

SMALL Space, BIG Challenge

*Several concepts
should be considered
when designing for
small spaces.*

by MONIQUE PAPA ZIAN ALLEN

“**P**lace is security, space is freedom: we are attached to one and long for the other.” When I first read these words by the scholar and author Yi-Fu Tuan from his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, I had an immediate “aha” moment. After almost 20 years of garden-making, I felt he had summed up in one brief statement all that I had been aiming for when designing and building landscapes for my clients.

In essence, the art of landscape design is just that — creating comforting, useful places where we feel protected and safe. The ultimate presentation of the garden is the result of analyzing three elements: the people, the space and the materials.

There’s a special challenge when one of these elements is constrained, yet there’s rarely a time when all three are without some unique limitation. In particular, I would like to discuss the confines of space and how not having much of it can bring up a whole host of hurdles when designing a landscape.

Summing up small. The size of a space easily can be debated as a matter of perspective. However, there are three distinct characteristics that can be used to determine whether a space should be considered small in the realm of landscape design.

Small spaces typically have a restricted or odd parcel footprint. For example, the property lines may be in close proximity to a building so the landscape is easily seen from only one or two views, and/or the lay of the land creates difficult access or uncomfortable use.

Architectural structures also may have an impact on the size of a landscape. The structures within the property might produce recesses that confine or cut off areas and visually impact and/or obstruct views and access in some way.

And finally, the existing mature plants on — or surrounding — the land may create a competitive setting for resources, such as ground space, soil area, light and rain infiltration.

Whether you’re dealing with a 2,500- or a 250-square-foot area, there may be constraining features that require special consideration. All landscape projects need to

be well-analyzed before they are designed, but small spaces need an additional level of scrutiny to avoid the most common design mistakes.

There is an inevitable truth to designing landscapes, regardless of the size: The client will always have a long list of desires to be met — certain uses for the space, desired plants, people and events that must be considered ... and then there is the dog.

Small spaces require a level of restraint in the program for the space and in the use of materials. If restraint and careful planning are not employed early in the process, it's very easy to end up with a cramped feeling due to interrupted circulation, overcrowded planting and dead-end or busy views — not to mention a potential maintenance headache. When careful consideration is given to the following design details, the end result will be a fulfilling “place.”

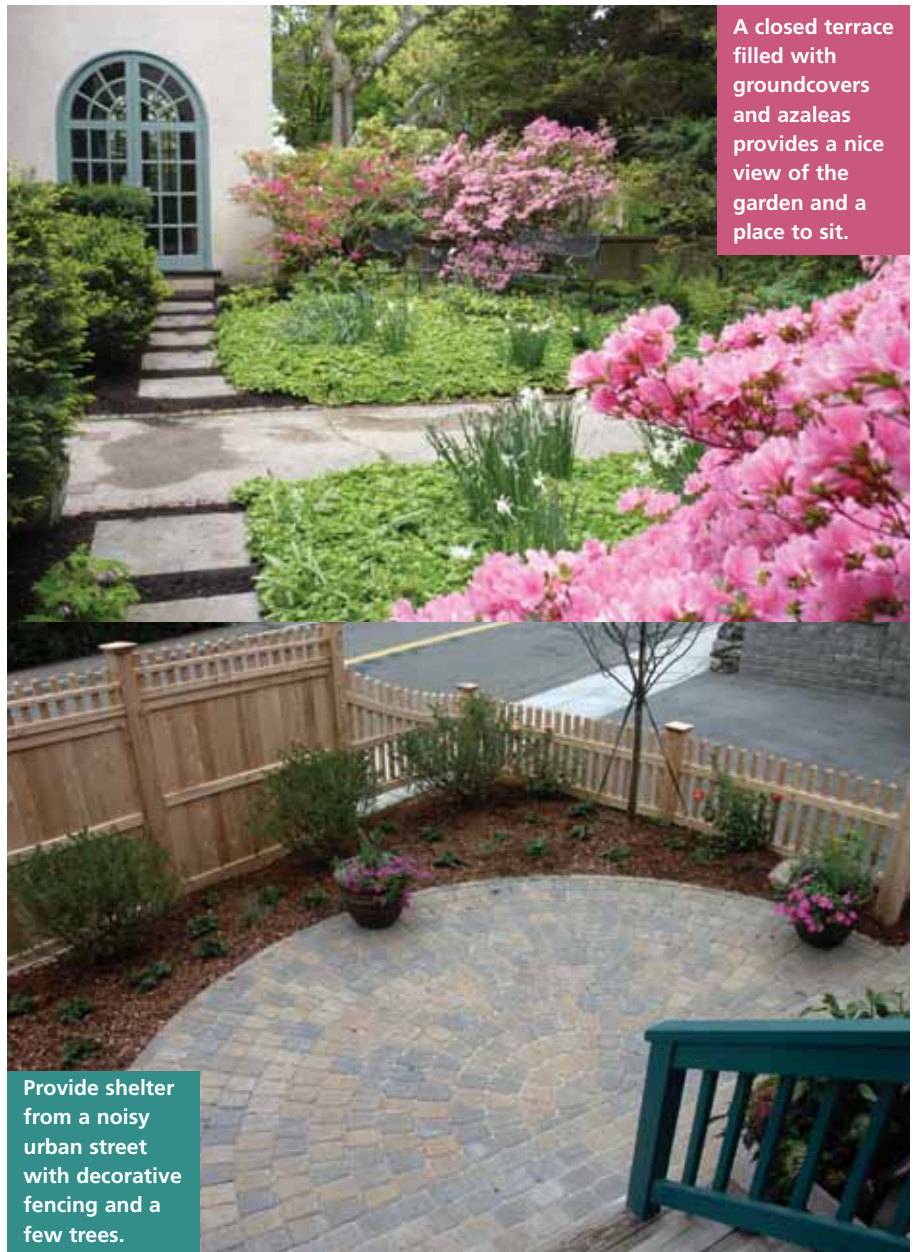
Plan for usefulness. The program of use for small gardens is the most fundamental component to understand before the design process gets fully underway. Is this space going to be used for viewing? Playing? Eating? Entertaining? Walking? Sitting quietly alone? Will Fido need a spot? Will it be all of the above? Understanding the main purpose of the space is pivotal in the planning process.

