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Bougainvillea Two Small Gardens Outdoor Steps



Design for a Small Backyard

Six ideas from a landscape architect's own garden

by William T. Smith

How can you transform an undeveloped lot into a garden with a personal style and a character of its own? Many people ask this question once or twice in a lifetime, when they buy a house. I ask the question and develop new answers several times a year in my work as a landscape architect. Although every site presents unique challenges and opportunities, I've learned some general principles that often help in designing small home gardens.

I'll use my own garden as an example in this article. When I started developing the "yard" (it certainly couldn't be called a "garden" at that point!) in 1984, I studied the site carefully and made a base map with trees, grade changes, sun and shade exposures, and drainage patterns all drawn to scale. From this I could design a plan that was sensitive to the character of the land. My property is located in a hilly forested neighborhood in Atlanta, and the trees and sloping contour were special features I decided to preserve.

I also defined goals for the kind of garden I wished to have. While I wanted to save as many of the trees as possible, I also wanted to add a small lawn, and perennial borders filled with colorful flowers from early spring to late fall. In addition, the landscape would need permanent structures and evergreen plants that looked attractive through the winter. Because of my work schedule, I knew the basic plantings would have to be low-maintenance, though I was glad to spend time maintaining the perennial borders. I drew up a master plan and implemented it one step at a time, doing all of the planting and most of the construction myself.

The site plan and the photos on the following pages show how the garden turned out, and illustrate the principles I followed. You can apply these basic ideas to many other kinds of sites and situations.

