

Educating the Gardener's Eye

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A few pointers for touring area gardens

Garden tour time is upon us! Homeowners throughout the country have spent months preparing to open their private realm to the public. Often these events benefit a worthy charity.

We visitors are excited to see a variety of places and to experience another's garden ideas. Much of the conversation often revolves around plant names, Latin and common. You may also hear discussions such as "I like this but not that," or "How much help do you think they have?" or "Why would they put that plant here?" or "Let me tell you where I saw this before."

All this is well and good. But when you visit a garden site, taking a bit of time to educate your eye will help you analyze why the design was planned as it is and how you can interpret these ideas into your own landscape.

Let's start with the most basic layout. Where does the house sit in relationship to the property? Is it off to one side overlooking the yard or a viewpoint or is it showcased on center stage?

As you approach, is it evident where the main entrance is? What factors did the designer use to lead your eye there? If you are lucky enough to have access into the home, notice if certain windows frame specific views.

When outside, look at the exterior materials, e.g. bricks or wood. Do they relate to materials used on the pathways or other structures on the property? Also notice the proportions of the garden beds to the size of the house. Is it pleasing to your eye?

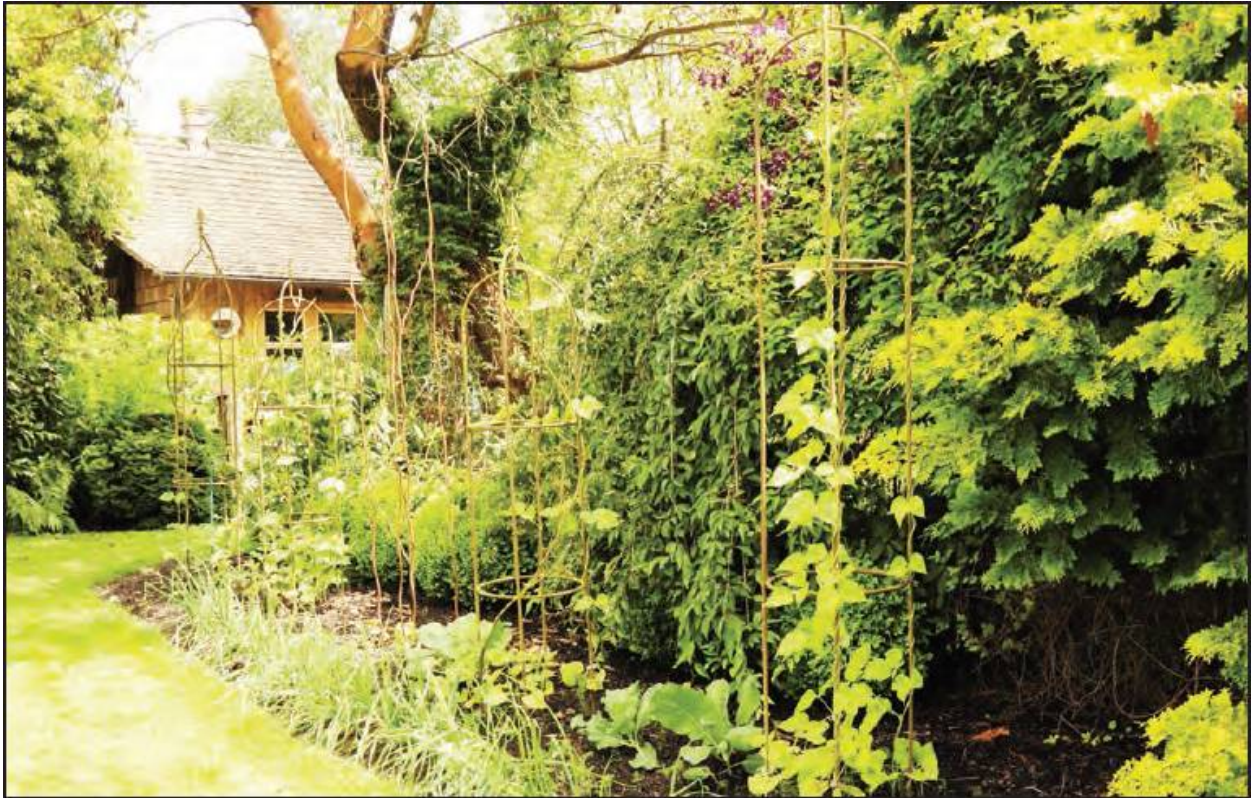
Back out on the property, find north and orient yourself to the compass points. This will allow you to see how the sun travels across the landscape and help you understand how plant choices were made based on shade and sun exposure. Gardens generally look their best in the morning or late afternoon when direct sun isn't beating straight down. Factor this into the scheduling of your visit if possible.

