

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Watching from my office window on a cold and gray winter day, I am amazed at the variety of deciduous trees and conifers that make the landscape in the Pacific Northwest so interesting and beautiful. Some of what I see is the natural landscape of the mountains that shelter my house and some of what I see is my neighbors' naturalistic gardens. Although the gardens and the wood-covered hills are not visually the same, they do have some fundamental things in common. In this commonality is the strength of gardening with mixed borders in a four-tier arrangement. Unlike the formal perennial borders of English origin the American mixed border is less formal, requires considerably less upkeep and mirrors the natural landscape.

The mixed border garden is a four-tier design, using the same design principals as those used in composing a painting. And as in a painting, shape is everything. The four-tier design of a mixed border, places large, often columnar, sometimes spreading trees in the background. The next tier is made up of shrubs of all kinds (deciduous and evergreen), with a particular emphasis on texture. In front of the shrubs, perennials are planted and finally in front of the perennials are the lowest growing plants and ground covers. The four-tier mixed border actually mimics the way plants thrive naturally.

The four-tier method results in exceptional visual harmony and allows the gardener to select from an extensive array of plants. In addition, it can be used in existing perennial gardens. By planting woody shrubs among many existing plants and by creating a backdrop of small conifers, a traditional perennial border takes on new life by extending color, texture and multi-seasonal appeal. Repeating plants, whether in a new garden or an existing garden gives the eye a sense of pleasant repetition among the variety that is essential to the mixed border.

The four-tier garden adapts just as readily to sunny and shady gardens. It is, however, important to create these plant communities with a selection of plants with the same cultural requirements. In a damp area, all the plants should be selected to thrive in moist or boggy soil and likewise in an area with dry or rocky soil. It is a matter of the right plant in the right place. The combination is four-tier design, variety in texture and color and the right conditions. When that is achieved, plants can thrive with minimal intervention from the gardener and provide year-round visual pleasure. Which, after all, is what living in such a glorious region is all about.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.
