



# **The Successful Garden Design Guide to:**

How to avoid the **5  
BIGGEST** mistakes  
in garden design!

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## Introduction

Garden design is really no different to learning any other skill.

There's a process involved and once you learn the do's and don'ts, you'll be well on the way to a successful garden.

Gaining the necessary experience to a competent level in any subject usually involves making a few mistakes along the way. This is all part and parcel of the learning process but this can be an expensive way to learn! By reading the following 5 BIG mistakes will help you avoid learning the hard/expensive way!

Learning the main mistakes to avoid, will save you time and money.

A very wise investment of your time! The more you can learn and plan, the better the end result in your garden will be.

These 5 BIG mistakes are the ones most people make when they do their garden. The reason these mistakes are so common is because they are VERY easy to make. SO don't feel bad if they are mistakes you've made in the past.

Some of the key elements to creating a successful garden design are slightly counter intuitive. This is the main reason why it can be very easy to get things wrong.

Once you've read all of the mistakes, you will be able to avoid these 5 BIG garden design errors you will be better equipped to create a successful garden design.



## BIG Mistake 1

# Garden Design is About Plants...

It REALLY isn't!

If you've read the blog article ['Garden design - that's just about where you put plants, isn't it?'](#) Then you'll already have an idea, that there is a lot more to garden design than plants.

Yes I know it goes against everything you know about gardens - and in that sense you are right - gardens are about plants. Garden design however isn't solely about the plants.

**Successful garden design is all about how you utilise the shape and space in the garden.**

Obviously plants do come into it but only at the end. To use the analogy I used on the blog "plants are the icing on the cake *NOT* the cake itself"

### **Why is shape so important?**

Well if you think about it, the way you view a garden (the route your eyes take as you look down it) if you take in the whole garden, with one glance, chances are it's going to be quite boring. Ideally, you want to be able to go from one point of interest to another and experience an interesting visual journey.



With the right use of the space and shape you can control how the garden functions and looks. You can create lots of interest, make the garden feel bigger and create a sense movement from one point to another.

"Plants are the icing on the cake NOT the cake itself"

[Successful Garden Design Blog](#)

Get the shape right and then when you come to add the plants - hey presto - fabulous garden (assuming you do a good job with the plants of course!).

**Discovering that plants are not the most important aspect of a garden will no doubt upset some people** - it did me, when I first started. Before I became a garden designer I was a keen horticulturalist and was passionate about rare and unusual plants - for me that's what gardens were all about.

I can remember back to when I read my first garden design book 'John Brookes' Garden Design Book' and was told that shape was more important and not to get carried away with rare and unusual plants, as they often had little true value, in a well designed garden. I was so upset that I nearly didn't bother learning about garden design! If it's not about wonderful plants then what's the point?

Despite disagreeing with John, I carried on reading to find out why he didn't seem to value plants as highly as I did. By the end of the book I understood and could see his point of view. I was able to understand how vital the design shape is.

Now I'm professionally trained and an experienced garden designer, I know he is right - shape does come first. Truth is; if you don't organise the shape correctly in the first place, it doesn't matter how wonderful your plant choices are - the garden just won't look as spectacular as it should. For some people, that's fine, they can appreciate every plant and be blind to the poor use of shape, that works for them and they love their gardens regardless.

But if you've ever tried to create a really beautiful garden by just putting in plants and not really shaping the garden first - you've probably already discovered that it just doesn't ever quite seem to work or look as good as you'd hoped.

You've probably tried moving plants around into different locations and that may or may not have helped a bit - but the garden still doesn't work, no matter how many times you change the planting scheme.

**The answer's really not in what plants you use it's how you use the shape, that's the key ingredient to successful garden design.** Get the shape right; get it to work for you. By shape I mean the empty areas of space like your lawn and patio areas. Use the right shape here to make the garden look wider or longer. Use it to create excitement and mystery and then IMAGINE what you could achieve with the correct planting...



## BIG Mistake 2

### Guessing the size...

Size really IS important in garden design

It's not simply a question of whether your garden is big or small, that's not important. What REALLY matters is the EXACT size and shape of your garden.

If you've read the blog post ['Do you suffer from the phobia that affects new garden designers?'](#) Then you'll already know a bit about mistake 2. Let's now go into more detail than the information contained in the blog post.

**A lot of people don't plan their garden** - usually because they don't know how, but those people that do give planning a go - fall foul at this hurdle - the measuring.

