

Defining Space with Plants

A landscape designer explains how to connect people to outdoor landscapes by using different planting techniques.

by MONIQUE PAPA ZIAN ALLEN

For 20 years, I have worked with plants in landscape design, installation and maintenance. In that time, I have participated in numerous successful projects, along with a few that were less than great. Often, it has been these struggles to succeed that have been the best guides to honing my skills as a landscape professional. My intention here is to articulate what I have learned about the transformative power of plants and about those factors that always are present in successful, well-received landscape projects. I will develop the concept of defining space with plants and show how the implementation of this concept connects people to the built environment.



Harmony in the landscape can be created when spaces are well-defined with plants.

In general, what I mean by “defining” in the context of plants is their ability to convey information about the built environment to the people using it. The plants should be able to enhance and complement the use of buildings, both commercial and private, and simultaneously add to the enjoyment of outdoor spaces around those buildings. Success is measured by how mere space is transformed into a desirable destination — a place — that can be named, used and remembered. When defining space with plants happens at its best, growers sell more plants, landscape designers become an integral part of the planning process, architects and builders take more pride in their finished work and users enjoy and utilize these spaces-made-places in more interactive and healthy ways.

Beyond improving ecological balance, plants have a unique capacity to enliven open space and convey information about how the space around the built environment might be used. Good definition of open space results in plant material “speaking” to users; they subtly suggest when and where people might “come in,” “keep out,” “sit and relax,” “stop and look” and “enjoy!” As living entities, plants have the power to transform the sharp edges of buildings and to rein in the loose, unbound character of open spaces. Green plant material (the softscape), interspersed with care among entryways, sidewalks, fenced areas, stone walls and so forth (the hardscape), has the capacity to define the space ahead as either a welcoming or a repelling destination.

While people vary greatly in the attention they pay to plants, it seems safe to generalize that the absence of plants (not to mention the presence of withering plants) in the built environment probably would cause a feeling of disconnection from the world around them. By nature, human beings have at least a subconscious relationship to the plants present in their everyday lives; they may take these plants for granted if they are not attractive, but hardly anyone, in my experience, isn't touched by the health and beauty of thriving plants. As a landscape designer, I feel inclined — even obligated — to think hard about the plants that get used in our urban and suburban designs, and any old plant in any old place (just for the sake of planting something) will not do. Deliberate attention to the connection between plants and human beings is among the primary guides to successful design, completion and sustainability of any project.

Beginning in the retail nursery trade, this “obligation” is noticeable immediately in the careful layout of plant stock. Every grower who deals with retail clientele knows there is a relationship between how and where plants are displayed and their sustainability in the nursery prior to purchase. There also is a defining relationship between good placement of plant material in the garden center and the enticement of shoppers to buy it. In the realm of design/build, understanding the end use of a space and the ultimately desired “sense of place” will lead to proper plant choices and arrangement within the landscape.

If those of us in the plant business have a mission (beyond our own livelihoods), it is this: To bring the plant world into the built environment in ways that perpetuate its growth and development and honor the fundamental relationship between plants and people. In my experience, this mission, which might be defined as “creating a memorable place,” can be achieved only when architectural and horticultural efforts are exerted collaboratively. Sizable and numerous planting beds drawn on architectural plans are just one small piece of a larger process, and they do not guarantee a successful design. Without reference to light exposure, soil and drainage conditions, plant zones, seasonal variations in growth cycles and so on, a landscape design is doomed to fail. When an appreciation of the microenvironment to be planted is followed by careful plant selection, placement, installation and maturation management, the result is a well-defined and energized outdoor place. Alone, generous allocation of land to



A mature and diversely planted border (top) offers visual impact while also differentiating spaces. A newly planted border differentiates property lines now with the promise of privacy later.



planting beds usually is overlooked unless plant performance is significant. Where plants do well, people do well because, consciously or subconsciously, a good relationship between them indicates comfort and safety in the built environment.

These observations support my recommendation to planning teams that focusing in depth on the placement of plant material early in the planning process is the single, most important factor in guaranteeing a successful landscape. By successful, I mean a landscape that is not only beautiful at the beginning of its life, but whose growth and well-being lends itself to defining and enhancing the built environment over many years.

