

HOW TO AVOID THE 5 BIGGEST MISTAKES IN GARDEN DESIGN!



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INTRODUCTION

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

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

Gaining the necessary experience to achieve 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! Reading the following 5 BIG mistakes will help you avoid learning the hard way.

By learning the main mistakes to avoid you'll be able to save time and money. In other words, reading this is a very wise investment. The more you learn and plan, the better the end results will be.

These are the five most common BIG mistakes 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 these things wrong.

Once you've read all of the mistakes, you'll be able to avoid these 5 BIG garden design errors and you'll 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. In one sense you're 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 in the blog, "Plants are the icing on the cake, NOT the cake itself."

Why is shape so important?

The way you view a garden is basically the route your eyes take as you look at it. If you try to 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 the 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 of movement from one point to another.

**"PLANTS ARE THE
ICING ON THE CAKE
NOT THE CAKE ITSELF."**

Get the shape right first, and when it's time 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 upset me when I first started. Before I became a garden designer I was a keen horticulturalist and was passionate about rare and unusual plants. To me that's what gardens were all about.

I can remember when I read my first garden design book, John Brookes' Garden Design Book. I remember reading that shape was more important and not to get carried away with rare and unusual plants because 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 the importance of design shape.

Now that 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. But for the most part, the garden still doesn't work - no matter how many times you change the planting scheme.

“THE ANSWER'S REALLY NOT ABOUT THE PLANTS, IT'S HOW YOU USE THE SHAPE. THIS IS THE KEY INGREDIENT TO SUCCESSFUL GARDEN DESIGN.”

Get the shape right first. Get it to work for you. By shape I mean the areas of empty space like your lawn and patio areas. Use the right shape in these places 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...

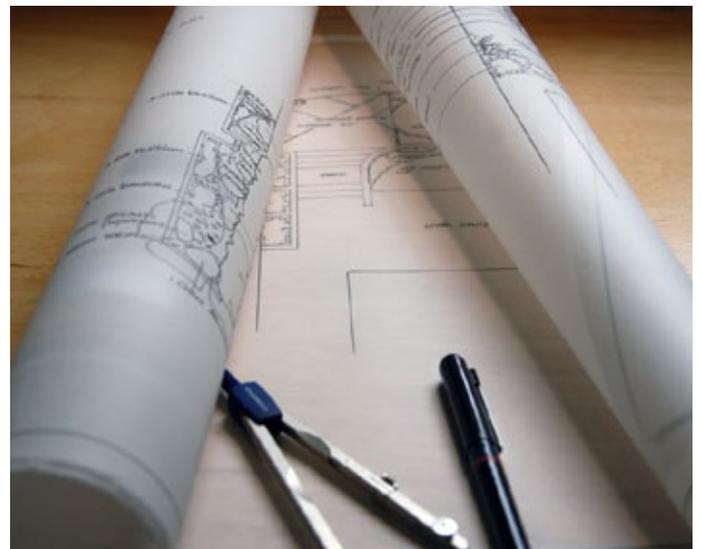
Size really IS important in garden design. It's not simply a question of whether your garden is big or small, that's not important. What REALLY matters is the EXACT size and shape of your garden.

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 two. 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. And of the people who do give planning a go, most won't make it over this particular hurdle: the measuring.

If you have a rectangular or square shaped garden you'll most likely be tempted to start working on a design on a sheet of paper. This part isn't the problem. The problem comes into play when you take a guess about the size and shape. If you do this, chances are you're 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. In my 20 years of garden design, I've only come across two or three gardens 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 that it's not the shape it looks when standing on the ground. This is because your eyes can easily be deceived by optical illusions.



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 this: 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 about this part of the process, I teach an online mini-course on [garden surveying](#). It will show you exactly what to do in a series of short videos and an ebook. It even shows you how to deal with changes in level.

There are also free video tutorials showing you basic survey techniques. You'll find these videos 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 looking as good as you want it to! A very frustrating and common scenario.

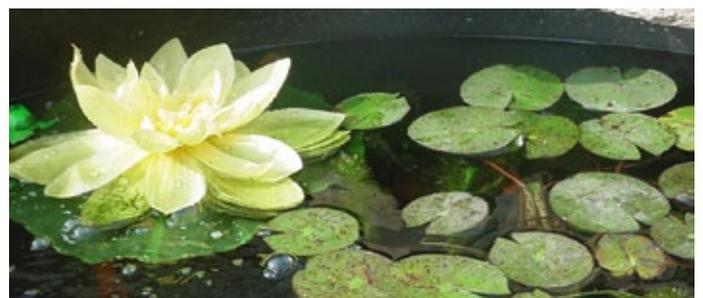
Take a minute to remember the cake analogy in the first BIG mistake, "Plants are the icing on the cake, not the cake itself." From this point of view you'll see the garden features as the cherry on the beautifully iced cake!

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 those garden features you've purchased over the years and understand why they may not be doing the job well. For this we need to look at the plan view of your garden. Imagine you are in a helicopter looking down. Or, better yet, see if Google Earth has a current view of your address and take a look at your garden from there.

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

Here's the big problem with trying to design with features: unless you take the shape and flow of the garden into account and get that right first, anything you add will be out of place and look like it's dropped from the sky and landed in your garden! Each item you have in your garden **MUST** look like it belongs there, not look like an afterthought.

If you are designing from scratch and have virtually a blank canvas, then it's 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 you have a lot of things you're keeping

(essentially doing a garden makeover), then it can be much tougher to incorporate the 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 need to link them into the garden so that everything works together as a whole entity rather than a series of unrelated parts.



BIG MISTAKE 4

NOT REALLY THINKING ABOUT THE SHAPE!

Shape is **THE** most important thing... You may well have noticed in the previous sections that at every given opportunity I 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) is **THE** most important part to get right in garden design. And that's the bit **MOST** people leave to chance.

It's the biggest mistake because it's not at all obvious that the lawn shape needs to be designed first. As you've learnt in the other sections, 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, 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 be. 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. Some of these might sound familiar: "I'm too busy," "I'll read how to do it another time," "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. And usually it's just around the perimeter because it feels safe to plant round the outer edge of the garden. (See photo above.)

But by playing it safe and just planting round the edges, or leaving the garden exactly as you inherited it from the previous owners, you won't be able to achieve the garden of your dreams. (Unless you inherited a really good garden to begin with!)



In garden design you need to be confident with what you do. If you are feeling afraid, it's time to 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 and 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 might feel more comfortable, it's still 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'll be able to create a really beautiful and successfully designed garden. The main things that separate you from a professional garden designer are that they design with confidence and they know how to arrange space.

Confidence comes from knowledge. If you can expand your knowledge it will be a big help toward getting you past any fear and onto 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 skills that professionals have all come from practice and experience. So even though you are just doing your own garden, I would recommend that you try drawing several different designs. The more you can do, the better you will get.

There will 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 in 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 so you can successfully design your own garden. You CAN do it!

I hope that you have enjoyed reading the 5 BIGGEST Mistakes and that it's been of benefit to you. I really hope you're able to use what you've learned here so you can successfully design your garden.

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

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Best wishes,

Rachel

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