

Small-Space Garden Solutions

By Everett Chu
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Less can be more

With our increasingly-hastened pace of life and multiple daily demands competing with gardening, a small-space garden is a blessing. But a small garden does not have to look or perform smallish.

Be it in the front entryway, balcony, courtyard or back alley, there are ways to make the tiniest garden the loveliest with abundance of imagination and some useful advice.

A good principle is to design with simplicity and harmony. Less is more. Make the most out of the existing space. This is even more important in a confined space.

Common challenges associated with a small garden, in addition to its limited space, may include the disconnect with its surroundings, the corridor feel and/or the wall effect. All these may be related, but together they could make the small space more unmanageable and unappealing. A small garden may be difficult to design, but the rewards can be greater.

The smaller the garden space and the more enclosed it is (such as a courtyard garden) or the closer it is to the house, the more it needs to relate to the design and architecture of the house. The garden must “connect” to the house by reflecting its style (geometry, color, texture) and become the extension of the house. The result is a better sense of unity.

Often the small space is the result of a walkway passing by or cutting through it. In such case, the garden gives the feel of being a part of a corridor. To reduce such a syndrome, the walkway and/or garden may be arranged in zigzag fashion that would make the space appear larger. In fact, designing on the diagonal and allowing the diagonal lines to stand out vividly, can make the area look more spacious.

A courtyard garden, enclosed on at least three sides by walls, provides a place of refuge in which to retreat from the bustle of the outside world. But when the walls are from a tall building and the garden size is proportionally small, the space can become claustrophobic. The taller the walls, the smaller the enclosed space will feel.

To help remedy such a situation, strong horizontal lines (ideally at eye level) would bring the eye down into the space instead of being led up to the tall walls. A raised bed or cluster of pottery at the perimeter would serve to reduce the height and give a sense of a larger space. Some planting matching the scale of the building and in perspective layers (varying heights) could be beneficial.



This enclosed front-yard garden extends the living space. The raised bed along the perimeter makes the small garden more spacious. Its Japanese-influenced simplistic and modernist style evokes a feeling of tranquility. *Photo by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Similarly, a change in levels in a small garden can contribute to the feeling of spaciousness. This may be accomplished by a small change in elevation of even just two steps. Making the steps or stairs wider also increases the sense of space. A deck or other seating area may be slightly elevated in relation to the rest of the garden.

A garden can also be made to feel larger by dividing it up into different sections with varied themes, functions or moods. In other words, create distinct destinations (secret gardens) for each area to be experienced through a “journey,” adding an element of surprise.

To help move the eye from foreground to background and explore the depth of the garden, the prominent focal point may be placed as far back as possible from the main viewing point. Pay attention to the transitions.

Containers add the growing area as well as the aesthetic value. Be sure that their style, color, and materials are in harmony with the surroundings.

Spatial constraints can be theatrical in their own effects. Mirrors can play tricks and add unexpected depth. Cooler colors (e.g., blues and purples) recede and make an area appear larger.



Left: In this fenced courtyard garden tucked behind a modern-style home, the individual and offset (zigzag) concrete slabs reduce the corridor feel. Ground-cover plants (creeping thyme) between slabs soften the harshness. The horizontal fence boards and the raised beds make the garden feel more spacious and a place to linger. **Right:** A small front-yard garden as seen from the frame of the entry gate. *Photos by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Bright or warmer colors (e.g., reds and oranges) and bold textures advance and make an area appear smaller.

Pathways connect different garden rooms. They direct the eye and the journey through the garden making the space feel larger. It is worthwhile to take time to plan the paths as well as the experience. To make the garden appear larger and more inviting, use lighter and warm-colored pavers.

When introducing a garden element into a small space, make sure each element serves at least double duty in terms of benefits. For example, a retaining wall can double as a seating bench and garden-room divider or screen.

An open area is appealing even for a small garden. Although a lawn is often a cause for wasted resources, the green space it provides can be a source of simplicity and relief, and possibly adding a sense of form for its shape.

Plant selections should be according to the microclimate. The plants should have at least two seasons of interest, preferably four. Their ultimate size when mature should be a concern. Avoid aggressive and rampant species. Create the feeling of depth with layers of plants in contrasting colors and foliage sizes. Use a simple palette of plants with repetitions. Repeat shapes to get a rhythm to the planting.

The Miller Botanical Garden in Seattle has an extensive educational outreach program called “Great Plant Picks for Maritime Pacific Northwest Gardens.” Among the many plant lists is one called “Small Spaces Big Impact.”

Below is a sampling of its plant picks (see link

http://www.greatplantpicks.org/plantlists/by_theme/small_urban):

- *Abies balsamea* 'Nana' (Dwarf Balsam Fir)
- *Acer palmatum dissectum* 'Tamukeyama' (Red Laceleaf Japanese Maple)
- *Adiantum venustum* (Himalayan Maidenhair Fern)
- *Blechnum spicant* (Deer Fern)
- *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana Lutea' (Golden Dwarf Hinoki Cypress)
- *Fuchsia* 'Golden Gate' (Golden-leaved Hardy Fuchsia)
- *Helianthemum nummularium* 'Henfield Brilliant' (Sun Rose)
- *Helleborus* 'Walhelivor Ivory Prince' (Hybrid Hellebore)
- *Heuchera* 'Green Spice' (Coral Bells)
- *Hosta* 'Blue Mouse Ears' (Blue Dwarf Hosta)
- *Hydrangea serrata* 'Little Geisha' (Mountain Hydrangea)
- *Ilex crenata* 'Dwarf Pagoda' (Dwarf Japanese Holly)
- *Lonicera pileata* (Box-leaf Honeysuckle)
- *Molinia caerulea* 'Variegata' (Variegated Purple Moor Grass)
- *Narcissus* Tête-à-tête' (Miniature Daffodil)
- *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens' (Black Mondo Grass)
- *Perovskia atriplicifolia* 'Little Spire' (Compact Russian Sage)
- *Pieris japonica* 'Cavatine' (Dwarf Lily of The Valley Shrub)
- *Polystichum polyblepharum* (Japanese Tassel Fern)
- *Rhododendron* 'Hino Crimson' (Evergreen Azalea)
- *Sedum spurium* 'Doctor John Creech' (Two-Row Stonecrop)
- *Spiraea Japonica* 'Walbuma' (Magic Carpet Japanese Spirea)
- *Veronica peduncularis* 'Georgia Blue' (Speedwell)
- *Weigela florida* 'Elvera' (Midnight Wine Compact Purpleleaf Weigela)

Resources:

- ***The Secrets of Designing for and Maximizing Outdoor Spaces.*** Webinar presented by Scot Eckley for Association of Professional Landscape Designers (APLD). June 29, 2017.
- ***Gardens by Design: Expert Advice from the World's Leading Garden Designers.*** Noel Kingsbury. Timber Press, 2005.
- ***Country Living Gardener: Courtyard Gardens.*** Toby Musgrave. Hearst Books, 2000.
- ***The Essential Garden Design Workbook.*** 2nd edition. Rosemary Alexander. Timber Press, 2009.

Note: a hyperlink in this article has been updated since its initial publication.