If there is only one use outlined for this space, then the design will be simpler. For instance, an area to sit and read requires placement for a seat within the planted space. If the use is play, then the bulk of the space will be open, possibly with a play structure, and the garden elements will be on the periphery. Truth is, for most of us, the criteria for landscape design usually carry multiple programs of use for the land. As a result, the small space sets up some hurdles.

Layering elements so they have multiple uses promises functional success, even within the small footprint. For example, consider a patio that abuts the lawn with no garden beds around it so that play can overlap onto the hardscape surface. Perhaps a portion of the driveway area could utilize pavers for the surface so that there's an opportunity for overflow use during a bigger party — a true courtyard.

Decks and patios in small spaces must flow seamlessly so there's never the feeling of being penned in or overly segmented. Limit deck railings and increase the length and width of steps so they can double as seats and places to position planted containers — a highly effective element in small landscapes.

And if, amid all this setup for entertaining and playing, your client maintains a



hankering for a quiet place to sit, that comfy seat tucked right into a planted garden works wonders — and it doubles as a focal point if placed in one of the central view angles.

Cue the view. Because of the confines that create them, the views into and out of the small garden are crucial to its success. It's not uncommon for the small urban landscape to have only one distinct view. Therefore, a well-sited focal element will take the bulk of the visual load — this can be anything from a tree to a bench or a piece of artwork.

Many suburban gardens have multiple short views, which can up the ante and make determining where to put a focal element extremely challenging. In colder climates, always take into account what the garden looks like in the winter and which window will carry the predominant

view. In warmer climates, where year-round use is possible, weigh the import of each view in order to determine the best placement for a focal element.

A vital consideration when it comes to views in a small-space landscape is to be certain that items less interesting to the eye — a grill, shed or air-conditioning unit — be placed smartly or screened. This may entail hiding these items behind other design elements, such as a hedge, wall or section of decorative fencing.

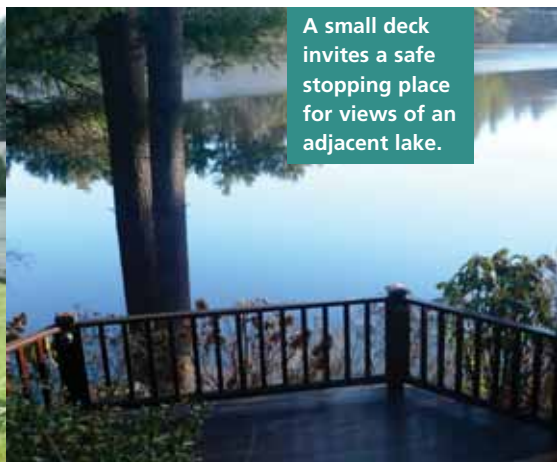
Be conscious of circulation. Getting in, around and out of the landscape must be comfortable. There's nothing worse than feeling as though passage is interrupted or obstructed. Careful design of walkways, steps and lawn areas pays off greatly in the final design.

