



Design Dilemmas & Savvy Solutions

By Karen Chapman CPH

Some gardens (and gardeners) present significant challenges: plant lust run amok, an established focal point that has no sense of “place”, a hodge-podge of multi-colored plants that better resemble grandma’s crazy quilt than a well curated collection. Learn how to creatively solve these and other common design problems, including those you may have initiated yourself.

“I’ve created a Monster!” (Making the best of a bad situation)

Not all projects begin with a nice clean slate and if we are honest, we are often personally responsible for many of these monsters. Add in the vagaries of HOA rules and it’s easy to feel overwhelmed by all the problems, let alone trying to figure out solutions.

The Plant Addict – perhaps the most common problem of all; the result of decades of uninhibited nursery shopping trips with no real sense of the future realities. I find there are two distinct types of plant addicts;

- The collector (lots of the same genus): be prepared to add contrast, punctuation, and/or negative space
- The true plantaholics (one of everything): introduce repetition, add a focal point, and/or use foliage strategically

Garden Art (at least in the eye of the beholder) – make sense of it all and create context and establish a theme. Or how to make a garden gnome obsession appear classy....

Unfortunate Focal Points: Neighbors deck? Propane tank? A/C unit? Creative solutions may be needed including the use of color repetition, introducing negative space, and/or artistic screening.

HOA Rules – learning to work with random restrictions such as ‘gravel mulch only’ can be an opportunity for innovation. The plant police *mean* well, but....

Design “Rules”: learn to be a rebel with *style*

Design principles are intended to help us, yet they can also paralyze us, resulting in predictable solutions and boring plant combinations. Use your imagination and explore alternative ideas. Some of the most common design ‘rules’ can be creatively suffocating. For example:

“Always Vary the Texture”

Yet texture is just one of *four* aspects to consider when combining plants. (color, shape (sometimes referred to as form or habit), size, and texture). Aim for a pleasing balance between contrast and similarity across all four.

“Never Mix Patterns”

On the contrary, patterns can be mixed effectively if one adds a ‘belt’ or ‘carpet’ of a solid color to break up numerous variegated plants or even a ribbon of wildly contrasting color, also variegated, can be striking.

Varying the texture, form, and variegation pattern of individual plants while having similar a color hue also creates stunning combinations.

“Always Plant in Odd Numbers”

Formal designs often *require* symmetry – and even numbers. Drifts may actually appear more natural using even numbers according to one top designer.

“Always Group Pots in Odd Numbers”

Rubbish! Simply vary the height when working with two pots. Or add a third non-pot element.

“Use the Thriller-Filler-Spiller Technique for Container Designs”

Ugh – my personal pet peeve! Stop planting by numbers or following a boring and predictable recipe. Try designing ‘*Foliage First*’ using the spotlight-highlight-limelight technique for fabulous, unexpected results every time. Works equally well for landscape design too.

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Want more ideas?

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- My [books](#) are full of creative ideas.
- Check out my [website and blog](#) for inspiration, upcoming events, newsletters, **garden tours**, and free stuff!
- **Questions?** Email me karen@lejardinetdesigns.com

