

Lessons from Large to Small

Many of us have visited large gardens during Virginia's Garden Week and thoroughly enjoyed them at the peak of their spring beauty. We have been charmed without realizing that they offer lessons to be taken home to our smaller gardens. A June morning visit to Sue Perrin's garden at Belle Terre was a lesson in achieving perfection without masses of annuals and perennials.

If your garden spaces and expectations are both of a modest size, you may think there are few lessons for you in studying a garden with acres of space belonging to a professional landscaper designer! However, the lessons are there, in abundance.

The first lesson is trees. If you are starting out with a roll of house plans in one hand and you are told that a large and handsome tree needs to go to accommodate the house, redraw the plans. Unless the actuarial tables guarantee you will be living there the 40 years it takes to grow a new tree to an impressive size, preserve what is there. Of course if most of the trees have the dimensions of a telephone pole, they must go, but have a tree expert advise you about what may be kept to provide a frame for your house.

Perhaps the one factor that separates an excellent gardener from a good one is discipline. It sounds strange, doesn't it, to use that word out of its usual context, but it is apt when you consider how essential culling away the mistakes, the extraneous, the overgrown – all those things that do not enhance the vision you have in your head- or even the plan on paper. I know about mistakes: I make so many of them. One bad habit is poking a pocket seed into the ground without thinking. The magnolia grandiflora seedling is next to the driveway and 7 feet tall so unless I wish to reroute the drive, it must come out. Discipline is needed if we are to achieve the simplicity inherent in beauty.

Another lesson in evidence at Belle Terre is "enough" in the sense of not too many and not too few. A group of at least three *Hypericum* shrubs caught my eye. St John's wort has elegant cup-shaped blooms of a clear yellow with prominent red-tipped stamens. Both buds and foliage are attractive but just one would have had little impact. When a space needs three plants, chose three of one species despite your desire to 'try out' three different plants.

It is also wise to assemble a group of one species, but varying cultivars. Sue Perrin has a family of deciduous magnolias, each welcoming spring with tulip shaped blooms of different pastels with early and late cultivars lengthening the bloom season. In any garden, large or small, a spotty effect results if shrubs in a border do not relate to one another. This idea can be used in planting perennials and annuals as well as small trees and shrubs.

It is a rare gardener who has a garden without a house but too many gardeners have to leave their houses to really see their gardens. Sometimes the fault is those billowing 'foundation' plantings that have long left the foundation and are eating the house. Belle Terre has formal low-growing parterres at the entrance and, on another side, a space that Sue Perrin refers to as her

“computer garden”, a peaceful expanse of muted tones that may serve to reduce computer-generated stress?

Looking out your windows is a good starting point for garden design. If you have a mountain out there, don't compete with it. If you are blessed to have a water view, don't detract from it by over-planting with massive greenery better used to disguise an eyesore. 'Curb appeal', the term tossed around in real estate circles, should stay there. The people who live in your house need secluded spaces around the house for privacy and pleasure so that inside and outside blend.

Color echoes abound at Belle Terre, for example the compatibility between the patina on a sculpture of a child and the pair of blue atlas cedars and the promise, in late summer, of the pink 'cotton candy' plumes of *muhlenbergia capillaris*, (pink muhly grass), that may reflect the aging pink of *hydrangea* blooms. Color is not just the attribute of living things but of furniture, brick, stone, water, sky, even concrete and the entire picture has to be a part of your planning.

One essential facet of our gardens that we tend to neglect may be scale. We sense when things are out of scale, the pea on a watermelon or the shrub with house attached. We are jarred by the incongruence without being able to explain it. We are also delighted when we see something done exactly right! I was delighted to see, for my first time ever, *Hydrangea* 'Annabelle's bouncy blooms in precisely the right spot, fronting a long wall of the house at Belle Terre. Thank you Sue Perrin.