

Layering for a Dynamic and Beautiful Garden

Presented by Laura Watson



1. A castle garden in Scotland.

Layering can be one of the most important elements of a beautiful and dynamic garden. By thoughtfully incorporating foreground, middle-ground, and background plants, a gardener can create a vibrant and satisfying landscape. Also integrating concepts like mass, repetition, flow, scale, depth, and focal points enhances the layers and creates a rhythm that moves the eye through the garden. The elements of layering are not new—they've been used ever since humans have gardened. Think about the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Consider a simple and timeless vegetable garden: low plants such as radishes, carrots, and beets in front with chard, kale, and cabbage behind them, then peppers and tomatoes, and finally climbing runner beans behind them all. The sun is able to shine on all the plants. Likewise, using layering in an ornamental garden ensures that a viewer can see all plants.

What Exactly Is a Layered Garden?

The concepts of a layered garden are useful when planning a new garden or revising an old one, but they are not rules. The most important aspect of anyone's garden is that it pleases the gardener. Use plants and colors and textures in ways that please you, while also considering some of the following elements of layering.

A layered garden is one where plants are arranged in layers—background, middle ground, and foreground, with the tallest plants in the back, medium-sized plants in the middle, and shorter plants foreground. Think in three dimensions: vertical, horizontal, and depth or, in other words, plant ground to canopy, back to front, side to side.



2. Chanticleer Garden in Pennsylvania.

Tall specimens can be trees or tall shrubs, both deciduous and evergreen, including flowering or fruiting forms.

Middle layer plants can be small ornamental trees, large flowering shrubs, and variably tall perennials and grasses.

Lower layer is shorter and can include small flowering perennials, shorter grasses and sedges, groundcovers, and ephemerals of varied height and breadth.

Mass

Layers are like a plant pyramid, with the tall plants at the narrow top. Because the tall plants have so much visual weight, i.e., mass, the middle layer of the pyramid requires more plants to balance mass of the top tall plants. The lower layer is the widest part of the pyramid, requiring the most plants to maintain balance with the taller layers.

Massing groups of the same or similar plants in the middle and lower layers in a pleasing manner balances them with the larger plants. The smaller the plants, the larger the masses should be. Cluster similar individual plants close enough that they touch only when fully mature, the exception being groundcovers. In the meantime, bare spaces can be temporarily filled in with annuals or other temporary plants. To create more interest, vary the shapes of masses: long and narrow, short and wide, or curved organic shapes. Create both vertical and horizontal patterns within layers to create flow throughout the garden spaces.

Supplemental Layers for Added Pizazz



3. *Garden of Laura Watson.*

A Seasonal Dimension: Add to the dynamism of your layered garden by including a seasonal dimension. Always be on the lookout for plants that offer something in three or four seasons and for plants that extend the season well into fall or add interest in early spring.

A Wildlife Dimension: Look for plants that provide habitat and food for birds and other wildlife at different times of the year to bring the busyness and sounds of birds and bees into your garden.

Vines: Add vines to weave the layers together, directing the eye up and down and side to side through your garden.

Garden Art: Garden art and other décor can add yet another layer, enhancing your garden even further. A wide variety of garden art is available to those who look. Along with more practical items like bird feeders, bird baths, bird houses, and insect hotels, garden art can add real punch to your garden.



4 *A beautiful Puyallup garden.*

Repetition—a Key Aspect of Layering

Repeating forms, textures, and colors throughout the layered beds creates a unified pattern in the whole garden, building up a rhythm that draws the eye and leads it through the landscape, linking various areas of the garden. Aspects of repetition include plant form (or shape), texture, and color.

Repetition of Plant Form (or Shape)

When repeating forms in the garden, use visually strong shapes with the ability to capture attention. Upright forms work especially well—canna lilies, *Acanthus*, or a beautiful grass in a pot on a stand, or a statuesque column are good examples. Then contrast the form with more horizontal and rounded shapes.

Large strong forms should be used sparingly, only one or two, then repeat the form in nearby areas with less weighty plants or focal points. *Avoid clustering too many strong shapes.*

Repetition of Texture



Texture is the combination of the size and shape of leaves, twigs, and stems. There are three categories of texture: coarse, medium, and fine. Coarse textures like hosta, *Rogersia*, or oak-leaf hydrangea have the most visual weight. Fine texture like large ferns, bush honeysuckle, evergreen huckleberry, and *Azara* in large-scale plants carries the next most weight. Too much coarse texture in different forms seems chaotic, while too much fine texture is monotonous. The weight of texture can also change with factors like viewing distance, light quality, and the contrast of surrounding plants. The trick is to take all of this into account and create a balance with the placement of plants that is pleasing to your eye. For example, use one large plant with coarse texture, such as a dark-leaved canna lily, as a focal point, then fill in around it with finer textures, like a maidenhair fern, *Epimedium*, or a low grass.

