

# 7 DESIGN ELEMENTS of a SANCTUARY GARDEN\*

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## I. THE ENTRANCE

### Functional & Psychological Values

1. **Doorway to a safe haven** (acts as a veil between the world and a place of refuge)
2. **Removal/distancing** (encourages one to leave cares, duties, issues behind)
3. **Sense of timelessness** (encourages one to be in the present moment)
4. **Anticipation** (engages the imagination: What lies ahead?)
5. **Gives an enticing glimpse** of what is ahead without revealing everything
6. **“Deep Pause”** (permission to slow down/stop to soak in the beauty and magic)
7. **Welcoming** (feeling embraced, soothed by the care put into the entrance and garden)
8. **Awareness of entering a special or sacred place** which deserves your thoughtful appreciation, receptivity, and respect
9. **Sets a tone** for what is to come (adventurous, peaceful, whimsical, artful, sacred, soothing, etc.)

### Design Considerations

1. **Enclosure.** Enclosing a garden promotes a sense of safety and intimacy, and fully or partially screens it from view. (Formal or informal? Height? Visibility through?)
2. **Fencing.** If possible, avoid chain link, barbed wire, field fencing, etc. Strive for a natural, inviting feeling that creatively integrates wood, live plant material, wrought iron, adobe, bamboo, etc.
3. **Elongated Threshold.** Passing under a vine-covered trellis, archway, the limbs of a tree or through a hedge, allee, or decorative gate
4. **Potted Plants.** Clustered pots of seasonal flowers for color and effect. Potted trees for shade or vertical interest. Something fragrant?
5. **Focal Points.** An artful bench, garden art, statue, special rocks, small water feature, etc. will cause guests to pause at the entrance and take note, increasing relaxation and receptivity.
6. **Lighting.** Consider how you can best work with the natural lighting (shady, bright, filtered) to establish mood. What artificial lighting is needed for safety of night visitors (spots, path lighting, etc.)
7. **Color.** Spots of color in ceramic planters, flowers, or garden art will enhance first impressions.
8. **Sitting Area.** Enticing the visitor to sit near the entrance can create a pleasant sort of “outer garden”.
9. **Pathways.** Meandering pathways make a garden seem larger and more intriguing, and conceal what lies ahead. The width of the path and its surface depend on the type and number of visitors, and the safety concerns (wheelchair accessibility? cobblestones, stepping stones, pebbles, bark mulch, moss, etc.)
10. **Signs.** The entrance is an appropriate location for a welcoming sign. The sign may identify the name of the sanctuary garden, if any. It may offer a few welcoming words or guidelines. It may simply say “Garden Sanctuary,” “Peace Garden,” or the like.

## II. WATER

### Functional & Psychological Values

1. Therapeutically cleansing, purifying, renewing, and healing to the mindbodyspirit
2. Moving water masks ambient sounds such as traffic, machinery, neighbors, and other distractions
3. Attracts birds, butterflies and other wildlife
4. Provides a symbol of peace and serenity
5. Entices stillness and contemplation (especially still, reflective water)
6. Creates a cooling, refreshing effect on a warm day
7. Nourishes the Spirit of the Garden & the soul of its Keeper(s)
8. Enhances the drama of the setting

### Design Considerations

1. Appropriate scale of water feature(s) relative to size of garden (larger may not be better)
2. Budget and time constraints
3. Ease of maintenance (especially moving water features)
4. Abundance or scarcity of water
5. Consider all the options, from very simple to complex
6. Shallow water bowls placed on stumps, pedestals, or in planting beds (freshen water daily)
7. Hollowed rocks or indented surfaces
8. Bird baths that are artful, the right depth for birds (1 inch is ideal), cleaned often, and well placed near a bird-feeder and/or sitting area with unobstructed views of potential predators
9. Fountains that are scaled properly to the setting, are well made, and not overly formal, cutesy, or trite. Avoid chemical algae removers that can harm wildlife.
10. "Build it and they will come." Any water or natural feature attracts wildlife and people's attention.

NOTE: Ponds should be carefully sized for location and regularly and non-toxically cleaned so as not to harm wildlife. Pond liners need to be thick enough, and the rock and vegetation around the pond should be well thought out and natural looking. If using a whiskey barrel or ready-made form, place among plants that will enhance it.

