

The garden of your dreams

Four easy steps can ease path to pretty plot



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Winter is almost over, and now is the perfect time to break out of hibernation and plan the garden of your dreams. Working with a landscaper or doing it yourself may seem daunting, but here are some tips to make the process easy and within any budget.

Step 1: Preparation

Since it's still a little cold outside, grab your gardening magazines and a pair of scissors and quickly flip through those pages! Pictures that slow you down, or make you stop dead and go "ooh and ahhh" are the ones you want to snip out and put in a project file. Don't worry about reality, skill or budget. The goal is to get a sense of the real you and clarify your style. Flip through those same magazines again later; different moods may result in different choices. Effective landscaping feeds your soul, relieves your stress and delights your eye.

Step 2: Picking favorites

Picking favorites for your garden project usually falls into two categories: color or specific plant species. Decide if you're going for colors that excite and cheer, calm or soothe. Consider a thematic garden — perhaps all white, blue or even "black." The three-color rule (three colors, plus white) may be a design standard; however, in nature, there are no limits! So choose colors for yourself, not your neighbors. Finally, plan for four seasons. Consider plants that offer intense winter color and fascinat-

ing textures in foliage and bark.

If you are fascinated by certain plants and simply must have them, you might be a plant collector. The focal point of your garden then may not be a specific color, but a specific series of plants. Watch out! If you crave every member of a plant family, you might be a "plant nerd" like me.

Step 3: Sketching

Now it's time to figure out where these plants will go. Take out a piece of paper and sketch a general

outline of your house from an aerial view (looking down at your house from space). Mark existing buildings, trees, ponds, gates, walkways, borders, and utilities.

Tip: Play it safe before you dig. Call your local Utilities Locator Service (1-800-245-4848 in West Virginia).

Mark east and west and planting areas. Check these planting areas at morning, afternoon and evening and mark the intensity of sun exposure in that area. Remember that these areas shift with the season — full sun areas now may be deeply shaded by leaves soon. These same leaves may block rain, so mark as dry shade. **(Tip:** Add irrigation to your plan if you do not have easy access to water, or pick plants that like it dry.). Generally, plants fall into three categories:

full sun, partial sun or shade. Refer to these notes when deciding which plant goes where.

Next, note the quality of soil. Is it rock hard, sandy, rocky or mostly clay? You can even check with your County Extension Agent for free soil tests to assess pH and fertilization needs. Also pay attention to areas of standing water, as this means drainage issues. Are there air conditioners or dryer vents that will blow on plants? That could damage them. Mark any special

areas regarding soil quality and physical threats to your plants.

Step 4: Deciding DIY or landscaper

Now it's time to decide if you want to go the DIY route or hire a landscaper. Thankfully, with your preparation, picking favorites and sketching, you've saved yourself time and money on mistakes that could have resulted in dead plants or hourly consulting charges with a landscaper.

If you go the DIY route, take your project file with you to a nursery. A great nursery will have knowledgeable staff who can help you find the plants in your photos and recommend soil amendments from your notes. If the nursery doesn't have the plant you want, they should be able to recommend suitable replacements that match your site and color requirements.

If you decide to hire a landscaper, be prepared to be frank about your budget and expectations. Don't be embarrassed to say you need landscaping done in small stages due to budget needs, or if you're looking for a complete hands-off "Wow!" experience, as seen on the home makeover shows.

The landscaper will work with you to refine your dreams into a reality that meets your budget. Giving you the best value for your budget is the job and pleasure of a good landscaper. They should ask lots of questions, refer to your project file and offer you a price quote on material, labor and a completion timetable before you sign off on the gardening plan of your dreams.

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Lori Wolfe/The Herald-Dispatch

Vikki Mitchell displays a basket of Wave Petunias at Perennial Favorites Greenhouse in Huntington in this May 8, 2009, file photo. Picking plants for your garden usually falls into two categories: color or specific plant species. Decide if you're going for colors that excite or soothe, and then build your design from there. Don't worry about following any color rules — plant what will make you happy, but don't forget to include color for all seasons.