



SEVEN TIPS FOR PLANNING YOUR CAPITOL HILL GARDEN

by CHERYL CORSON

Few can resist the springtime urge to buy whatever is flowering at the garden center. But if you're about to re-think your entire yard, buy something potted for good cheer, go home, and create a garden plan so you can return and spend your plant dollars wisely.

Planning does take time, but in the long run the effort pays off. Your project will be installed in the most economical way, and your plants will have the best

chance for success, not only this season, but in years to come.

Here are some tips to get you started:

1. Make a map. Go outside with graph paper and a tape measure (30' tapes are nice) and map what you've got. Include doors, steps, walks, trees, drains, gutters, fences, water meters, outdoor faucets overhead wires and lights. Note dimen-

sions on your drawing, and using paper with four squares per inch, allow each square to represent one foot. When you're done, make several photocopies that you can draw on.

2. Take inventory. In your own yard check the condition of your fence, gutters, deck, and plants. Buy or borrow a shovel and dig a small hole about a foot deep. How's the soil? On a sunny day when you're home, use some copies of your

map and draw the parts of your garden that are in shade, checking every 2-3 hours. Knowing your sunlight is critical for plant selection. On a rainy day, go outside and see how your drains and gutters work. Next, look at your neighbors' yards. Maybe there's (still) an abandoned house to screen, or if you're lucky, a gorgeous flowering tree that you want to see from your future garden. Note important views on your map. Short on Latin? Don't worry about plant names. Simply note whether they're evergreen or deciduous (plants that lose their leaves in winter).

3. Be careful what you ask for. Do you travel a lot? Are you rarely home during daylight hours? Or do you have a home office with wireless Internet? Do you have a digging dog? Time for gardening? No interest in garden maintenance? There's a good design for everyone who's honest. Travelers can irrigate. The busy lobbyist can grow fragrant white night-blooming flowers. Digging-dog owners can build raised planters. Indifferent gardeners can have masses of easy-care perennials. Those working from home can have shady outdoor offices close to their routers. But you've got to ask yourself what you really need, and put your cards on the table.

4. Keep track of your ideas...the dreams and the reality. Whatever your filing style, get a box, binder, or accordion folder, and keep your maps, notes, contractor names, and plant tags in one, and dreamy pictures from magazines or the Internet in another. Did you see a nice tree blooming on your walk home? Try to write down where it was so you can tell someone who can help you identify it later.

5. Get professional help if you need it. If you're a contractor or you only need a planting plan, skip to the next tip. But many of us need outside help to realize our dream gardens. If you're really stumped or just short on time consider a professional landscape architect or designer. At a minimum, they can provide a consultation that will give you good de-



sign direction. They can also produce detailed plans and plant lists. If you already know what you want but lack brawn, consider going straight to a landscape contractor who can replace fences, build walkways, replenish soil, and remove unwanted materials that you could never get to the dump yourself. Or you may need a roofer to replace gutters, or a plumber to unclog a storm drain. Always do messy hardscape work before you plant, and check references before signing a contract.

6. Plant for year-round interest. Our gardens can be at least partially green all year, and bloom times can start in January with winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) and wrap up around Thanksgiving with autumn witchhazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) and camellias. Berry-bearing plants, tall grasses, and shrubs with colorful bark provide additional interest during the fall and winter. So create a year-round garden that will give you pleasure long beyond the daffodil, cherry blossom and azalea season that is upon us. On the Hill, horticultural help is available (and often free), through our local garden centers, the Capitol Hill Garden Club, the U.S. Botanic Garden (www.usbg.gov), and National Arboretum (www.usna.usda.gov). We are also fortunate to have excellent local master gardener programs, and Maryland's Home and Garden Information Center (<http://www.hgic.umd.edu/>) to answer horticultural questions.

7. Be a good neighbor. The charm of the Hill's close quarters can wear thin when home improvement time comes around. Discussing your garden plans with your neighbors before construction can create good will and save time and money. Neighbors can pool resources to build a new party wall fence saving precious space. Arranged in advance, an arborist can work on adjacent properties saving additional fees and minimizing disruption. If you know your neighbor plans to remove his large evergreen (that shades your yard), you can adjust your own planting design accordingly. Beyond common courtesy however, you (or your contractor) are also responsible for obtaining permits for fences, and for retaining walls above 18" high, from the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, or DCRA (<http://www.dcrd.dc.gov/>). You (or your contractor) are also responsible for contacting Miss Utility at least 48 hours before digging, so that underground utility lines can be flagged and damage prevented (www.missutility.net).

With plan in hand, it's back to the fun part – going to the garden center and selectively buying the plants that breathe life into your new garden oasis. Enjoy the season!

Cheryl Corson is a landscape architect that finds special pleasure in designing Capitol Hill gardens (www.cherylcorsan.com).



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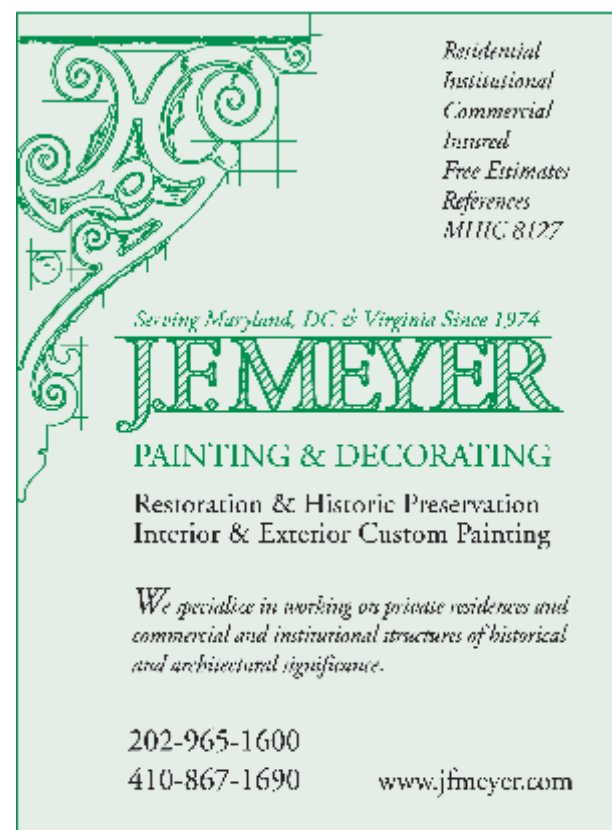
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