking rather ordinary. Treat the interiors as you would any room of your house. One couple in Austin, Texas, built a teahouse to echo the measurements of their dining room, because to them, it had comfortable proportions.

What about the walls? It’s fine to expose the rafters and studs, but can you paint them or mount shelves and hooks for displaying collections? A San Diego gardener lined the walls of her potting shed with pegboard, where she hung antique gardening tools as art.

6. Add home-like details that complement those of your primary residence. Windows should be operable so you can adjust temperatures, create ventilation, and—most important—hear the sounds of your garden while inside. As with your home, make sure the doorway linking your “inner

sanctum” with the “outdoor world” is symbolic of shelter, safety, and haven. Don’t settle for an ordinary door from a big-box home center when you can find something special. A salvaged door, especially one with multipaned glass, is a nice choice. Coat it with a brilliant color or allow it to weather with time.

7. This is an outdoor structure, so practical elements come in handy. It’s okay if you have a cement floor, but consider staining it with an accent color and adding a drain in the center for easy cleanup of gardening projects. Shed floors can be finished with wooden planks, vinyl tile, terra cotta pavers, flagstone, wall-to-wall carpeting, or colored concrete. We’ve even seen sheds elevated on stilts, making them feel like grown-up tree houses.

8. Give yourself a work surface. Add a counter or potting bench, allowing ample depth to accommodate stacks of terra cotta pots or a row of gardening books. Are there enough shelves overhead or storage cabinets underneath? Cover the countertops in a durable material, like copper or galvanized metal sheeting. One Seattle gardener found a discarded bank of classroom cupboards complete with countertop and storage bins—voilà! It is the perfect potting bench for her garden house.

9. Add ornamentation. Artwork—inside and out—will adorn your sweet retreat and make it a personal expression of your style. The freedom of moving this private room outdoors means that anything goes, including mirrors, stained glass, vintage artifacts, retro pottery, hanging plants, birdhouses, a weather-vane, chandeliers, your personal collections, and more.

For More Creative Inspiration, Read:

*Stylish Sheds and Elegant Hideaways:
Big Ideas for Small Backyard Destinations*

By Debra Prinzing
Photography by William Wright Photography

10. Make it a space that transforms your mood. Even if your shed is mainly home to your gardening projects, designate one corner for R&R. Include a bench with cushions or a wicker chair and a good reading lamp (of course, this means electricity), a desk for catching up on correspondence, or a spot for a small tea party. Remember, the object is to create a secret destination that nurtures your spirit and feeds your soul, allowing you the freedom to celebrate life and take a break from the world at large. ■