To take this recommendation one step further, let me give a few examples. First, imagine a busy street with no vegetation, or even better, one with failing trees. Now imagine that same street lined with thriving trees. Which makes you feel better? Which street promotes comfortable and safe feelings and invites you along for a stroll? An answer other than the tree-lined street is simply unfathomable to me. Streets defined with living, breathing trees offer a “sense of place” where the air smells fresher, building and traffic noises are muted, sunlight is filtered and vistas are framed more gracefully. People on this street undoubtedly will be more energized and happier than they would be



Distinct orientation from a boxwood hedge (*Buxus sempervirens*) around this patio provides a sense of invitation.



Plants surrounding a walk help to orient movement while offering visual interest.

on a street without healthy plants. These benefits speak to the fundamental human desires for comfort, safety and beauty in the environment. Those same elements are among the defining characteristics of wonderful cities, pleasant towns and good neighborhoods. More than spectacular buildings, grand plazas, artful stone walls or magnificent, wrought-iron fencing, what welcomes human beings most in the built environment is its living, thriving plant life.

As landscape designers, we try to “get hooked into” the planning process early. That way, we can explore with architects, builders and homeowners certain techniques that can be used to define and enhance their properties with appropriate plant material. Prior to defining those techniques, let me share with you five good questions to ask yourself or your clients to determine which methods will best suit the landscape needs.

In what ways can we differentiate space within the legal boundaries of the site?

What is needed for good orientation, easy use and access to the site’s entrance(s), circulation patterns and other amenities?

What possibilities exist for outdoor enclosures (with plants) to create people-friendly locations?

Which areas of the site will profit most from planting highlights?

Where is the most favorable setting for the site’s anchor planting?

Differentiation within bounds. The basic, defining element of any property is its legal boundaries. With property lines,



Set within a ‘Vermeulen’ yew hedge (*Taxus × media* ‘Vermeulen’), this parking area is screened by a strongly planted enclosure that improves the views throughout the parking lot.

this is accomplished through surveys and registered documents. Once the outer bounds are known, the creative process of differentiating interior space within these bounds can begin. In private property, differentiation begins with the construction of the home and its major circulation patterns. The remaining land around these constructed elements, however, often is left open with little or no differentiation. The same often is true of many public properties. Differentiation within bounds is the technique of examining the landscape as a whole and choosing how to divide the land within itself and sometimes

how to demarcate legal boundaries, as well. Through some rough diagramming, we come to understand how the landscape should “read” as a whole. Using a survey of the land, we create a number of tracing paper overlays in order to “see” the potential for layers of differentiation. Overlays usually show the following aspects of a property:

- means of egress to and from the site and buildings;
- circulation patterns in and around the site;
- views that are desirable or undesirable;
- exposures that need protection; and
- destinations that will be developed.

This type of simple planning helps to pinpoint areas where plants ultimately can do the defining work of separating and demarcating shifts in the usage of space. Differentiation sets up visual cues for navigating the landscape, no matter how large or small. This technique also lends itself to opportunities for that element of surprise so coveted in landscape design. By “hiding” one space from another, mystery comes onto the scene, enlivening and energizing the overall design. Differentiation within bounds also is a technique that can produce privacy in close-knit areas, create the effect of larger space by borrowing views and hide less desirable elements through screening. Well-mixed borders and even formal hedges differentiate space in ways that improve overall perceptions. By making outdoor “places” out of formerly undefined spaces, the differentiation within bounds technique teases the elements of comfort and connection out of the landscape — elements at the very heart of our mission as “plant people.”

Orientation. Our busy lifestyles set us on multitasking courses and make us want to find the shortest distance between any two points. To suggest that as designers or builders, we can force a busy individual

Nestled amid a large parking lot, this corporate employee break area is enclosed by a grove of single-stemmed 'Heritage' river birch (*Betula nigra* 'Heritage'), creating a destination of comfort and repose.



An oasis in this private landscape is created by a constructed pond that is highlighted with a lush and diverse group of plants.