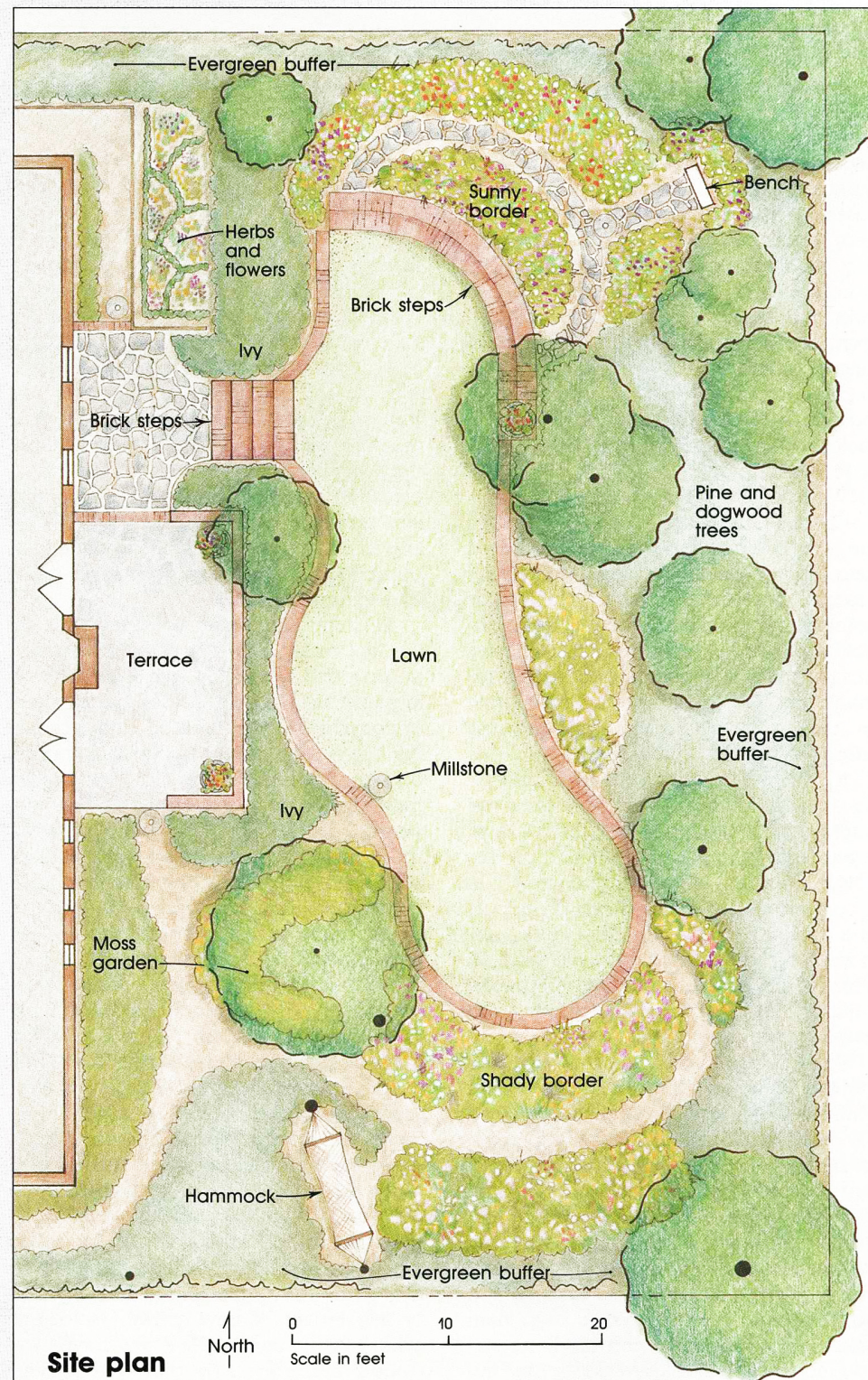


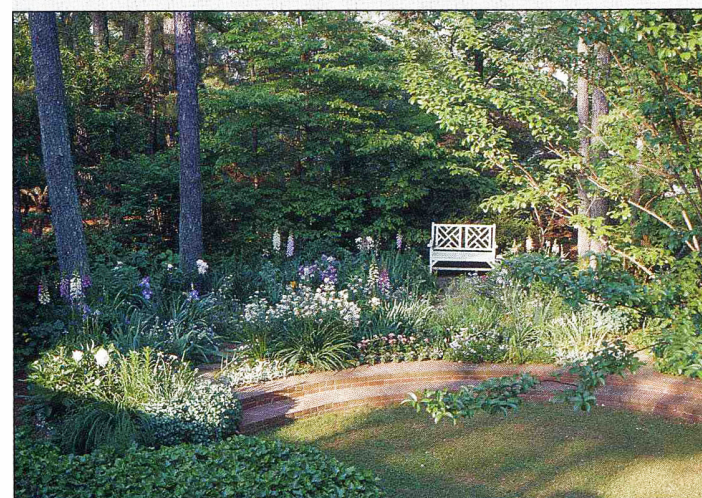
Illustration: Laura B. Goodwin



Keep the trees—There are several huge old loblolly pines (*Pinus taeda*) on this site, and some handsome specimens of the native flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*). They're wonderful trees, so I designed the landscape around them by making curves in the lawn and planting beds. This photo shows how the trees cast dappled shade across the lawn at midmorning on a summer day.

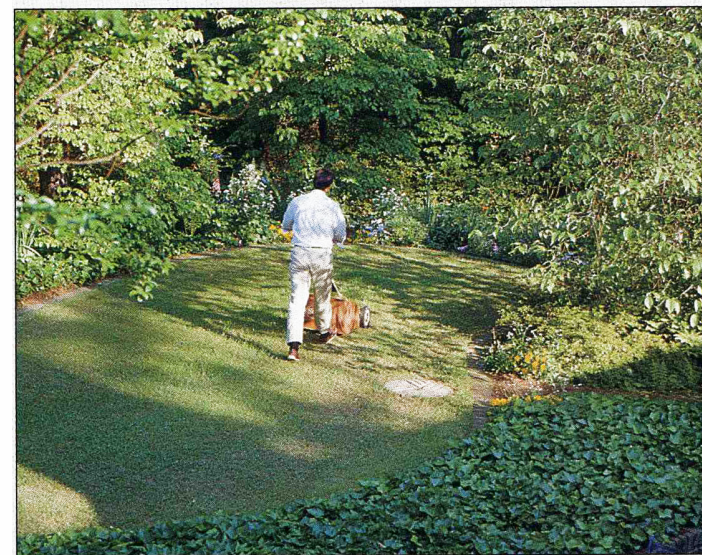
Different exposure patterns gave me the opportunity to plant both sun- and shade-loving plants. The south end of the garden (away from the camera) gets more shade and is cooler, so I grow woodland plants there, such as epimediums, primulas and ferns. The north end of the garden (behind the camera in this shot) is sunnier and warmer, just right for veronicas, irises, daylilies, hollyhocks and other perennials.

Designing the curved lawn and borders to accommodate trees took some fine-tuning. I wanted the curves to be bold and sweeping rather than erratic and sharp, and to evoke a soothing feeling rather than an energetic one. At the drafting table, I drew and redrew the design until I was pleased with its shape. Once the plan looked good on paper, I transferred it to the site, using wooden stakes to mark the steps, walks and edgings. Looking at the staked-out design helped me refine my plans, and I kept adjusting the stakes until the shapes looked just right. I've found that it sometimes takes a bit of on-site trial and error to achieve a satisfying "look," especially when there are grade changes.



Retain the slope—Another feature of the site is that it slopes down from north to south. The sunny border shown in this photo is at the north end of the garden. There's a drop of 18 in. from the back to the front of the border, and a further drop of 12 in. to the level of the lawn. At first I thought of making a low retaining wall to secure this slope, but I decided not to because it would stop people from entering the border. Instead, I designed these curved brick steps. They retain the slope, and at the same time they enable—even invite—guests to enter the border from any angle.

I took great care in designing the steps, since it was obvious that they would be a prominent feature in the garden. I sketched different curves and finally decided on a perfect 90° arc with a radius of 11 ft. I wanted the steps to look and feel gentle and inviting, so I made each tread two bricks wide (about 17 in.) and each riser two bricks high (about 5 in.). The wide treads and shallow risers make steps that are easy to climb and comfortable to sit upon.



Keep the lawn in its place—This lawn fits my schedule and interests just right. In fact, I can mow it in seven minutes! I wanted a lawn, because it's a neutral green carpet that complements the colorful perennial borders, but I didn't want to spend much time maintaining it.

