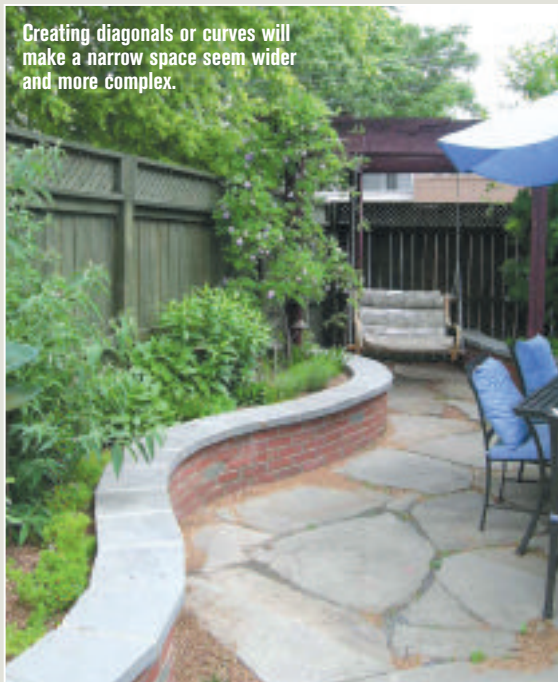


Creating diagonals or curves will make a narrow space seem wider and more complex.



Beautiful Gardens All Year Long



Broad-leafed evergreens are the backbone of the winter garden, and bulbs extend the period of bloom in early spring.



No matter how small, gardens need good structure. All photos ©Cheryl Corson

BY CHERYL CORSON

As autumn approaches, bedraggled August gardens apique our interest once again. Soon, mosquito prime-time will end, and we can actually inhabit our gardens for a few glorious months before winter. This is a good time to contemplate your garden's annual cycle, take stock of the year's successes and setbacks, and anticipate seasonal changes ahead.

Structure for Small Spaces

Gardens ground us in time and place. Living in a four-season climate gives us the chance to build change into our garden's structure with plants. While Capitol Hill's forgiving climate offers endless planting possibilities, it is spatial limitation that poses the greatest challenge to designers and homeowners alike.

What does this mean if we want a garden that is interesting, even attractive, 12 months a year? For one thing, no matter how small, gardens need good structure. This means creating well laid-out and built paths, building attractive fencing, preferably stained a rich color (backyards only), and perhaps adding some special garden ornament to treat the eye.

The Hill has many long and skinny outdoor spaces. When this is the case, it's always good to introduce design elements that counteract the "bowling-alley effect." This can mean introducing a diagonal or some curves with lawn, patio or raised plant beds so that you're not gazing straight down the space. It may seem counterintuitive, but interrupting a long narrow space cross-wise usually makes it feel wider. If you don't see the entire space in one glance, it will feel larger and more complex. It is human nature to outline spaces, to layout a planting bed 2 feet wide around the perimeter of the yard. Perhaps this is a remnant of some primitive survival mechanism. Fight the urge, and instead of allowing your fence line to dictate the interior shape of your garden, create a structure that will hold your interest even if there were no plants involved.

Plant for All Seasons

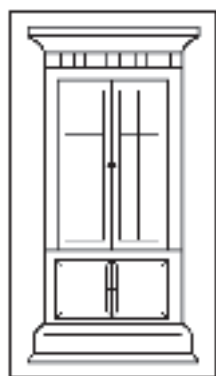
Fortunately however, most gardens have plants as well as hardscape. Again, taking small spaces into account, Capitol Hill gardens usually benefit from a limited plant palette. Even with lots of plants in a space, a smaller number of species will be more restful to the eye and make a space seem larger. Planting spring-flowering bulbs in fall offers those with small spaces the opportunity to extend their period of bloom in early spring as well as grow more plant varieties. Once springtime bulbs are done, their foliage disappears, and herbaceous perennials grow over the places where they rest until the following year. For a small investment of time and effort, bulbs grant a huge garden payoff. The Capitol Hill Garden Club sells a wide variety of bulbs at Eastern Market every fall.

We usually think of winter as the season most challenging for gardens, but in our mid-Atlantic region, having a beautiful garden in winter isn't hard at all. Broad-leafed evergreens are the backbone of the winter garden, and they thrive in our climate.

Expand your repertoire beyond evergreen azaleas. Try a fall blooming camellia (*Camellia sasanqua*), so much less likely to be zapped by frost than its spring-blooming cousin,

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Camellia japonica. Daphne odora offers handsome evergreen foliage and intoxicatingly fragrant early spring blooms. For evergreen ground covers, look to epimedium for dry shade, even under trees, Japanese painted fern (*Athyrium niponicum*) in moist shady spots, speckled lungworts (*Pulmonaria*) with their pink and blue March flowers, or the wide selection of hellebores that bloom for weeks. These and so many others are reason enough to relegate relentlessly invasive English ivy and periwinkle to the compost pile.

With good garden structure, your garden will love its winter coat. Maybe inaugurating a Capitol Hill winter garden tour would encourage paying more attention to this under-appreciated garden season.

Fall is upon us, so here are some enticing mid-Atlantic favorites that will show off until nearly Thanksgiving. In sun, the intense blue flowers of caryopteris make a perfect backdrop for the bright yellow Fireworks goldenrod (*Solidago rugosa* 'Fireworks') and purple New England asters (*Aster novae-angliae*). With space, try some bluestar (*Amsonia*), the only perennial whose foliage turns a bright gold in the fall. A shrub that delights late in the season is Beautyberry (*Callicarpa*), with its clusters of light purple berries loved by humans and songbirds alike. And you can always find room for fall blooming crocus, even if you may not have space for another bulb, the hefty tropical canna.

For good fall reading, try "The Garden in Autumn" by Allen Lacy (1990). If you usually trade and rarely buy plants, find a copy of S. Bender and F. Rushing's highly entertaining "Passalong Plants" (1993). And for the greatest impact, read them in your garden, enjoying the season.

Cheryl Corson is a landscape architect in private practice. She teaches landscape design at the US Botanic Gardens twice a year (www.cherylcorsan.com). ■