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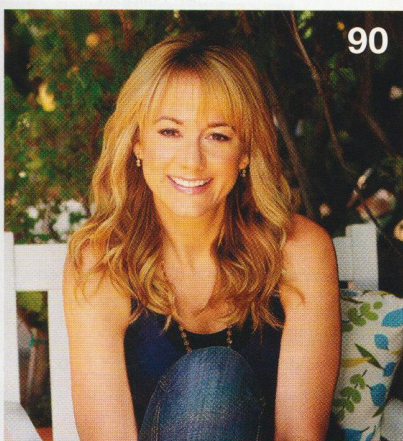
Designed by Barrett Landscape and Design in Dexter, Oregon.

Photo by Allan Mandell

Photo of spring crocuses by Kate Frank



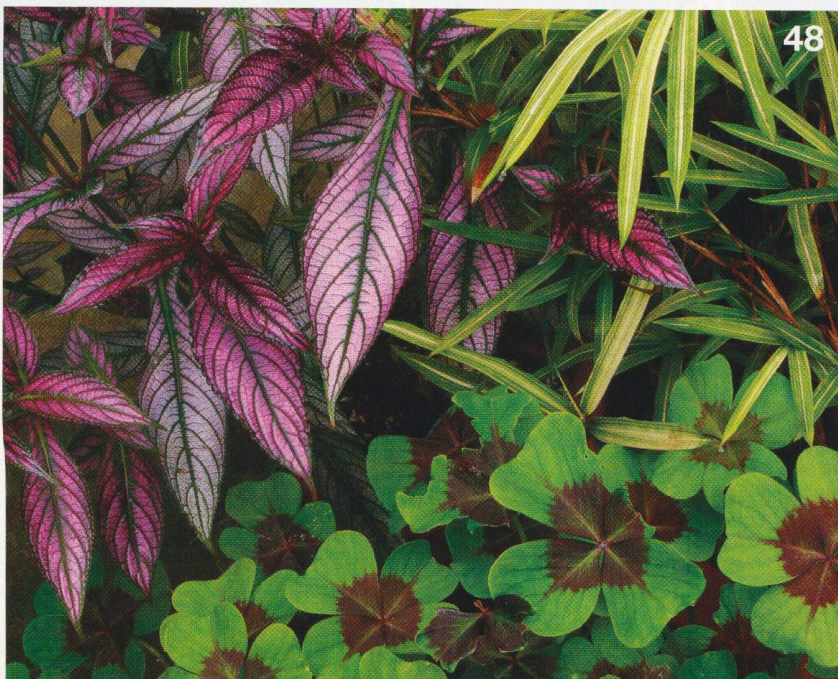
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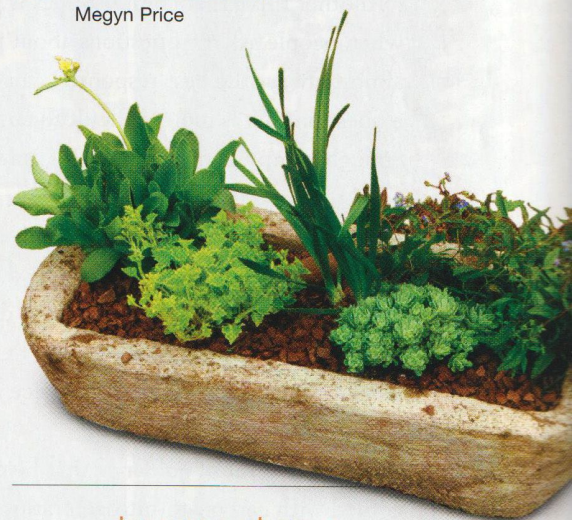
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The Taunton Press
Inspiration for hands-on living®




Two secrets to great design

Establishing layers and creating patterns are the keys to crafting an informal garden

BY ANN E. STRATTON

COLORING OUTSIDE THE LINES takes creativity and a good bit of courage. Bryan and Cassandra Barrett have both. As a contractor and garden designer, respectively, this husband-and-wife duo makes a living conceptualizing, installing, and maintaining gardens under the name Barrett Landscape and Design. There are no formulas for the gardens they create. At their home in Dexter, Oregon, you won't find symmetrical groupings, tidy rows, or manicured shrubs. Their garden has a fluid, natural look. And yet, with all its layers, ornaments, and myriad of plants, there is nothing messy about it. Like any well-designed informal garden, it maintains a sense of order without looking rigid. But how, exactly, is that accomplished? How do the Barretts unify so many seemingly random plants to create something so beautiful? Or rather, how do they color outside the lines and do it so well? Their approach is simpler than it might look.

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A photograph of a lush garden path. The path is paved with dark stones and is flanked by a variety of plants. In the foreground, there are several large, light pink poppies with dark centers, interspersed with smaller red and purple flowers. To the left, there are large, white, spherical flowers and a tall, slender plant with long, thin leaves. In the middle ground, there are bright yellow shrubs and a small, blue spruce tree. In the background, there is a dark metal trellis structure and more dense foliage. The overall scene is a vibrant and eclectic mix of plants.

From poppies to spruce trees, this garden boasts an eclectic mix of plants. But they all harmonize, thanks to patterns. If you want to add patterns to your own garden, start by buying more of a plant you already have.