Some plants to get started with

Appreciable Anchors

Acer griseum (paperbark maple; zones 4 to 8)
Cornus kousa (Kousa dogwood; zones 5 to 8)
Pinus flexilis 'Vanderwolf's Pyramid' ('Vanderwolf's Pyramid' upright pine; zones 4 to 7)
Stewartia monadelpa (tall stewartia; zones 5 to 8)

Great Groves

Betula nigra 'Heritage' ('Heritage' river birch; zones 4 to 9)
Cornus florida (Eastern flowering dogwood; zones 5 to 9)
Liquidambar styraciflua (American sweet gum; zones 5 to 9)
Ulmus parvifolia (Chinese elm; zones 5 to 9)

Happy Hedgers

Ilex verticillata 'Red Sprite' ('Red Sprite' winterberry; zones 3 to 9)
Itea virginica 'Merlot' ('Merlot' Virginia sweetspire; zones 5 to 9)
Spiraea japonica 'Magic Carpet' ('Magic Carpet' Japanese spiraea; zones 4 to 8)
Syringa meyeri 'Palibin' (dwarf Korean lilac; zones 3 to 7)

Distinct Differentiators

Acer saccharum 'Green Mountain' ('Green Mountain' sugar maple; zones 3 to 8)
Cornus officinalis (Japanese cornel dogwood; zones 5 to 7)
Metasequoia glyptostroboides (dawn redwood; zones 5 to 8)
Parrotia persica (ironwood; zones 4 to 8)

down a meandering path is to be presumptuous about the path's power, not to mention our own. It is necessary to have more than just a carved-out place to walk to orient people along a path. Planted barriers and openings leading to a specific destination can and do, however, set up visible guidelines for the intended route. As a busy person myself, I often tend to walk with my head slightly down and have come to appreciate plant design and placement that can be picked up by my

peripheral vision. Such peripheral elements work to indicate direction by squeezing or stopping circulation so that it is oriented through the landscape as the design program requires. This technique is easier to use in the private landscape than in public settings where plantings would have to be thicker, taller, bolder and sometimes "painfully prickly" to prevent the inevitable cut-through path made by people in a hurry.

Still, in public or commercial places

where plants are used for orientation in a thoughtful program of spatial use and architecture, this technique can be extremely successful. Take, for example, a patio in either a private or public setting; if the desired entry and exit are to be from a single point, plants can be arranged all around that opening to direct passage to and from the patio. Simultaneously, the space becomes more beautiful and therefore more inviting. Hardly anyone will perceive that they are being forced to walk in a certain pattern, but they will know subliminally how to move in or out of the space simply through its plant definition. Again, mission accomplished. How lovely and comforting to be oriented outdoors by well-placed plants as our guides.

Enclosures. To be enclosed by plants may be a gardener's delight. To others, it may feel a bit like a "Little Shop of Horrors." Enclosure is a technique that needs to be tempered to the desires and comfort zones of its potential users. For obvious reasons, an enclosure that works in a suburban park setting or in a private landscape might be inappropriate in downtown areas of a city. Hedging is a good example of the enclosure technique. As noted earlier, hedges often are used to differentiate space, but they also can enclose space and give it prominence in the landscape. Enclosing space with plants has the dramatic potential to create "rooms" that lend charm and intimacy to a landscape. Walkways, patios, decks or even a garden can be enclosed by a low hedge or by groundcover to give them more presence or focal interest. Tall

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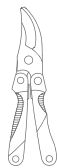


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The entry to the stately home is honored with a formal garden anchored by a beautiful cutleaf Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum* var. *dissectum*).



Even in winter, this graceful Eastern flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*) is inviting in an anchor space by creating a "sense of place" in the landscape.

evergreens arranged in an arch might hold and define a space by creating a protective enclosure or a backdrop for other elements. Plants set up along a fence often enhance the beauty of such hard-scape features by softening and/or bringing attention to them. The wondrous element in the enclosure technique is its capacity to expand into a third dimension. Imagine the view from a second- or third-story window that overlooks the canopies of trees. Imagine a patio in the heat of summer set with a grove of trees that provide a cool ceiling of shade. Both that view from above and that shade below are people-friendly aspects that define space with plants while connecting people to nature and bringing that

"sense of place" that encourages frequent use. Other aspects of mission fulfillment created by the three-dimensional enclosure technique are wind and sun protection, havens for birds and enhancement of outdoor sounds, like falling water, soft breezes and birdsong.