If you have a rectangular or square shaped garden and start to work on a design on a sheet of paper, having guessed roughly what size and shape it is - chances are, you are going to have big problems later on.

**The reason it's going to get tricky comes down to two things.** The first is shape - even if you are totally convinced your garden is a perfect square or rectangle - it VERY rarely is. I've only come across two-three gardens in 19yrs of designing that have the same measurements at the top and bottom and have sides of equal length.

Your garden may well look square when you stand in it but if you were above it looking down (the plan view) you'd see it's not the shape it looked when standing on the ground. This is because your eyes can easily be deceived by optical illusions.



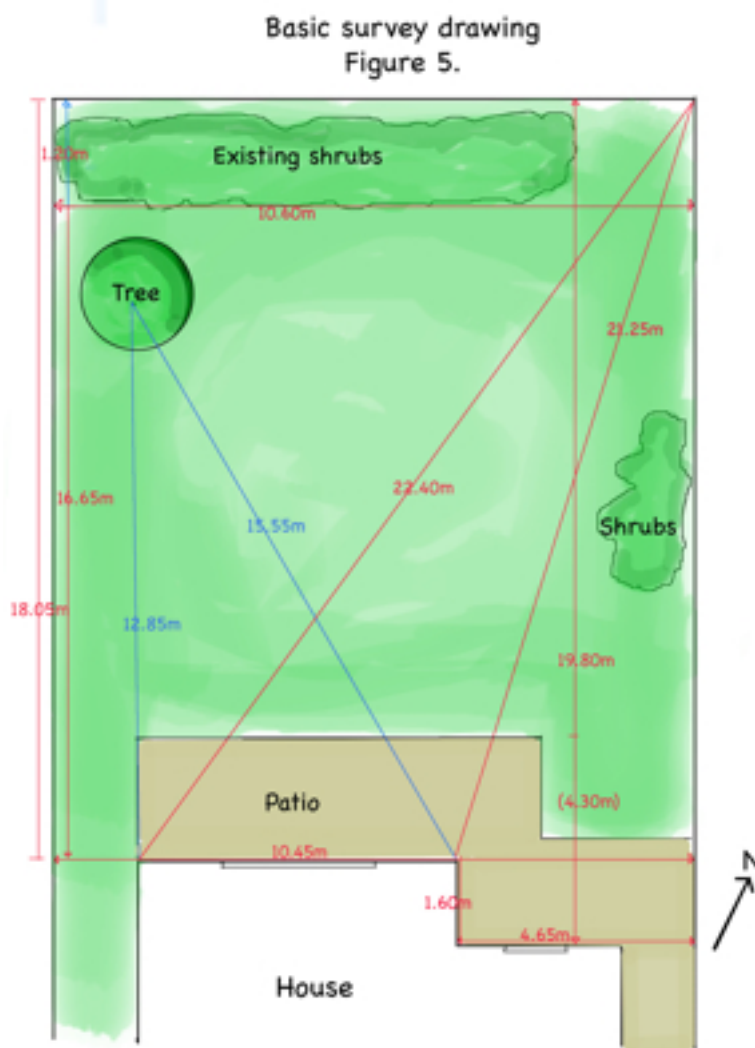
**Optical illusions are going to be one of your best friends, later, in the design process.** You can use them to your advantage to make the garden appear much bigger, a different shape and more interesting than it really is.

But for now the last thing you want, is to assume that the perfect rectangle or square really exists in your garden. There is a really strong chance that your boundary fences don't run perfectly square to the house and they are angled slightly or sometimes quite a lot. You need to be aware of the true shape of your garden, so you can work with the real shape in your design.

**If you are not accurate with your design plan, when you come to build your garden, you may be in for a nasty surprise!**

In really well designed gardens, even if they are broken up into different sections, it still has to work as one whole entity. Each part of the garden interacts with the part next to it. So if you haven't measured the garden properly or at all, when you build it, some bits just won't fit and that will have a knock on effect to the whole of the garden.

The second reason you need to measure the garden and find out the exact size; is to be able to plot it accurately on paper. You need to have your plan drawn to scale. If you have your plan to scale, you can then use it to accurately work out where everything goes and the quantity of materials you will need to build the garden.





Or if you are hiring a landscape contractor to build it, they will be able to work from your drawing much more easily.