Texture can also be used to change the perception of the size of the space. Coarse in the tallest layer feels smaller, while coarse in the nearer layer, seems larger. Fine texture can also be used in the background to emphasize other plants, making a nearer coarse texture stand out more, but coarse in the back makes fine texture more delicate. Color can also affect the perception of texture—bold colors look coarser, while muted colors take on a medium or fine texture.

Texture in plants can be used throughout the garden for unity, while varying form and color for balance.

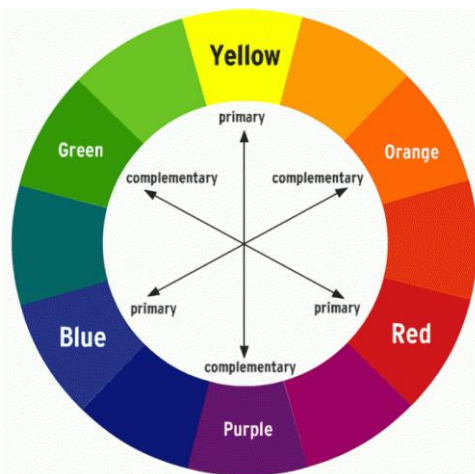
Repetition of Color

Keep in mind that warm colors in the middle and front of a garden make the planting seem to move toward the viewer, while cool colors draw away from the viewer. Because of this, cool colors make a good backdrop for warm colors. Nature offers many shades of green that can be used in this way.

Flower color is the most temporary of aspect of the garden, but when present it carries the most visual weight. Color is difficult to plan because of factors like weather, seasonal changes, light intensity, texture, color properties, and color relationships. The garden should be balanced and pleasing with or without color. Try viewing photos of your garden in black and white to assess balance more easily. A good plan would be to design the garden or bed, including focal points, using form and texture first, then add color for extra emphasis.



6. A garden in Scotland.



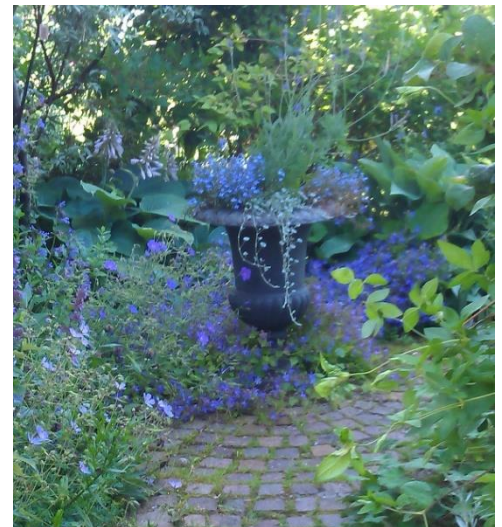
Use a 12-part color wheel when planning to add color to your garden! They are inexpensive and invaluable for understanding how to incorporate color. Here's a link to a great website that explains how colors work together and how to use a color wheel:

<https://www.canva.com/colors/color-wheel/>

Complementary colors are opposite each other on the color wheel and when used together have high impact and high contrast, each color appearing brighter and more prominent when used together. Use complementary colors thoughtfully and sparingly.

Monochromatic colors are three shades of the same color. This is a subtle and calming color scheme. **Analogous colors** are three colors next to each other on the color wheel and can provide a sense of unity. One way to use them is choose one color as the dominant color and use the other two as accents. Photo on the left uses the analogous colors blue, blue green, and green, with blue as the dominant color.

The amount of color used is just as important as the location. Scattering many different colors in small bits can be unsettling (except perhaps in cottage-style and meadow gardens). Aim to have colors flow through layers, top to bottom, front to back, side to side. Be careful using color as focal point, especially if the focal point already has high visual interest—color can add too much weight.



7. A garden in southern Germany.

Other Considerations

A sense of **scale**, that is, the relative sizes of plants combined with the distances between them, is important when siting plants. Scale helps determine the number and size of plants you will use. Plants should fill in without overcrowding and support each other without touching (exception: low-growing groundcovers).

Attaining a satisfying sense of **depth** through the arrangement of plants low to high can be enhanced by varying levels in the garden with terracing, berms, and/or raised beds.