## III. SITTING AREAS

### Functional & Psychological Values

1. Stills the body and quiets the mind
2. Allows one to engage in meditation, contemplation, prayer, reading, or simply being alone
3. May encourage social interaction in a pleasant setting (conversation, tea, meals)
4. Allows views of wildlife, a nearby flowerbed in bloom, a vista, or a lovely sunrise or sunset
5. Provides relief and relaxation in a cool or shady spot on warm days
6. Permits one to relax from work tasks (including gardening) or other duties

7. Provides proximity to water or water sounds
8. Gives an opportunity to sit in a protected place to view the garden in any type of weather
9. Provides a place to simply “be” or to be a silent, unjudging witness to the activities of nature

### **Design Considerations**

1. Most importantly, have a clear purpose/use in mind as you create each sitting area
2. Carefully plant foundational trees and shrubs nearby, and add flowers to achieve a layered effect with year-round interest. Or site a sitting area in a favorite spot already well planted.
3. Make sure your sitting area is accessible so that people will actually want to sit there.
4. Enhance the mood with garden art, wind chimes, a nearby water feature, or bird feeder.
5. Select chairs or benches that are durable, safe, comfortable (padded?), and relaxing. Plant grass that is durable and comforting for those who desire to sit on it.
6. Keep the surrounding area clean and free of clutter so that the view is aesthetic and peaceful.
7. Whatever type of sitting area you create, sit there often, letting it become a place saturated with peace, happy memories, healing, and gratitude.

## **IV. NATURAL FEATURES: WOOD & ROCK**

### **Functional & Psychological Values**

1. Provides structure and form to planting areas (the “bones” of the garden)
2. Adds a natural, rustic, timeless quality to paths, borders, trellises, and beds year-round
3. Provides important contrast to plantings as well as visual relief from green/grassy expanses
4. Serves as perches for birds, squirrels, butterflies, etc.
5. Enhances the drama of the setting, especially around water areas
6. Provides a strong anchor point to attract the eye (a psychological sense of permanence)
7. Can fill in planting gaps and provide shade/protection for the soil
8. Very economical and long lasting
9. Allows artful creation, such as rock towers, labyrinth, trellises

### **Design Considerations**

1. Rock and wood can be heavy. Always use caution or strong helpers to move such items.
2. Respectfully scout out good sources for natural materials: quarries, beaches, and streambeds for different sizes of rocks; forests, beaches, wild places, or other resources for stumps, driftwood, and rotting logs.
3. Ask permission from the spirits of the specifically selected rock or wood before removing
4. Carefully fill in any holes left by what you take so that insects, nests, and exposed soil are protected.
5. It’s best to lay down these natural “bones” first before planting a bed, to avoid damaging plants.
6. Keep in mind the mature height of whatever plants will surround your natural feature, or it may be hidden in a year or two.
7. Try to mimic nature as you place such items — avoid that awkward, staged, or artificial look.
8. Consider using natural wood for fencing, trellises, gates, arches, altars; or, integrate with rocks for borders of beds or paths.

## V. GARDEN ART

### Functional & Psychological Values

1. Sacred garden art is pure inspiration for the soul.
2. Secular garden art tends to be light-hearted, whimsical, and fun for one's spirit.
3. Art honors and celebrates life and the creative spirit: a bridge between human and nature.
4. Serves as a catalyst for specific emotional responses, stimulating humor, pathos, reflection, etc.
5. Reflects the changing and evolving awareness of culture.
6. Can be permanently placed or be moved whenever and wherever desired.
7. Enhances the drama of a setting, fills in seasonal planting gaps, contrasts with plants.
8. Allows the unique personality of the caretaker or the garden's patrons to be expressed.

### Design Considerations

1. Be very selective when choosing garden art. You may want to avoid mass produced or cheaply made items. Aim for quality and uniqueness.
2. Keep it simple at first, asking: "Will this piece enhance the feeling of sanctuary in this garden?"
3. Find the right place for your art, moving it around until it's perfectly positioned.
4. Let your art create a mood: be clear about your intent.
5. Keep your eyes open for the unexpected. You can stumble on amazing art in second hand stores, garage sales, or even among debris.
6. Don't be afraid to create your own art: hand painting an old chair; sculpting a whimsical pot, plaque, or creature; making tiled or pebbled stepping stones...it's lots of fun!
7. Don't overdo it or your garden may start looking more like a museum. Understated is good!
8. Give yourself full creative license in this process. Enjoy yourself, and notice that the effects are contagious. Other gardeners will want to imitate you. People will want to donate special pieces.
9. Create an Earth Altar as a spontaneous expression of the sacred. You can do this anywhere. Place a single statue, a few polished stones, fallen leaves, or other special found items on a stump, flat rock, or bed of moss. Create a rock tower or driftwood sculpture. Such altars are honoring and often impermanent, yet their intent will not go unnoticed!
10. Dedicate a part of your garden as a Peace or Prayer Shrine. Hang prayer flags, place sacred art, or create a sitting area there to encourage contemplation. Erect a small sign explaining your intent. You may even conceptualize a simple ritual that visitors can engage in, if they wish.

## VI. HABITAT FOR WILDLIFE

### Functional & Psychological Values

1. See everything in your garden refuge as an integral part of the Web of Life that you have volunteered to uphold with love and respect.
2. Realize that all creatures have a need for sanctuary and safety.
3. Refrain from using toxic chemicals of any kind, for any reason.

