

“Designing for Natural Elegance” (excerpt)

By Sara Bonn

How do unplanned wild planting create enchanting landscapes, while some home plantings fall flat? An easy way to create an engaging garden or foundation planting is to mimic nature’s planting patterns. In the wild, each area has its characteristic patterns of plant types, heights, and combinations.

Designing gardens with the patterns of nature in mind can give your home a timeless ease, along with a distinctive character that fits in well with the landscape. You can even invite desirable wildlife to the garden (and discourage the less welcome visitors) by providing the right plant layers.

Learn about your local wild landscapes. Take note of what kinds of plants dominate in your area. Are they evergreens? Deciduous trees? Grasses? Cacti? Find out what other layers of vegetation usually grow there with them. Are there small trees under larger ones? Flowering perennials mixed in with prairie grasses? Ephemeral wildflowers between shrubs on rocky outcroppings?

Nature centers often provide good local information. Ask the nature center staff to describe what the vegetation of a mature wild landscape looks like in your area. An internet search for “plant communities of (your state here)” should yield descriptions and pictures. Your local native plant society may also be a good resource. Finally, get outside and observe wild plants where they grow. Hike a trail and take pictures of scenes that especially interest you.

In the eastern United States, a common pattern is the forest. Tree canopies shade the shrubs and smaller trees, while herbaceous annuals or perennials thrive at the edges of the woods and in the occasional patch of sunlight. In a few square feet of forest, a toad can stay moist in the leaf litter while awaiting the arrival of insects at nearby flowers. A songbird can gorge itself on berries from the shrubs, invisible to hawks above. And a squirrel may run through the high canopy gathering seeds and nuts, safe from foxes and other predators below. The landscape is varied, and provides pleasant surprises for gardeners and children as the plants and animals grow and interact throughout the years.

Once you have a sense of the layers of vegetation in your local habitats, you are ready to look at your garden. Scale your plants to your lot and your house. In many places, having a tree that towers over the house endangers the roof as well as your insurability. A wild landscape might have a canopy layer between 70 and 120 feet above the ground. For your medium-sized garden, you could create a canopy 15 to 30 feet above ground. For a foundation planting, or for a very small lot, you might choose an 8-10 foot canopy, since taller trees might not be desirable so close to the house. Choose plants for the lower layers in proportion to the canopy.

Example:

On a quarter acre lot in an area of eastern forest, you might choose Eastern Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*), which matures at 15-25 feet high and wide, as the canopy layer. Beneath that, you might place Virginia Sweetspire (*Itea virginica*; cultivars range from 3 to 6 feet high), whose graceful drooping branches and flowers will complement the upright, spreading form of the redbud. A combination of Creeping Phlox (*Phlox subulata*), Smooth Blue Aster (*Symphyotrichum laeve*), and Heuchera (*Heuchera* spp.) will grace the ground layer with a fine to medium textured carpet of blue and purple all season long.

“Dividers to Make Your Garden Pop” (excerpt)

By Sara Bonn

Garden dividers frame our gaze and give us a sense of place, while hinting at discoveries beyond. A divider may be a fence, rocks or paving, a hedge, a large specimen plant, a sculpture, buildings, or even furniture. Dividers create different zones with different qualities. A cozy garden nook is more welcoming with a sheltering hedge, and a play area is more energizing with a border of rocks to climb on and hide behind. A small garden can feel larger when divided into distinctive spaces. A large area is more hospitable when it includes smaller places for people to relax and play within it.

To use dividers in your garden, first consider which areas have different uses. The transition from one area to another is an ideal place to try a divider. Next, stand in your space and consider: Are there specific features you would like to conceal or to emphasize? Place your divider where it can cover anything you don't want to see and show what you do want to see.

How big does that divider need to be? A divider that blocks less than one-third of your view (either horizontally or vertically) usually creates a comfortable area for play or relaxation. Larger dividers may feel isolating; however, using a large divider at the end of your property can screen the view of the next lot while framing the trees and sky beyond. The Japanese moon gate is a classic example of a large divider that feels welcoming because it frames an enticing view into the next garden.

Once you have an idea of the placement and size of your divider, decide what materials interest you most. Use your garden style as a guide to the most effective choices. A rustic garden can be a wonderful place for a wattle and daub fence, while an English country garden pops against a white picket fence. A minimalist garden may use sculpture or a feature rock to delineate between garden areas, while a parterre garden may rely upon boxwood hedges and brick paths. In a garden where accessibility is paramount or space is at a premium, the dividers may be different patterns and colors of hardscape marking the edges of patios and paths. Imagine a white concrete patio edged in a broad border of Mediterranean blue tile.

“Great Vegetable Garden Soils “(excerpt)

By Sara Bonn

For a gardener, little is more rewarding than successfully growing a luscious crop of vegetables to share with friends and family. Strolling through the garden in the late afternoon to gather home-grown cherry tomatoes for the evening meal is a pleasure and a satisfaction that few would not envy.

One of the keys to gardening success is to have great soil for the vegetables you are growing. The right soil can help plants grow larger, faster, and healthier. Soil plays a role in immunity to disease and insects. And great soils make for great-tasting vegetables.

Some gardeners are lucky enough to have naturally great soil. Others in the Mid-Atlantic area may be dealing with heavy clay soils. Near the coast, gardeners are likely to encounter very sandy soils. In this article, we will take a look at what soil is, how to identify the needs of your soil, and how to build up the soils you have to grow great vegetables.

What is Soil Made Of?

Soil is made up of four basic parts: rock, water, air, and organic matter. The main ways that you can improve your soil are by amending the rock and organic matter. Here is some background to help you understand your soil, and some easy tests you can do to find out what will make your soil better.

Rock particles

The rock in soil is generally in the form of tiny particles. We call the biggest rock particles sand. Smaller particles are called loam or silt. The tiniest particles are called clay. The size of the rock particles that you have in your garden affects your plants' roots can access water and air in their roots. Soil with a lot of sand in it drains easily, but dries out quickly. Clay helps soil hold more water, but it can sometimes hold so much water that the plants' roots don't get enough air. The best soil for growing plants has a lot of loam in it. Loam holds water long enough for the plants to get a long drink, but then drains and allows air to reach the roots.

You can easily tell whether your soil is mostly clay, mostly loam, or mostly sand. Dig up some soil from your garden area with a trowel. Pour a cup of water on the soil and let it soak in for a few minutes. Then take a handful of soil and squeeze it gently into a cylinder shape. Sandy soils will not stick together, and your soil will fall apart when you open your hand. Clay soils will form a cylinder that doesn't crumble. Loam soils will form a soft cylinder, which will break into pieces about two inches long when you hold it by one end. This is the ideal soil for growing vegetables.

Organic matter