Balance comes into play as plants of various forms, sizes, textures, and color are woven together into pleasing patterns. Each plant has a visual weight that consists primarily of three things: mass, color, and density. **Mass** is the perceived size or visual weight of the plant. Large plants can visually move forward while smaller ones can recede into the background. For balance, you could use two equal-sized plants, or one large one balanced with two or three smaller ones. **Color** affects balance, too. Darker colors feel heavier than lighter ones. Two shrubs of the same size will have different weights if one is dark while the other is light-colored. **Density** also factors in the relative weight of a plant. The thicker the foliage and branching, the more density the plant has. Balancing these three factors when siting plants will make for a more pleasing garden.



A **focal point** captures the viewer's attention immediately. Then, with careful placement of other plants, the eye is led fluidly around the space. Focal points often signal that a change in the garden is about to come. They can be many different things: a gate or an arch; a water feature; a weeping tree; an unusual plant; a vignette of three plants that support each other visually; a vibrant color; a birdbath; an outstanding conifer or shrub; a large boulder, a striking piece of art, or as in the photo on the left a gabion column topped by a beautiful plant.

8. Garden of Camille & Dirk Paulsen.

Planning for a Layered Garden

Starting with a Blank Slate

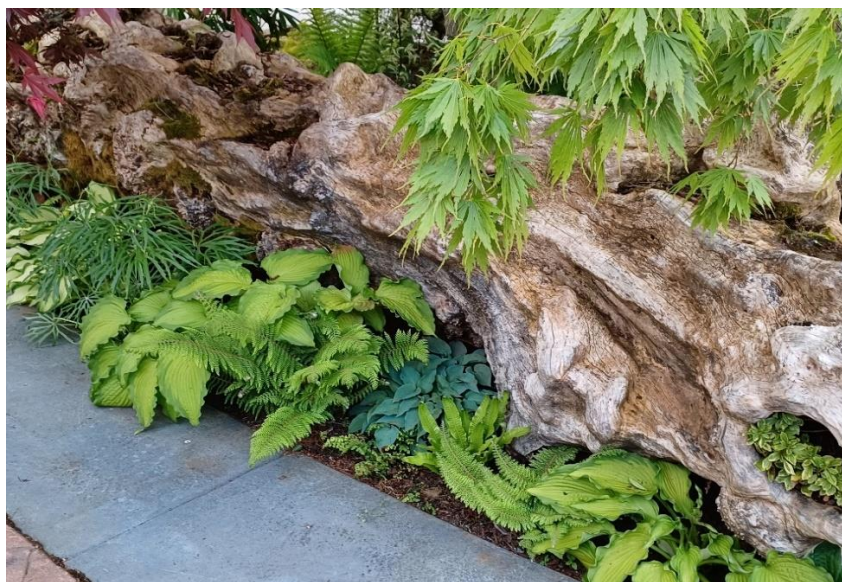
As with any new garden, the first thing to do if you are considering creating a new layered garden is to assess the site. Note borrowed views that can be either hidden or incorporated into the plan. Plan the hardscapes—fences, paths, walls, terraces, berms, and so on. Modulating levels via berms, terraces, and raised beds can keep the landscape in view. Assess the sun—which areas will be shady and which sunny. Do soil tests and plan to group plants according to soil requirements. Determine and mark out the shapes of beds. Only after all of this is done, begin to consider plant choices.

Introducing Layered Gardening to an Established Garden

Assess the Site: What plants will you keep, which will you move, and what will be removed? Will you add hardscape or remove any of the existing hardscape? Do you want to add a berm? Note borrowed views that can be either enhanced or hidden. Check the trees already on your property and determine which to keep and whether to remove any. Take note of existing focal points and decide whether to keep or remove them. Assess sun and soil and plan to group plants accordingly.

Adding Plants: Plant in layers and use forms, colors, textures, and plants that appeal to YOU. Repeat them to hold the design together and create flow. Choose plants that can be kept in bounds and not overtake others. Develop your editing skills—to paraphrase Marie Condo, if a plant doesn't "spark your joy," compost it! Keep your budget in mind—divide existing plants, trade with others, go to local plant sales, or grow from seed. Done wisely, layering can reduce ongoing maintenance.

**And always remember,
RIGHT PLANT RIGHT PLACE!**



9. Garden of Camille & Dirk Paulsen.

Books of Interest:

Theo Williams' ***The Complete Guide to Layered Gardening***, self-published in 2020.

Marietta and Ernie O'Byrne's ***A Tapestry Garden***, published by Timber Press in 2018.

David Culp's ***The Layered Garden***, published by Timber Press in 2012.

Ann Lovejoy's ***American Mixed Border***, published by Macmillan Publishing Company in 1993

The Illustrated Gertrude Jekyll, published by Little, Brown and Company, 1988

Websites:

Search "Layered Garden" to find a plethora of interesting articles, blogs, and podcasts on layering a garden.