One problem was which type of grass to use, since exposure for the lawn area ranges from hot sun to dappled shade. Also, I wanted a fine-textured, manicured lawn that would contrast with the natural, relaxed character of the adjacent plantings. 'Emerald' zoysia grass met both of these requirements, and it grows in heavy red clay without too much resentment.

Zoysia is a creeping turfgrass, so I knew that in order to preserve all those curves, I would have to edge the grass continually, or use some type of edging to preserve the design. I opted for the edging, and used a single row of bricks around the entire lawn. I laid the bricks flat in a bed of mortar, just slightly above the elevation of the sod. This way, the design of the lawn will always stay as I designed it, eliminating the re-measuring or guesswork that would undoubtedly be required in successive seasons if I let the grass creep as it wanted.



Observe drainage patterns—Water drains from north to south down the site. The soil in the shady border at the downhill end of the garden stays wet longer than in other parts of the garden and supports moisture-loving plants such as the hostas, ferns, mosses, hellebores, primulas and tiarella in the photo above.

Experiment with a wide range of plants—I'm always interested in learning about new plants and designing new plant combinations. The white-flowering money plants (*Lunaria annua* 'Alba'), pink foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*) and yellow pansies (*Viola* 'Golden Champion') in the photo at left are some of my favorites for late-spring bloom.

Gardeners around the South today are actively searching for new plants to grow and new ways to grow them. The challenge is finding varieties that can take the heat of summer. I'm convinced that soil preparation is the single most important consideration. Our native red clay is fine for most trees and shrubs, but when I'm making a flower border, I excavate the soil to a depth of 18 in., install drainage pipe, and then refill the excavation with a mixture of good, purchased topsoil, seasoned manure, sand, ground-bark mulch, perlite and lime. This is a lot of work, and not without its expense, but it's worth it. I've watched plants in improved soil survive heat and drought that would kill plants in the native clay.

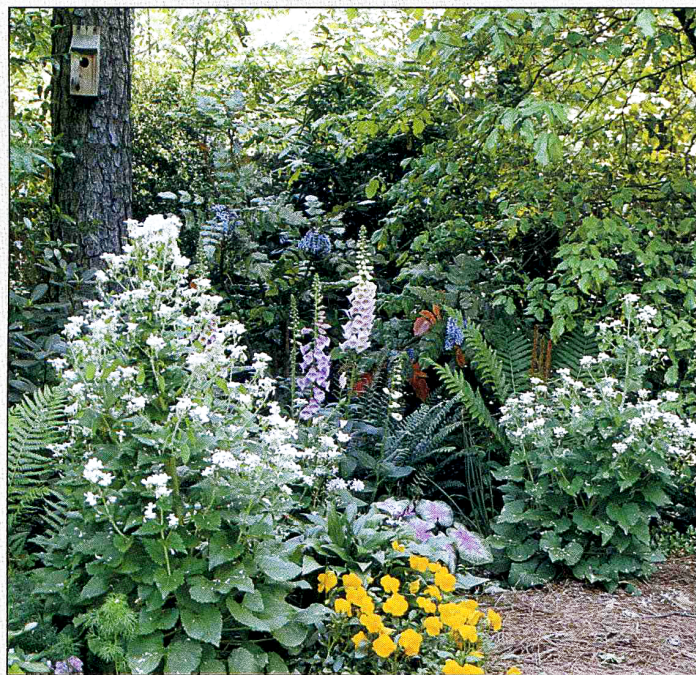


Repeat elements and ideas—Repetition helps unite a design. In this garden, I've made repeated use of certain plants, construction materials and shapes. Most of the trees are the native loblolly pines or dogwoods, and the most abundant ground cover is English ivy (*Hedera helix*). In this photo, ivy mounds against the steps that lead from the patio to the lawn.

The house is made of old brick, and the small existing patio was laid of flagstone; I used these same materials in the garden

steps, paths and edgings. Another repeated element is millstones of varying sizes. Located at strategic points as landings or steps, such as at the back edge of this patio, the millstones are visually separated from each other and recur as "surprises."

Curved lines are a repeated shape. In the herb garden, just beyond the patio, curving rows of small English boxwoods divide the rectangle into several rounded compartments where I plant a variety of herbs and small seasonal vegetables.



Plan for year-round interest—The steps, paths and edgings give an interesting shape to the garden even in the winter months. The view from the patio at left above shows the "bare bones" of the garden in early March. The pines, English ivy and other evergreens add form and texture, and I enjoy the sculptural branch pattern of deciduous trees such as the multi-trunked crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) to the right of the steps. Here in the South, pansies bloom off and on all winter, so I use them to fill this and other pots with color.

Berry-producing shrubs like the evergreen mahonia



(*Mahonia bealei*) shown at right above are colorful for months and attract a variety of birds. The bright-blue berries on this mahonia lasted until late April, when the photo was taken. Several types of birds, especially mockingbirds, feasted on the morsels until they'd completely cleaned the branches. In addition to mahonia, I've planted different kinds of holly, viburnum, euonymus, nandina and laurel as shrubs that provide berries and winter color. □

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