**"If you haven't drawn the plan to scale, how will you or the contractor get a wall or feature in the right place at the right size?"**

Scale often frightens people and puts them off even trying to measure their garden. It needn't be frightening. Scale only means that you draw it small, in the correct proportions. For example 1cm on paper can represent 1m (100cm) on the ground (scale of 1:100) or for those more familiar with imperial measurements  $1/8" = 1'0"$ .

As an example, if your tape measure says your boundary is 11.40 meters long then you draw 11.40 centimeters on the paper (1:100 scale). There are lots of different scales you can use. I use 1:50 (1cm = 50cm) wherever possible ( $1/4" = 1'0"$ ) because it enables me to get a larger drawing on the sheet of paper. I find it easier to put in detail in larger scale drawings.

**Scale also helps you to design well.** Having a plan drawn to scale will enable you to gauge how your design is working. It will enable you to get the right balance and proportion with the elements you are incorporating into your design.

The best thing about a scale drawing is - if it works on paper it WILL work in your garden! Basically, it takes the guesswork out of things and enables you to design your garden effectively and successfully. Plus a well thought out design, is going to save you time and money in the long run, not to mention look a lot better than an unplanned garden!

If you'd like to learn more I have produced a online mini-course on [garden surveying](#) that will show you exactly what to do, including level changes, in a series of short videos and an ebook.

There's also some free video tutorials showing you basic survey techniques on the Successful Garden Design [video tutorial page](#).

## BIG Mistake 3

### Features are the answer!

Alas no...

So if garden design isn't about plants, then it has to be about the features - the patio, the pergola, the pond - right?

If only it were that simple!

If it were that simple, that summer house or circular patio kit you've had your eye on and eventually couldn't resist buying would have solved all your garden design problems...



So why isn't buying a host of attractive garden features transforming your garden into the living, breathing work of art that you want it to be? You've spent a ton of money. You love your purchases but once the novelty of the new addition has worn off, you've realised that the garden *STILL* isn't look as good as you want it to! A very frustrating and common scenario.

If you remember the cake analogy the first BIG mistake - "Plants are the icing on the cake, not the cake itself" then view garden features as the cherry on the beautifully iced cake!

Garden features do play a really important role in garden design, but again, like the plants they are a finishing touch rather than true design. By true design, I mean the shape you create with your design.

'Oh but that is boring! Who cares what shape my lawn is - I just want it to be a beautiful garden!! I want my summer house and my circular patio and all my lovely plants to look wonderful and be the envy of the whole neighbourhood - surely that can't come down to shape?'

**It does! If you are not convinced, let's look at it another way. Let's look at exactly why the garden features you have purchased over the years, may not be doing the job well. For this we need to look at the plan view of your garden - so imagine you are in a helicopter looking down or see if Google Earth has got round to updating and take a look at your garden from there.**

I'm betting, if your garden isn't looking as good as you want it to, when you view it from above, all those features you've purchased look like they've been dropped from the sky and have randomly landed in your garden!

The big problem with trying to design with features is, unless you take the shape and flow of the garden into account and get that right - anything you add will be out of place and look like it's dropped out the sky and





landed in your garden! Each item you have in your garden MUST look like it belongs and not an afterthought.

If you are designing from scratch and have virtually a blank canvas, then it is fairly easy to incorporate any garden features you desire and get them in the right place. But if you have an existing garden you are working to transform and have a lot of things you are keeping, essentially doing a garden makeover, it can be much tougher to work in features effectively.

So if you are adding anything, to your existing garden, make sure it looks like it was planned and not an afterthought. If that means you need to adjust the shape of the lawn in order to achieve it, then do it, make it work.

You should be aiming for a seamless flow from one part of the garden to another. Garden features, should be used as accents and focal points in the garden. The shapes you create around the features needs to link them into the garden so it works as a whole entity rather than a series of unrelated parts.





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## BIG Mistake 4

# Not REALLY thinking about the shape!

Shape is THE most important thing...

You may well have noticed in the previous mistakes, at every given opportunity I've mentioned how important shape is.

I'm not talking about the overall shape of your garden. It doesn't matter if you have an L-shaped, square, rectangular or triangular shaped garden.



**What really matters is the shape inside the garden - the part you can control.** The shape of the space inside your garden boundary (usually lawn area), that's THE most important part to get right in garden design. And that's the bit that MOST people leave to chance...

It's the biggest mistake because it's not at all obvious that the lawn shape needs designing first, unless you've been trained how to design a garden. As you've learnt in the other mistakes, it's very easy to get carried away with the plants and the features and not give any thought to the internal shape of the garden.

