

Purposeful Gardens

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Many benefits for your landscape

Have you ever thought about grouping your garden areas into many rooms, just like inside your home, where each serves a particular purpose? Maybe each even has its own virtual floor, walls, and ceiling. That's what landscape-design experts would recommend and how some of the famous gardens around the world are created.

To set a solid foundation for purposeful gardens, you will need to make them functional, inviting, and sustainable. Some of these topics may be expounded in future articles.

The functional aspect of a garden must be considered first, just like the old saying, "Form follows function." Simply speaking, the gardens must support the intended function as influenced by the lifestyle preference. The focus includes suitable access points, effective circulation paths, and appropriate space relative to the activities. Other functional issues, such as drainage, lighting, and safety or security measures, may also come into play.

Making the gardens inviting is more than making them pretty. A successful landscape offers rewarding engagement through sensory experience (gardens for five senses). It evokes positive emotions and invites visitors to interact with the surroundings, rather than simply moving through them. When the visitors are able to form a closer bond with nature and feel invigorated from it, the experience may even become therapeutic. To accomplish this, key landscape-design principles must be judiciously applied to harness all garden elements when putting the gardens together.

To make the gardens sustainable requires careful planning in design and construction, as well as maintenance. Factors contributing to sustainability include soils, vegetation, materials selections, hydrology, and human health and well-being. In addition to cost and effort, the fourth dimension (time scale) should enter in the equation to ensure long-term success.

To apply the purposeful concept, twelve outdoor rooms are introduced herein as broad-brush examples: entryway, edible, fragrance, drought tolerant, shade loving, moisture loving, wildlife habitat, deer resistant, privacy screen, sanctuary, seacoast, and small space. Some of these rooms may be combined to serve dual purposes. This purposeful approach is not the same as choosing among garden styles (such as modern, Japanese, cottage, etc.), although the preferred style should still play a role in the actual design.



A purposeful entryway garden in Anacortes. *All photos by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.*

An **entryway garden** makes a statement about the occupants of the home. It may be part of the front-yard landscape that contributes to the “curb appeal.” A common approach is to make this garden bold, with interesting textures and vibrant color, but at the same time more refined and with less maintenance.

An **edible garden** could be the most exciting part of the landscape because, from our hunter-gather instinct, few things bring more exhilaration than harvesting food to quash the hunger. This garden is usually sited in a sunny, warm spot to increase the yield, but it does not have to be confined to a backyard corner.

A **fragrance garden** evokes a strong sensory response. It is ideally sited near gathering places, such as a patio or a deck, taking advantage of the prevailing wind, which usually comes from the west.

A **drought-tolerant garden** is typically oriented toward the southwest corner of the yard. It can have a Mediterranean style with Mediterranean plants, because of similar climate.

A **shade-loving garden** may be on the opposite end from the drought-tolerant garden. Depending on the source of the shade (building or tree canopy), the composition may differ.



Left: A purposeful shade-loving garden in La Conner. **Right:** A functional garden in Anacortes, with circulation path and dry streambed for drainage.

A **moisture-loving garden** takes advantage of low-lying area or the bottom of a hill with seeping water most of the year. Such wet spots may not need to be “corrected.” Instead, a broader range of suitable planting can increase biodiversity and wildlife activities.

A **wildlife-habitat garden** can be a transition between natural wooded areas in the background and the built landscape closer to the house. It can be designed to attract songbirds, hummingbirds, and other wildlife such as pollinators, contributing to a robust ecosystem.

A **deer-resistant garden** would keep the landscape intact in areas with high deer traffic. Although no plants are totally safe from deer browsing, careful selections from a palette of more-resistant plants could keep the damage to a minimum.

A **privacy screen** would reduce direct line-of-sight from the street or the neighboring properties. It applies the “enclosure” principle to provide a sense of security and comfort, but it does not have to be a solid block of monoculture plants.

A **sanctuary garden** can be located in a quiet corner of the backyard, away from the noise and clutter, and offer relaxation and peaceful escape from the stressful world. It may come with an enclosure, under a tall-tree canopy or a garden structure, to provide the sense of shelter.

A **small-space garden** may require proportionally-smaller (dwarf) plants and may include a form of container garden. A fairy garden of certain scale may offer interesting results.

A **seacoast garden** requires plants and amenities that tolerate salt sprays and soils with high salinity. Decoration with driftwood blends the garden with its surrounds. For non-beachfront homes, a “dry stream bed” may be used to offer a similar soothing effect and help alleviate low-level surface-water runoff issues. When a water feature (such as a fountain or waterfall) is added, it further enhances the sensory experience.

In summary, grouping your outdoor rooms into purposeful gardens can bring many benefits to your landscape, and it can make your gardening experience more enjoyable and successful.

Resources:

- *Landscaping Principles and Practices*. 5th edition. Jack E. Ingels, State University of New York, College of Agriculture and Technology. Delmar (Thomson Learning), 1997.
- *Residential Landscape Architecture: Design Process for the Private Residence*. 6th 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.
- *Therapeutic Landscapes: An Evidence-Based Approach to Designing Healing Gardens and Restorative Outdoor Spaces*. Clare Cooper Marcus and Naomi A. Sachs. John Wiley and Sons, 2014.
- *Understanding Garden Design: The Complete Handbook for Aspiring Designers*. Vanessa Gardner Nagel, APLD. Timber Press, 2010.



Left: A sanctuary garden at the Kubota Garden in Seattle. **Right:** A purposeful drought-tolerant garden at the Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium in Tacoma.