Highlights. Plant highlights create vistas from near and far that break open the possibility for an "aha" moment in nature. People in urban settings spend so much time indoors. We work in buildings, shop in malls and sleep, read, eat and think in our homes. For those of us in northern climates, cold weather forces us indoors for even longer stretches of time. Our houses and office buildings are equipped with windows for obvious reasons of health and natural light. While the views from these windows may not be vital to life itself, they do play an absolutely integral part in how we feel, work and play indoors. How often have any of us booked a hotel room requesting a view facing the alley or the wall of another building? (Probably never — unless we were traveling on the cheap.) We request the rooms with ocean, park or skyline views that enhance the quality of our hotel experience. Certainly finding a house or an apartment with a view is among the significant challenges to well-being in the city, not to mention in crowded suburbs. Even a pleasant view can be hard to find at an affordable price. Regardless of that challenge — and it can be huge — highlighting a small, outdoor space with the right plants can mitigate the lack of views and delineate a nook or a corner as a green "place." A collection of multiple plants

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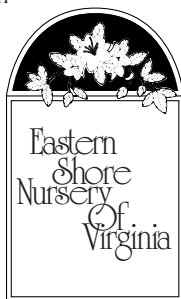


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within the angle of view from a window, door or pathway highlights the landscape and provides immediate and soothing connections with the natural world. A single bench placed neatly under a small grove of river birch is enough to induce a city dweller to go for a good walk just to get there. Plants that surround a constructed pond with a small spillway graciously offer the potential of a resting place and time for thought and reverie. Green highlights in the landscape feed people's souls in the city or in the suburbs, making them feel more at home wherever they are.

Effective utilization of highlights in the landscape enlivens an entire area by defining the space with the form and structure of well-chosen plants. When taken one step further, green highlights become even more inviting by incorporating plants that flower, give fruit or offer tantalizing fragrances. People are drawn to highlights in ecosystems for more than sensual reasons. They might follow the plant's seasonal changes with curiosity. They might take pride in learning the plant's name. They simply might enjoy passing by it.

Anchoring. Anchoring is the technique most widely used and very often without consideration of any of the other defining techniques. We all know the ubiquitous feature plant placed at the side of the suburban front door — the same plant that so often flourishes only to crowd the entryway to a lovely home rather than anchoring it long-term. Although regularly and often improperly overused, anchoring still is an important defining technique. It simply needs to be thought out well in advance of placement. Anchoring architecture, landscape beds and other outside elements draw attention to the hoped-for "sense of place" in the built environment. Sometimes a good anchor plant can transfer attention away from shortcomings in the outdoor space and reorient the onlooker to better features in the overall landscape. An anchor plant can be a new addition or a pre-existing plant that is brought into focus. In combination with other defining techniques, an anchor plant becomes a powerful visual:

- with differentiation within bounds, it can demarcate the beginning or end of a space;
- with orientation, it can become a pivot point around which to walk;
- with enclosure, it can become the sentinel(s) that guards an entrance and welcomes visitors; and
- with highlights, it can determine the symmetry and balance of the vista.

A private entry is set off with plantings that highlight a strong, granite lamppost and the American flag.



On its own, an anchor plant is a focal point where significant interest is directed — the glory of a magnificent plant's presence expresses itself in the singularity of its use. No wonder the anchor technique is so popular in the trade; deep down, we love plants and want to look at them. What better way to pay homage to a plant than to place it prominently alone where it will command our attention, admiration and joyous, inevitable connection to the natural world.

Planning for definition. The potential for defining space with plants is infinite. If thoughtfully and collaboratively undertaken and executed by a well-rounded planning team, built environments can be transformed into lively places where people live, work and interact with one another. Any landscape worth the planning effort is a space worthy of definition with the right plants. Properly chosen, placed, installed and managed plants that have thrived in the care of professional growers can thrive again in their new environment for years to come.

The defining techniques discussed in this article, while deserving real consideration in renovation efforts, are most easily incorporated when considered up front in the planning process for new projects. Whether building condominiums, office complexes, private homes, parks, schools or playgrounds, early, collaborative forethought about how plants will be used in the landscape to define the outdoor space associated with these structures is key to their long-term usability, sustainability and beauty. True, it will cost money to begin this process early and may even increase the overall landscape budget.



The rich, autumn color of tall stewartia (*Stewartia monadelphica*) solidifies the power of this majestic specimen used as an anchor in the garden.

Nevertheless, this investment in time, effort and money always pays off.

Whether we are involved in the growing of plants, the designing of outdoor living spaces or the installation and/or care of landscapes, we "plant people" are by our choice of work intimately connected to plants. For those of us who really care about plant life, growth and sustainability in the built environment, there always are opportunities to communicate that connection and our mission to the outside world. Thriving plants simply make great "places" of the built environment and entice people to want to be there. They make people happy, and that makes our businesses thrive, too.

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