"If you START with getting the right shape for your needs and THEN add the features and the plants - THEN you will have a really successfully designed garden."

Do it the other way round and you are constantly playing catch up and fix. If it's too late and you already have a lot of the garden done, then you need to look objectively at what is working and what isn't.

Imagine that the garden was empty or all the bits you don't like weren't there - what would you do instead?

This may sound frightening if your garden is already established but it needn't. I'm not suggesting that you will have to rip everything out and re-do it all. But you need to be aware of what is and isn't really working, so you can make it work.

**The most important thing you can do is, be totally honest about what works and what doesn't.** Yes, even that area you've recently spent lots of time on. Once you have that knowledge, you can then work out a way to get everything to work together as one whole unit, rather than a series of separate, unrelated parts.

If you have a blank canvas or a garden with little in it, then you are in a really good position. You can control how the garden, looks, flows and works right from the outset. Work out the best shape for your needs. Do you need to make the garden look bigger? Is the garden an awkward shape that needs disguising? Do you need to divide up the space to create more interest?

It does feel slightly counterintuitive to start with the shape of the garden first. If you think of the shape as the skeleton and then everything else as the flesh, then you will have a better feel for the value of starting with the shape before plants and features come into it...





## BIG Mistake 5

### Fear of Change!

There's really nothing to be afraid of...

You already know fear is a huge inhibitor. Fear probably isn't an emotion you would often associate with something as innocuous as gardening. But it's most definitely there and it can be the biggest reason people fail in their garden once they get past the other hurdles we've already discussed.

It's a trap that's really easy to fall into without even knowing it. This is because fear manifests in numerous different ways - procrastination is probably the biggest sign - "I'm too busy, I'll read up how to do it another time. Oh well it's the wrong season, I'll wait until next year..."

Or there is the opposite extreme of rushing in and doing everything without giving it enough real thought - "well we didn't really have the time to do it properly, so it was a bit of a rush job!"

**It's not a fear of the garden or designing.** It's that big fear we all carry with us, to a greater or lesser degree. It's the fear of getting it wrong and failing.

Mostly people either do nothing at all or just pop in the odd bush here and there (usually around the perimeter as it feels safe just to plant round the outer edge of the garden). See photo.

By playing it safe and just planting round the edges or leaving the garden exactly as you inherited it from the





previous owners, isn't going to get you the garden of your dreams (unless you inherited a really good one to begin with!).

**With garden design, you need to be confident with what you do.**

If you are feeling afraid - go past your comfort zone and see what you can come up with. If you want a design with curves - really go for it - draw big sweeping curves, avoid timid wiggly lines.

If you've measured your garden and drawn it to scale - you can try multiple ideas out on paper first. It really is the best way to test your ideas. If it works on paper, it WILL work in the garden.

The main reason people fear taking action is they don't really know what to do and it feels safer either doing nothing or just doing a small amount - whilst that feels comfortable, it still is not achieving what you really want!

**It is well within your capabilities to design your own garden.** Garden design is a process and once you learn the do's and don'ts, you will be able to create a really beautiful and successfully designed garden. The main thing that separates you from a professional garden designer is they design with confidence (and know about how to arrange space).

**Confidence comes from knowledge.** If you can expand your knowledge it will be a big helper in getting you past any fear and on the right path. Immerse yourself in books and magazines and learn as much as you can. The more you understand about garden design the more confident you will feel and the better results you'll achieve.

The skill professionals have, comes from practice and experience - so even though you are just doing your own garden, I would recommend that you try several different designs for it. The more you can do, the better you will get.

**They'll be plenty of advice each week in the Successful Garden Design blog and Design Tips newsletter.** If you have a question you'd like answered, please leave a comment on the blog and I will endeavour to answer your questions in upcoming posts.

I hope to see you on the [Successful Garden Design courses](#) but even if you don't do one of my courses, I sincerely hope that you continue to grow your knowledge and your skills and successfully design your own garden. You CAN do it!

I hope that you have enjoyed reading the 5 BIG mistakes and it has been of benefit to you. And I really hope you avoid all 5 mistakes and successfully design your garden.

If you'd like to tell other people about the benefits you've obtained from this ebook, please do so by clicking this [link and 'like' & leave a comment on my Facebook page!](#)



Looking forward to seeing you at [Successful Garden Design!](#)

Best wishes

Rachel

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