

“Right Plant, Right Place”

A summary of some design ideas presented in “Naturescaping” workshops taught by
Linda Andrews, Linda Andrews Landscape & Design and
Erica Guttman, Native Plant Salvage Project—WSU Thurston County Extension
www.nativeplantsalvage.org; 360-754-3588 ext. 110

Planting Design Goals

Select the right plant for the right place: Observe patterns and species that you find together in natural settings (woods, mountains, prairies) and copy those patterns in your garden. Pay attention to moisture and light. Group shade-loving plants together; consider the edges and find plants that take some shade and some sun. Generally, morning light or filtered sunlight is OK for many “part-shade” species. Some can take more direct sun than others (such as *Mahonia repens*, Creeping Oregon-Grape). Some species that prefer shade can do well in more sun if the soil is naturally wet (such as Lady Fern and Salmonberry).

Place sun-lovers in appropriate layers so that they don’t shade each other out and you can see the smaller species near the front of the border.

If you’re working with plants that aren’t drought tolerant, place them together in a spot that will be easy to water. Don’t mix water-lovers with drought-tolerant species. Plants that need sharp drainage will be happiest in rock gardens and thinner soils without a lot of soil amendments. In fact, you might find these plants failing to thrive in soil with too much compost. Examples include lavenders, creeping thymes, some sedums, and *Ceanothus* species.

Finally, think about your soil. Some species are tolerant of thin soils, others need richer, humus-filled soils (such as *Asarum caudatum*, Wild Ginger). Generously mixing compost into your beds and/or applying it as a top dressing under a wood-chip mulch will enable your plants to thrive and do better without supplemental watering.

Activate your senses: Consider capturing the light (fuzzy tips of ornamental grasses); adding fragrance (lavender and curry plant); capturing the wind’s motion (Mexican feather grass).

Plan for four-seasons of interest: Berries, bark, fall color, winter twig color and form are at least as important as flower color and foliage shape. Plant the same area with species that will complement each other throughout the year, and add early (Columbine, native prairie plants) and late bloomers (Japanese Anemone, Asters), as well as long-bloomers (Gaura, Yarrow, Coreopsis).

Balance simplicity and complexity: Balance busy, “hot” combinations with “cooler” colors and negative space, giving the eye a chance to rest. Repeat patterns and colors. Carry color “cognates” throughout a bed to give continuity (e.g., yellow flowers to yellow foliage to peachy tones; blues to purples and grey-hued foliage). Balance large “drifts” of single species with coordinated mixes.

Contrast forms and colors; use complementary forms and colors. Some great drought-tolerant examples:

- ❑ *Monarda* (Bee Balm) with a loosely arranged flower and *Echinops* (Globe Thistle) with the tight round ball (both tall, good at the back of the border). The *Echinops* is bright blue; what color *Monarda* to choose?
- ❑ *Helichrysum* (Curry Plant) with *Lavendula angustifolia* (English Lavender). Both have fragrance; the greyish foliage of the Curry Plant echoes the light blue of the Lavender, and the yellow flowers of the Curry Plant contrast with the blue flowers of the lavender. Both are mid-height, good for a low divider or the mid-point of the border.

- ❑ Another great blue/yellow combination is *Agapanthus* ‘Storm Cloud’ and *Rudbeckia* (Black-eyed Susan) or a yellow or orange form of *Echinacea*.
- ❑ *Coreopsis* ‘Zagreb’ with *Gaura* ‘Siskiyou Pink’. The *Coreopsis* has lime-green foliage that is delicate but forms a dense tuft (2 to 3 feet tall and wide). The *Gaura* has long darker-green “fronds” of flower clusters that come up between the *Coreopsis*, both echoing the delicate features and contrasting the dense tufts of the *Coreopsis* with the wispy arching qualities of the *Gaura*. The bright yellow flowers of the ‘Zagreb’ variety contrast stunningly with the rich pink of the ‘Siskiyou Pink’ variety.
- ❑ Another great bright yellow and bright pink combination for early spring is *Mahonia* or *Berberis aquifolium* (Tall Oregon-Grape) and *Ribes sanguineum* (Red-flowering Currant). The forms and twig colors, and foliage shapes and textures offer additional year-round interest.
- ❑ *Penstemon fruticosus* (Shrubby Penstemon) has a large, bright-purple flower that makes a hot early spring combo with one of the orange-flowered *Helianthemum* (Sunrose) varieties. Both are sub-shrubs with beautiful foliage that persists all year.
- ❑ English Lavender, a grey-foliaged/yellow-flowered Yarrow variety, and the native Showy Fleabane (*Erigeron speciosus*) create a pleasing combination of yellows and blues contrasting and echoing each other.
- ❑ The spiky shape and purple color of *Liatris* (Gayfeather) contrasts in form and color with the openness and yellow or orange of many Daylilies.
- ❑ Russian Sage (*Perovskia*) and *Caryopteris* (Bluebeard/Bluemist) offer late blue flowers (and one *Caryopteris* variety, ‘Worcester Gold,’ offers golden foliage!) that can be used with pinks, yellows, and whites, such as: *Echinacea* (either pink or white), yarrow, *Coreopsis lanceolata* (Tickseed), *Schizostylis* (Crimson Flag) and others.
- ❑ A great late-fall combination: Fall-blooming aster with *Coreopsis* ‘Moonbeam’ (pale yellow) or ‘Zagreb’ (bright yellow) with *Sedum* ‘Autumn Joy’ (is green until autumn coolness brings red flowers).
- ❑ Use different-sized ornamental grasses as accents and foils, mixed with shrubs and perennials. The thin-bladed *Miscanthus* varieties, *Pennisetum* species (Fountain Grasses) Bronze Sedge (*Carex buchananii*) and Orange Sedge (*Carex testacea*) can create many interesting combinations throughout the sunny to partly sunny garden. (See our “Waterwise Wonders” list for more options, and note that each genus offers tall and short varieties and different bloom times.)

Use plants to liven “hardscape,” such as various creeping thymes, Sea Thrift, or Brass Buttons between stones, and to soften a fence or in place of a fence. A hedgerow is more interesting, lower maintenance, and more naturalistic than a highly managed hedge. It’s a mix of evergreen and deciduous plants that can form a great privacy buffer and hiding/resting places for birds and butterflies.

Hedgerow options: Good evergreen choices: Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus unedo* ‘Compacta’), Tall Oregon-grape, Mexican Orange, *Osmanthus delavayi*, *Escallonia*, *Pyracantha*, *Abelia* (lower, closer to the front), *Ceanothus*, *Stranvaesia*, and *Nandina domestica* (Heavenly Bamboo). Good deciduous choices: Serviceberry, Ocean Spray, Bald-hip Rose, Red-osier Dogwood, Pacific Ninebark (gets wide), and Snowberry (in front). Allow the plants to grow together in a thicket, and practice limited pruning for good plant health only. You’ll be rewarded with four seasons of interest, birds, caterpillars, and butterflies!