

# The Functional Landscape

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## More useful and enjoyable garden area

Making the landscape functional is making the landscape useful. It is as important as making the landscape inviting and sustainable.

Functional requirements of the landscape must be considered up front. It is about the organization of the outdoor space, what to look for in each space and how different spaces may be interconnected. The idea is to design the space for not only the residents but also the visitors, neighbors and passersby.

Like the inside of the home, the outdoor space has four types of use: public, family living, service, and private living. Ideally, indoor and outdoor spaces are conveniently connected and coordinated.

Whether it's indoor or outdoor rooms, changing the purpose of the space requires expensive remodeling work. It pays to have a clear and well-thought out plan; then build the landscape accordingly.

A typical residential outdoor space has three separate sections: front yard, back yard and side yard. Each serves a different purpose, and each is organized differently.

The front yard is typically the outdoor arrival and entry space. It complements the indoor entry foyer that provides a pleasant, friendly experience that says, "Welcome." It presents the "frame" for viewing the "picture" of the house from the street.

The front yard can be divided into zones according to the arrival sequence: public zone next to the street, semi-public zone along the driveway, transitional zone leading to the front door, semi-private zone at the porch, and open-space zone in the remainder of the front yard.

Each of these zones contributes to the overall sensory experience. In the public and semi-public zones, a low fence or plantings along the street could provide a sense of spatial enclosure, so long as the visibility from the driveway is unobstructed for safety reasons.

The transitional zone is pedestrian-oriented and calls for smooth, defined movement and attention to smaller scale and details. On the other hand, the open space may serve as the foreground for the house and may be simply taken up by the lawn or groundcover, dotted by some trees and shrubs.



A natural-looking trail with well laid-out steps increases the functionality of a wooded backyard.  
*Photo by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

The entry walk to the front door should be sufficiently wide (4.5 feet or more) to allow two people walking side-by-side. Viewed from the street and driveway, the route should be obvious, not hidden, and easy to negotiate during day and night. This space may also serve as a delightful place for the residents to sit and relax.

The back yard would be the most varied and likely the most intensely used portion of the landscape. More utilitarian than the front yard, its function may include living and entertaining, eating or dining, recreation, work and storage, and gardening.

The living and entertaining area should accommodate areas for individual and small-group relaxation, conversation, and interaction in relative peace and quiet, yet be flexible enough to hold larger groups of people for social gatherings. The proportions of the area should be more squarely than long-and-narrow. To entertain four people with a table and four chairs, the preferred size would be 10-feet by 10-feet or larger.

A larger space can be organized as a series of smaller subspaces, each accommodating a particular function (sitting, entertaining, sunbathing, reading, and so on). This can be accomplished by varied shapes, pavement materials, and elevation changes with planting beds in

between. Garden structures and plant canopies can effectively create a sense of identity and privacy and counter harsh microclimates.

The recreation area should be located on flat ground with only a slight slope for drainage and be away from other quiet space and delicate elements. The size and shape should be established for a particular type of recreation, and the space should be defined as a separate outdoor room.



**Left:** A naturally meandering dry streambed intercepts surface runoff and adds interest as well as functionality to the landscape. **Right:** A fire pit adds outdoor living and entertaining enjoyment to the backyard. *Photos by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

The work and storage area should be located near the garage or basement door, so that materials and equipment can be easily transported. Ideally, it should have a hard, durable and nonslip pavement surface.

The garden area, for raising fruits, vegetables, and perennial flowers, should be situated with adequate sunlight exposure, near a water source, and not become unsightly offseason. Incorporating the garden with other compatible areas may also improve its functionality.

The side yard is usually narrow, damp and dark. It may appear to be a leftover or wasted space with little use except providing access between the front and back of the house. Consequently, it may be dominated by the walkway and has few elements occupying the space. Or it may become a preferred location for work and storage areas. Unobstructed and close-up views between houses may pose a privacy concern that requires special solutions such as screening.

There are two final items to make your landscape functional. An effective circulation path would take into consideration safety, convenience and comfort. The slope of a walkway should not exceed 5 percent. Steps of appropriate dimensions may be used to take up the elevation change between two spaces.

The second item is surface water runoff, a common challenge for residential landscape. Traditional solutions, such as a French drain with weeping tile around the perimeter of the property, may not alleviate localized drainage issues entirely. A dry streambed, meandering naturally, may be an aesthetic and functional answer utilizing the rocks found on site.

A functional landscape brings the house and the site together and enables the landscape to provide its intended services. With enough foresight, the landscape can be made more useful and enjoyable for years to come.

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## **RESOURCES:**

- ***Residential Landscape Architecture: Design Process for the Private Residence.*** 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Norman K. Booth and James E. Hiss. Prentice Hall, 2012.
  - ***Sustainable Landscape Management: Design, Construction, and Maintenance.*** Thomas W. Cook and Ann Marie Vanderzanden. John Wiley and Sons, 2011.
  - ***Understanding Garden Design: The Complete Handbook for Aspiring Designers.*** Vanessa Gardner Nagel, APLD. Timber Press, 2010.
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