

Design a New Garden This Winter

By Susan Camp

Unlike me, you probably have completed your holiday shopping, wrapped the presents, and mailed your Christmas cards. No doubt you have decorated the tree and house, and can sit back and enjoy the seasonal ambiance with a cup of hot cocoa. I envy you, but that isn't the point of this column.

No, I am suggesting that since you have completed your holiday preparations, now is a good time to think about making some garden design changes for spring, or even plan an entire new bed or garden.

In winter, you can see the bones of your garden: the hardscape, the leafless deciduous shrubs, and the stalks of dormant perennials. If you kept notes or a gardening journal, you have a good idea of which plants performed well in their current locations, which ones need to be moved, and which plants failed completely.

If you decide to add a bed or border or even create a new garden, some basic planning is required. Keep in mind that you don't have to be a professional horticulturalist or landscape architect, although you may want to consider consulting one if you are planning a large or complex project.

Before you start digging a bed, consider the style of your home. If your house is a colonial reproduction, as are many in Tidewater Virginia, visit Williamsburg for some garden design ideas. Take a walk down Duke of Gloucester Street and observe the bones of the old gardens.

You may want to explore a different design plan if your home is a mid-century modern rancher or was built between the 1970's and the present time. Right-angled borders and rectangular beds planted with evergreen shrubs and annuals and large expanses of turfgrass were popular during those periods.

Today, curved beds with softer lines and colorful perennials are popular, and many gardeners are reducing lawn size while adding native plants that attract bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds.

Help is available in magazines, gardening design books, and on the internet. Millions of hits on Google provide designs appropriate for every style of house and every level of design skill. Most are free.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-202 "Planning the Flower Border"; Cornell University publication "Flower Garden Design Basics"; and the University of Illinois Extension article "Introduction to Perennial Garden Design" provide helpful information for the beginner and experienced gardener alike. Keep in mind that you should use plant lists that are appropriate for our region. Perennials that thrive in Illinois or upstate New York might not make it through a hot, humid Middle Peninsula summer.

Several preliminary steps are necessary before digging begins. First, put your design on paper. A rough sketch will do, or you can lay out your plan on graph paper, measuring distances from trees, buildings, and walkways and design the garden beds to scale.

Pay attention to the sunny and shady areas where you want to place your new garden. If you have lived in your house for several years, you probably are familiar with the seasonal changes of sunlight and shade. Consider the presence of overhanging trees and fences or other structures and the shade they will cast at different times of the year.

Check the condition of your soil. Is it sandy or clayey? Does the soil drain well or hold water for days after a rainy spell? Send a soil sample to VA Tech to find out the pH of your soil and which nutrients are needed. Contact the Gloucester Extension Office at (804) 693-2602 to obtain a soil sample kit. There is a small fee for the service.

Plan borders and beds that will be easy to access for weeding and deadheading; a depth of 2 to 4 feet lets you work among the plants without trampling them or hurting your back.

The real fun begins when you start selecting plants. A future column will look at color combinations. Happy planning and enjoy your hot cocoa!