A common mistake is to pinch the paths as a space-saving measure. Humans have

This narrow passage serves as a walk, patio and "place space" all at once.



A small deck invites a safe stopping place for views of an adjacent lake.



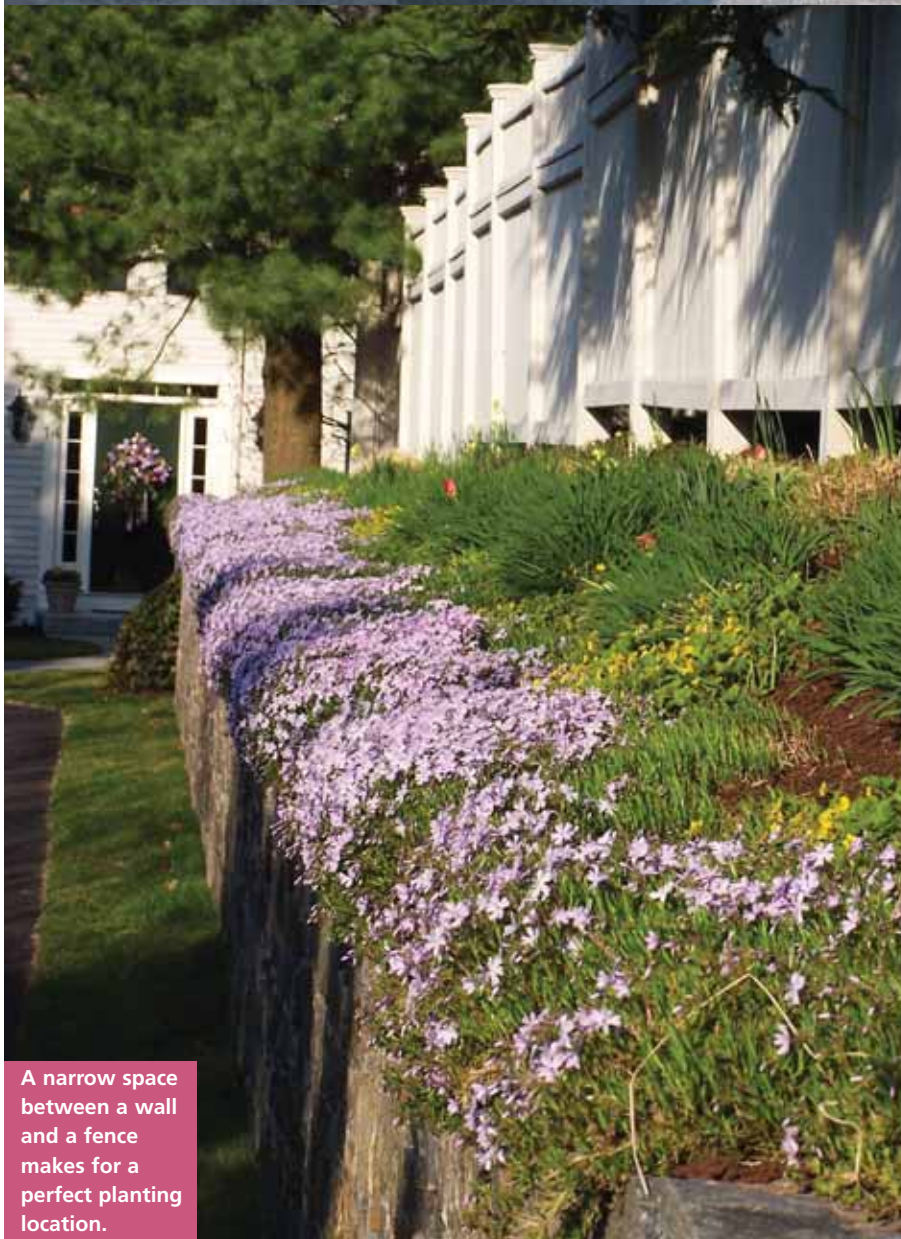
specific requirements regarding comfort that cannot be shortchanged. A path that is only 2 feet wide will make even the thinnest people feel as if they need to sashay sideways into the landscape. Keep paths 30 to 36 inches wide so they are comfortable for one person at a time to travel. Additionally, it's wise to use a level surface for a main path. As alluring as an uneven fieldstone path may be within a garden bed, it's not a comfortable surface for a path that has high use year-round.