4. Learn about the wildlife common to your region and their needs for space, food, water, and shelter. Understand what endangered species you can protect.
5. Strive to create as natural a setting as possible, with a diversity of food, water, and nectar-producing plants for each season.
6. Be curious about insects, snakes, weeds, etc. instead of fearful. Withhold judgment until you are well informed.
7. Watch, listen, and closely observe before taking action.
8. Remember that you are the steward and Keeper of your sanctuary, but not necessarily the Big Boss. Cooperation with nature is the ethic to strive for.
9. Be grateful for everything nature gives to you and teaches you. You are a student blessed with many of nature's teachers.

### **Design Considerations**

1. Creating a natural habitat increases the diversity and proper balance of the birds, insects, and animals that visit your garden. Biological diversity is the key to survival on Earth.
2. Integrate native plants into your design as much as possible. This will also save water.
3. Understand the home range or territory of raccoons, deer, bees, butterflies, owls, birds, bats, and other creatures.
4. Various sized shrubs (structural layering) and wild grasses (especially if left unmowed until late spring or summer) provide much needed cover; they significantly increase wildlife diversity.
5. Ground covers and brush provide important food and shelter for smaller creatures, including places to nest, hide from predators, and keep warm or cool.
6. Leave standing snags so as to create veritable bird condominiums, but cleanable nesting boxes with the right size of hole are also invaluable.
7. Many deciduous and coniferous trees are excellent sources of food, as are common fruit-bearing shrubs and vines such as blackberry, currant, holly, juniper, and rose.
8. Erect birdfeeders to supplement natural food sources with black oil sunflower seeds, white proso millet, hulled or black-striped sunflower seeds.
9. Plan for designated wild areas (even if small), perhaps toward the back of your garden. Let this be a place that is not mowed, weeded or manicured — where plants and grasses can freely go to seed, and creatures can safely find shelter. Even if you cannot create a wild area, you can create areas that are a little more dense and diverse. This technique is called the “edge effect.”
10. Research and plant some common nectar plants for butterflies and bees, such as amaranth, aster, bee balm, sunflower, Joe-pye weed, goldenrod, milkweed, queen Anne's lace, and clovers, to name only a few.
11. Create a hedgerow of wild plants (such as those above) — these provide a perfect home for butterfly larva and a host of important beneficial insects.

## **VII. COLOR and LIGHTING**

### **Functional & Psychological Values**

1. The healing properties of various colors have been well researched. Color therapy is used in Feng Shui, chakra balancing, clothing design, advertising, and in countless settings, from fitness and daycare centers to birthing and hospice rooms. Understanding the use of color can help you to fine tune the effect your garden will have on visitors and yourself.

2. The colors used in your garden have everything to do with the mood you create. Combining colors in various ways augments their excitement and therapeutic value.
3. Know the flowering times of the plants you are combining so your artful color combinations are not wasted.
4. Understand how the particular natural lighting quality in your setting augments or diminishes particular colors.

### **Design Considerations**

1. Lead with your heart. Reflect on the mood and feelings you want to evoke in your sanctuary: nostalgia, exuberance, reflection, peace, etc.
2. Keep it simple at first, initially selecting only 2 or 3 colors in a given area. Learn from these experiments and explore new ideas in other locations.
3. Plant for compatibility. Ensure that color and texture of leaves and foliage is also considered in your design. Similarly, let colors or lighting augment any garden art displayed in a given area.
4. Keep plant maturity characteristics in mind so more vigorous or invasive plants don't overpower shorter or more delicate ones.
5. Remember that nature's artistry and color palette can often display more daring effects than we might plan. However, it's also okay to be a little daring and juxtapose colors in your plans.
6. As one heals and changes, color tastes are likely to evolve as well. This may mean periodic adjustments in a garden design, in order to keep pace with emotional and soulful needs. If you are creating a more public garden primarily for visitors, observe closely the reactions of your guests.
7. **Impact of Color:**  
 In general **Red** is warm, vigorous, and energizing. Use it carefully. **Pink** can range from very warm to soft, delicate, and feminine. **Orange** is cheerful, positive, and invigorating. **Yellow** is also bright and cheerful, suggesting the luminosity of the sun and the first enthusiastic burst of spring blooms. Yellow can also be stimulating to the nerves and brain, with a harmonizing effect. **Green** is well known as the color of healing, the heart chakra, springtime, and the lushness of the fertile earth. There must be a good reason why green is the predominant color seen in much of the natural world! **Blue and indigo** are doorways to spirit and interiorization. They are restful and calming and sometimes work best when contrasted with brighter colors, such as white, yellow, or orange. **Purple** is similar in this respect, though violet shows up well. Colors in this spectrum possess the excitement of red and the peacefulness of blue. Purple is mysterious, meditative, and introspective. **White** is purifying, calming, and expansive, and it positively glows at night. It works well, of course, with all other colors.

\*Excerpted from:

**The Sanctuary Garden: How to Create a Place of Refuge in Your Yard or Garden.**

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