

MGOC – 55+

In Our Dreams – Funky Little Garden Design Projects for 2016

By Edythe Falconer

Winter is still upon us but we have turned the corner into the new year and spring will be here in a blink – this a good time to dream about the coming garden season. My mission is to give you some fun and interesting little design ideas for empty corners, spaces under trees, veggie garden set up - maybe one of these small projects will help solve a problem area in your garden.

Why Small Projects?

Last summer, happily, I was able to concentrate on the “little pictures” instead of the big ones. My “big picture” had been frequently messed with in the previous six years – trees and hedges had to be removed, fences replaced and a rotting retaining wall repaired – all big projects which involved moving plants back and forth into holding beds and hiring people to do the work. I was ready for some small and manageable design challenges that would give me a bit of instant gratification – especially things I could do myself.

Make Corners Count

Corners can be awkward to reach with the lawn mower and can be an eye-sore. A side project, which made use of surplus material from a landscape make-over in my front yard, fixed a difficult corner very simply and at no cost. The surplus pebbles from the main project and a medium stone set vertically to prevent a groundhog from sheltering under a wooden walkway made my corner problem a thing of the past. I added an attractive pot planted with annuals. For me, this simple fix reemphasized the importance and delight of little things, those subtle touches of minimalist design, tiny bits of inspiration and surprise.

Themes and Variations

Some well-chosen perennials or annuals can change a dull or vacant corner into something special. The same plantings repeated at adjacent corners can create a theme. Themes and colour combinations can be maintained permanently or changed on an annual basis. A favourite semi-shade combo of mine is a variegated hosta paired with tall yellow irises. The contrasting shape and texture of the foliage is visually appealing. Statuary, wooden structures and ornamental pots are also good for corners and can be mobile with the help of a sturdy garden

dolly or an athletic spouse. Found or repurposed items can make interesting additions to your design so keep an eye open for street-side treasures during evening strolls and/or check out yard sales.

Use Orphan Space

For the frequently orphaned space under deciduous and coniferous trees there are several attractive possibilities – some more expensive than others unless you have access to free materials. In my garden two overgrown apple trees will be professionally pruned and the chips will be spread beneath a weeping spruce in our front yard. I will edge this circle using a manual edger to a depth of 10-12cm. This classical edge is now my favoured solution for border and free-standing beds. Dry-laid fieldstone (cracks left uncemented to let water penetrate the surface under the tree) can add more interest but is more labour and cost intensive. Plant spring ephemerals - perhaps *Mertensia* (Virginia blue bells) - under deciduous trees. Other longer blooming choices are *Pulmonaria* (Lungwort) or *Heuchera* (Coral Bells). *Pulmonaria* are attractive spring bloomers much beloved by hummingbirds and bees. With two or more cultivars you can create a textured ground cover of different shades of green with varied greyish polka dots that add interest all summer long. *Heuchera* cultivars now sport a range of foliage colours that are even more exciting.

Go Funky, Go Vertical

Not enough space to grow veggies? The quick fix is to go vertical. “Trees”, though not your usual trees, can include bean trees, squash trees, tomato trees and cucumber trees. The gardener must supply suitable supports for each of these “trees”.

Bean “trees” are easiest requiring only three or four stout 2.5-3 m poles firmly anchored in the ground and secured at the top with wire or rope. Plant the climbing bean seeds around the base of the poles. Once they start producing they don’t stop until the first hard frost, at which time any beans that haven’t been collected fresh can be dried and used for soups or baked beans in winter and some can be saved for planting next year’s crop.

A squash “tree” takes more engineering as the produce is considerably heavier. Although it became obvious to me that sturdier taller supports will be needed in 2016, I’m still very pleased with the results of my squash “tree” experiment last summer. Vines did not roam indiscriminately and fruits did not touch the

ground. Butternuts store well and I harvested enough to last the winter, providing “pumpkin” pies and tasty squash soups. Squash is in the same family as pumpkin and can be used as a substitute in recipes calling for pumpkin.

Some tomato plants have an indeterminate growth habit – they simply will not stop growing. This growth habit makes them the perfect candidate for tomato “trees”. At some point they need to be reined in with a bit of judicious pruning and will require sturdy support that is tall and wide. At my previous residence I could tie tomato plants to my fences. Creative supports, purchased or homemade, can be important structural components of our garden art.

Use Rock Mulch in Pots

This time-saving and plant-saving design tip will keep your planters healthy and happy. Our property is shared with many squirrels – browns, greys, reds and some curious combos. I’ve learned that applying a layer of small rocks on top of the soil in my containers prevents squirrels digging and frequently uprooting many plants. The rock mulch also helps to retain moisture and stifle weeds. With their amazing striations and shapes rocks are an attractive addition for whatever reason.

Get Creative With Composters

Composters often end up hidden in a corner. However, composting on site can be achieved in many ways without sacrificing artistic values. Consider using a large pot, a trench or a hugel (hügelkultur replicates the natural process of decomposition that occurs on forest floors). Containers can be works of art whether commercially obtained or home built. Our gardens are actually mini-ecosystems and regular composting will keep our “systems” healthy at very low cost. Healthy soil will extend the life span of our carefully chosen plants and our carefully planned landscapes.

Hopefully my rambling assembly of garden ideas has given you some inspiration and some new methods to add to your repertoire. If so, mission accomplished.