

LANDSCAPE DESIGN

Tips and ideas to help your landscape look its best

Story by Chris Olsen

Today Young and Tomorrow Old

Some of the most beautiful gardens are old, established landscapes. There are those of you that have been blessed with a garden rich in history and plant variety. That's why I love to drive around mature neighborhoods. But there are others, like myself, that live in a fairly new home. I love the conveniences of having a new house, such as the tall ceilings, custom accessories and yes ladies, plenty of closet space. But when it comes to the outdoors, most new landscapes are rather plain and immature. The charm of an older landscape is, therefore, lost. But don't let that stop you from creating your own garden paradise that is new but appears established. I have a few gardening tricks that just may help you accomplish this simple goal.

What I do in my own garden is embellish certain things such as statues, bird baths, etc. to look like priceless antiques overgrown with years of vegetation. Case in point, I have a rather large Buddha statue at the end of my pool. This big guy rests on a large concrete pedestal. Bold and visual, this new addition gives great impact whether you're inside or outside. Big to scale, your attention will be captured. Now remember, this Buddha head is new, so I wanted to soften its look and make it appear older, as though it's been sitting there for 20 years or so. To accomplish this, you just need a few ingredients such as a variety of different plants (I like using tropicals), *Tillandsias* (air plants), and some green sheet moss. Let your imagination go wild and mix and match different colors, textures and varieties of plants.

Each April brings forth a new look for my Buddha. I like to change plant varieties each year. Tropical plants are perfect for this job. They are inexpensive, easy to find and love the South's summer heat. First I start with the statue itself. I take a variety of *Tillandsias* and hot glue them to the concrete statue. The hot glue dries in seconds, it's not harmful to the *Tillandsias*, stands up to the weather (rain or sunshine) and easily peels off when need be.

Some of my favorite varieties of air plants are the *T.xerographica* (silver color foliage and large in size), *T. ionantha* (brilliant red foliage and purple flowers) the *T. duratii* with its curly leaves, and you can't do

without the *T. bulbosa* (looks like my hair does when I get out of bed in the morning).

Usually I glue these plants strategically in groupings so it looks more natural. You don't want to cover the whole statue. Leave some areas exposed to view. Now my Buddha looks as though I recovered it from the jungles of the Himalayas in India.

With the top finished, now I have to soften the pedestal. My pedestal sits on a flagstone surface. I love to give the illusion that the concrete pedestal is sitting in a flower bed. To achieve this, I took an assortment of different tropical plants that love the morning sunshine and afternoon shade.

First I start with height in the back and sides of the pedestal. I use the *Phoenix robelini* palm which looks like a fern. Then I move to the next layer. One of the easiest medium plants to grow in the summer is the *Anthurium*. Also known as the "Little Boy Flower" for reasons that are obvious but can't be discussed in print, this plant will bloom all summer long and grows to only about 18 inches tall. By mixing in some ferns such as the maidenhair fern (*Adiantum peruvianum*), the bird's nest fern (*Asplenium nidus*) and colorful bromeliads, you achieve softness and color. I also like to use variegated English ivy (*Hedera helix variegata*) that borders the grouping and drapes into the clear blue water of my pool below.

To look established, you want to make it appear as though these plants are growing in dirt. So I take each plant out of its original container and squish the root balls together so that each plant is next to another. The taller plants go in the back and staircase down toward the smallest plants, in this case the English ivies. Then to keep the soil from washing away and to conserve moisture, I went ahead and placed green sheet moss over all exposed root balls. You can find green sheet moss at local florist shops. (We actually sell it in bulk at Botanica Gardens in Little Rock.) A trick of the trade is to moisten the moss first. This makes it pliable and workable.

Once finished, water these plants about every other day during the growing season. In regards to the *Tillandsias*, just sprinkle them with water when you water the other



Gluing Tillandsias to any surface is easy. I just use a hot glue gun. Apply to the bottom of the plants and hold firm for one minute. You're done.

Photos courtesy of Chris Olsen.

plants. *Tillandsias* are so easy, just remember, they don't ever like to sit in water. That's why they are air plants. They are plants without roots for the most part.

As with most plants, remember to fertilize with an all-purpose fertilizer at least every month. Since these plants are not planted in the ground but instead are sitting on a hard surface, nutrients are lost with each watering. Routine fertilizing, with a liquid soluble food, will make your plants grow at minimum 300 percent better. Fertilizing is like planting bulbs...all that hard work with no instant results. But in just a few weeks, you'll be thanking me and just maybe you may want to invite me over for a margarita and show off your lush display.

The key to success is also plant selection. If you have a sunny location then tougher plants such as echiveras and sedums will do. Succulents are great for this job. They are low maintenance and thrive on neglect. In either case, you can take anything that looks new and make it look old.

Add age to your garden and patio with planted objects. All you need is just a few focal points to do the job. My planted Buddha by itself takes the show and creates a feeling of history and past. You would never guess that my landscape is only a few years old!

Happy Gardening! 🌿

Chris Olsen is the owner and landscape designer of Botanica Gardens in Little Rock. He is also a local TV personality in association with Today's THV 11. Check out his two new national DVD's at botanicagardens.com. For more information on Chris go to chrisholsen.com.



Overgrown with Tillandsias, this Buddha looks as if I just relocated it from the tropical jungles. Around the base of the head, I also planted common green Pothos that quickly grow up the sides of the face.

▲ By under planting a focal point such as this Buddha, you now have a point of interest that looks as if it has been there for years.