Enclosure. More often than not, the small-space landscape has architectural features that enclose all or part of it. This can mean any main building and/or outbuilding, such as a garage, shed or pool house. Other constraining elements, such as a fence, sidewalk, driveway or neighboring unowned land, also will limit the space.

To be used well, the landscape should feel inviting and secure. As neighborly as any one person may be, there still seems to be a never-ending quest for privacy. Even in the most open and public areas, there are tricks to make a "space" feel more like a "place." Positioning a bench just in front of a tree trunk will make the person sitting there feel sheltered by the trunk and by the canopy overhead. A hedge planted to imply a wall will define a garden and create a sense of security for those who use the area within.

In the residential landscape, the considerations for enclosure go beyond just the sides. It's important to think of secondary screening and, at times, it's even reasonable to think of overhead cover as a ceiling element. Deciduous trees can be extremely useful to this end. The slender trunks take up little room in the garden, while the canopy can be trained through careful pruning to be above head height and provide much-needed screening into neighboring properties. Even the tree's branching habit in winter months will offer some filtering of views.

A narrow space between a wall and a fence makes for a perfect planting location.





Benches within a garden, backed with a hedge, provide peacefulness within an urban setting.



A narrow corridor between a deep slope, a retaining wall and a house becomes a restful promenade.

Evergreens can be wonderful in a small space, but there are limitations because of the broad nature of their habit. Columnar and fastigiated selections can be very useful when there's a need for year-round screening. Often, these plants grow slowly so a modicum of patience is necessary.

Vegetation. For plant people, this discussion would be incomplete without mentioning how to think about the green side of the small landscape. The first — and most important — point to make is that no plant will just simply “fit” into a small space. I find myself repeating this mantra over and over to clients who ask, “Now, how big will that get?” My stock answer is, “Too big for your garden.” I then proceed to explain compact and dwarf varieties, and how they are useful in many applications. Oftentimes, we want the garden to work for us now and not just in 12 or 17 years from now when the plants finally get some size. This means planting more conventional selections of woody ornamental

material and then planning for careful hand-pruning to train the growth to fit the site. Of course, being mindful of mature size is necessary — Norway spruce and sugar maple are not generally considered the top selections for small gardens — but limiting choices to only compact and dwarf varieties limits the potential of the garden design.

Setting expectations early on about the maintenance needs of plants is a key element to long-term success. The notion that landscapes are finished the moment they are installed must be eliminated. I find it both helpful and liberating — for the client and for me — to discuss the operational costs associated with caring for a landscape in tandem to the design process. More often than not, the information about how and when to care for the investment is greatly appreciated.

Environmental considerations. In our climate of environmental awareness, the careful design of drainage throughout the

landscape is a worthwhile effort. Roof water is too often allowed to run haphazardly through the planted gardens, eroding soils or spilling onto hardscapes or completely off the property. This is a wasted resource, and it's often the cause of water problems and safety hazards for buildings.

Landscapes associated with buildings have the opportunity to remedy unnecessary water runoff if the designer installs any number of capturing and recharging devices. Downspouts from gutters can filter roof water into drip edges at the foundation where no infiltration into the basement is possible.

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Roof runoff also can be captured in rain barrels for watering the garden. A dry well installed a short distance away from the building will recharge water into the soil — be sure to install a pop-up emitter or some backflow device to guard against backup at the foundation during any heavy rain events. What's more, bio-retention cells (rain gardens) can be designed for areas where the soils are drainable to clean and recharge water, as well as provide visual beauty and habitat.

When these six design criteria are factored into the development process, there is every reason for small or confined areas of land — whether an entire parcel or just a section — to be deeply fulfilling “places.” Most consumers do not have vast, luxurious estates to design and build landscapes upon. Many are in close-knit urban and suburban areas that have at least one — if not all — of the three characteristics that would classify them as small spaces. The reward for designing a landscape that truly transforms a mere “space” into a “place” is that it becomes an extension of the inner sanctum of the dwelling and offers a connection to the land where true comfort and security can be enjoyed.

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