STEP 1

Pay attention to every layer of your garden

THE BARRETTS' GARDEN is exceptional for many reasons: dramatic year-round color, meandering gravel paths, and contrasting textures, for example. But less obvious is the way each level of the landscape steps down gradually—from the tallest Thompson blue spruce (*Picea pungens* 'Thompson', USDA Hardiness Zones 2–8) to the Barretts' clapboard farmhouse

to the epimedium (*Epimedium* spp. and cvs., Zones 5–9) cascading onto walkways. Each element is integrated. This effect is, of course, intentional. Smooth transitions and dense beds are what happens when gardeners know how to layer—and Cassandra has layering down to an art form. For her, every garden consists of four tiers, and each tier has a job to do.



Upper story

LINK THE SKY TO THE LANDSCAPE

It ought to be a given that every yard comes with at least a few 80-foot-tall trees, but that's often not the case in newly constructed neighborhoods. If your landscape lacks shade trees and you have the space, don't waste any time before planting a few cedars or oaks.

Secondary upper story

TIE THE LANDSCAPE TO THE HOUSE

The taller your house, the taller this tier needs to be. A general rule to follow is to select trees and shrubs that will mature at 8 to 15 feet tall for single-level homes and 25 to 30 feet tall for two-story homes.

If you're starting a new garden, Cassandra recommends buying trees and shrubs first. Use them to create a frame around your yard. Plant them in groups along your property line for privacy and in the corners of your lot to soften its angles. It doesn't take many of these plants to give beds structure year-round and to create focal points throughout the garden.

Midstory

MARRY THE HOUSE TO THE GARDEN

This tier consists of eye-level perennials and shrubs, which describes the majority of plants in a garden.

The midstory is also the place where you want to include several signature plants. You need only a few to add some wow factor to your garden. Keep an eye out for ones that don't require much room around their base so that you can plant shorter perennials underneath.

Ground story

ADD ORNAMENTS TO THE BEDS

Low-growing plants, measuring 1 foot tall or less, are best admired up close. Think of them as jewelry, with their delicate textures and vibrant colors. They're perfect for accessorizing borders, paths, and entryways.

STEP 2

Fuse the layers with patterns

FULLY DEVELOPING EACH STORY of the garden creates the type of rich, layered beds that make the Barretts' landscape so inviting. But there is a strategy, of course, to filling up each tier

with plants. Selecting colors, shapes, and textures that complement each other is essential, as is arranging plants in an aesthetically pleasing way. That's when creating patterns comes into play.



Plant selection

PICK THREE COLORS AND A TEXTURE

The secret to tying all four stories together can be summed up in one word: repetition. In the early stages of planning, the Barretts picked a color scheme (burgundy, blue, and chartreuse) and a texture (prickly conifers) to recur in the garden. The Barretts repeat them just enough to give them prominence, which is roughly every 20 feet. "That's all the eye can really take in at one time," Cassandra explains. With the conifers and the burgundy, blue, and chartreuse always in the line of vision, Cassandra is then free to add almost any other plant that suits her fancy. The ever-present color scheme and texture maintains a cohesive look, even as new plants are introduced.



GETTING DOWN & DIRTY

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, Bryan and Cassandra's garden is remarkably low maintenance. The Barretts (photo, left) do every chore themselves. As small-business owners, however, they're often strapped for time. Here are a few tricks they use to keep their 2½ acres picture-perfect.

- › **PRUNING.** Forget about cutting the garden back in fall. The Barretts wait until after winter's last frost to tidy up their perennials. They also don't prune the same plant more than once a year. They shape multistemmed flowering shrubs and weeping trees in late spring, late-winter bloomers in early fall, and deciduous trees in winter.
- › **WEEDING.** Never stop weeding, not even in winter. For the occasional problem area, Cassandra uses a preemergent herbicide,

such as the organic Preen Vegetable Garden Weed Preventer.

- › **FERTILIZING.** It wastes time and money to fertilize every plant. In spring, Cassandra sprinkles wood ash around her peonies to intensify their color, and organic, slow-release fertilizer around vegetables, fruit trees, and several heavy-blooming perennials. That's it.
- › **WATERING.** The Barretts don't have an underground irrigation system, but they save time (and water) by buying the right tools. For overhead watering, they use a Gardena timer and oscillating sprinkler. For hand watering, Cassandra swears by her Gilmour 8-ply garden hose, American-made brass nozzle, and a brass quick connector with male and female fittings.

Web
EXTRA

To identify many of the plants shown in this article, visit FineGardening.com/extras.



Plant placement

THINK "TRIANGLES"

Staggering plants, as opposed to planting in rows, further interlocks the garden's many elements. Cassandra practices what she calls "triangulation"—in short, thinking in threes. From zigzagging irises along a pathway to positioning a pair of burgundy-leaved shrubs at the foot of a red strapleaf Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Atrolineare', Zones 5–8), Cassandra creates triangular patterns everywhere. She buys multiples of every color, shape, and texture, and disperses them among the garden's lower three stories. Loosely working within triangles keeps the patterning subtle, the tiers intertwined, and the landscape's overall look informal.

Ann E. Stratton is an assistant editor.

*See *invasive alert* on page 13.