Analyze what zone the garden is in. If a property map is available, see if different areas are named. Notice if the garden areas flow from one to the next, whether they are exposed or contained or just pockets in a sea of lawn. How well does the overall plan fit together?

In looking more closely at the garden areas, are they quite similar or does each have an individual personality or function? Perhaps one area is to stroll through while another is a spot to sit, relax and contemplate. One could be in shade, another in full sun.

Sniff the air to see the importance of fragrance in each area. Do you find any area either too large or too confined? Notice the shape of the bed edges. Are they straight or curved? Is it appropriate to the space?

Garden designs incorporate transitions in different ways. A change of pathway direction or materials, a gate or doorway, a hedge opening or staircase can all signal transitions. Do they work smoothly and gracefully? Are you beckoned to explore all of the spaces? How might you incorporate some of these ideas into your own garden?



A garden can be designed with visual surprises, such as a colorful rooftop succulent display or, instead of a bed of roses, you may find handcrafted supports guiding young beanstalks into the clouds. *Photo by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

As you move through different areas, notice what structures and ornamentation is included. Do they fit into the overall garden scheme or are they randomly placed along the route? Analyze if they add to the pleasure in the garden or distract from it. Are vines used on the structures or do they stand alone? Is this technique effective or happenstance?

Now we can home in on the plants. Some gardens provide plant lists that will make identification much easier. Do the individual plants and plant combinations flow with the overall garden design? Are they well placed in specific areas?

Often gardens are shown at peak bloom time so you might want to imagine what the garden might look like in a different season.



LEFT: Owners of gardens featured on a special tour welcome you to their private space. Respect their requests and take the time to say “thank you.” RIGHT: Comfortable shoes and a camera are necessities for a garden tour, according to David and Sally Harris of Mount Vernon, who toured this Samish Island garden, a home to many birds. *Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

If you analyze the bones of the design, which trees, shrubs or large perennials will add garden interest even in the winter months? What is the dominant color scheme and is the design formal, contemporary, casual or a combination? Are certain design elements repeated or is there a wide variety?

Once you have visited many gardens, you can translate what you have learned to help solve problems in your own garden. Take some photos (ask permission first) and keep a notebook to write down ideas you find that might work for you. Comparing how other designers solved an issue you are experiencing will help you find your own answers.

Beautiful garden designs can be low or high maintenance. Before translating ideas into your landscape, evaluate how much upkeep you are willing to do.

On your visits, please remember garden etiquette. Leave your pets at home unless they are specifically welcomed. Do not take cuttings, seed heads, fruits or berries from the property. Respect the garden beds and stay on the paths. Arrive after opening time and leave by closing.

If you are lucky enough to have the owner or a guide speak to your group, save your side conversations for when the speaker is finished. Ask permission to take photos or set up a camera tripod. Do not take food into the garden without permission and then take your litter with you. Do not ask to use the bathroom facilities in the house.



Photo by Christine Farrow

In short, treat the garden as you would like your garden to be treated. Perhaps next year you will be doing the hosting!

RESOURCES:

- “An Educated Visitor,” *Horticulture Magazine*. May 1, 2007.
- “Pleasing Rhythm Makes a Garden Sing,” Richard L. Dube. *Fine Gardening* 81, pp. 66-69.
- “Making Opposites Attract,” Judy Horton. *Fine Gardening* 101, pp. 29-32.
- “Creating a Scene,” Laura Crockett. *Fine Gardening* 104, pp. 21-57.