



LANDSCAPING GOALS:

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE STARTING A PROJECT

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There are so many questions that you should think about before getting started with your landscape. It does matter why you are gardening and what you want from your landscape. But don't let this list overwhelm you. These are suggestions to think about, but if you're the type of person who wants to start without an overall plan, go for it. Planning and thinking about these questions, however, will result in a more cohesive, and perhaps a more to your liking, landscape.

First, why are you gardening? Are you gardening for pollinators, to save water, for beauty, to provide shade and a calm place to sit? Have you given your garden a mission? Do you have an overall vision for your landscape? To give you some structure, below are some questions you should think about before designing your garden, or digging in a plant. Ask yourself the ones that seem useful and leave the rest. Notice that your responses can draw out unrecognized obstacles as well as clarify your purpose. Leave open the possibility that some or all of your responses could change over time due to outside factors like climate or changes to your neighborhood, or personal changes like health challenges and aging, children coming back home to live, a dog, or change in finances.

For your **vision**, ask yourself:

- Do I want to go out barefoot
- Do I want a place to sit/watch the stars/picnic
- Do I want a special or private spot for rejuvenation
- Do I need places for the children and/or a dog to play
- Do I want shade or shelter from the sun and rain
- Do I want plants/specific places to attract birds

Do I want plants/specific places to attract bees and other pollinators
Would I like a water feature
Do I want as little work as possible - a low maintenance garden
Do I want a cut flower garden
Do I just want an attractive place for views from my windows
Do I want an outdoor entertaining space for small or large parties
How about a garden or landscape I can nibble or eat from
How about an herb garden for spices and culinary medicine
Would I like a desert-like or xeric landscape (I don't want to water much!)
Do I want a meadow/naturalistic design
Do I want a place to meditate/zen-like atmosphere
Do I want a refuge, however I define a "healing space"
Do I need a work area, complete with potting bench, compost area, trash cans, or maybe an area to propagate plants?

And then, some questions getting at **practical aspects**. These questions are designed to focus on what you can realistically accomplish:

What does my family/others I live with need or want from this?
How much help will I get from my family/friends/people I live with?
How much time do I want to devote to this?
How much money do I want to spend?
How will/does this fit in with the rest of my life?
What does the land here (nature) need or want that this project can help fulfill?
If gardening for ecological value, what do the birds need? the insects? the soil? the water? the air? the animals? The habitat overall?
How might these change over time? (trees will grow and shade out sun-loving plantings, etc.)
How will we deal with the non-delightful wildlife/insects/birds?
What challenges do I/we see, in terms of nature and people.
What skills does the project need that I want to acquire?
What other resources does the project need that I want to acquire?
What skills and resources are needed that I do *not* want to acquire?
Where can I get services I will need? Can I buy/rent/share/trade/barter
What resources do I have (mentors, guides, consultants, websites, books)?
How can I stack functions? Can I design elements that meet more than one function?
Can I stage the project? In other words, do one phase at a time?
Will we monitor and evaluate? What has worked; what needs work?
How do you plan to deal with maintenance, and weeds? There is no such thing as a garden that doesn't need maintenance!

And, a few more things to consider before you ever put a plant in the soil. These questions are designed to make you **observe what's there now**.

Location: Consider the airflow, taking into account wind and bird/insect patterns. What are your views from different vantage points on the property, and windows from the house? Are there trees and other existing plants you want to keep? Are there big rocks you don't want to move?

Existing paths you don't want to move? Views/influences that you want blocked (garbage dump, pesticide drift)?

Soil: How is the soil health? Do you need to work on the soil before planting?

Sun: How can you make best use of the sun? Where are your hot spots, and where is your shade? We have microclimates around our property that make all the difference for plants.

Fire: Is fire a consideration? Do you need to fire-proof your home? How will you integrate your landscape/garden dreams with fire mitigation necessities?

Water: How will you retain water in the soil? Take advantage of downspouts and do some water harvesting (e.g., channel water where you want it to go, letting it sink in slowly)? Do you want water features? Bird baths? How can you minimize irrigation and maximize soil water capture? (catch, store, clean, use)

And, a few quotes to motivate your journey. The first two are from **Design from Nature**, by Delvin Solkinson:

“Nature [in health] is a working model for a stable and regenerative system. Observe how nature [in health] cycles energy, supports [bio-]diversity, produces abundance and generates no waste, then model these qualities on your...site.”

“The garden is a metaphor for any system of relationships. Every living thing eats, drinks, produces, has relationships, fulfills ecological functions, grows and dies just like a garden.” This explains the permaculture saying, “everything gardens.”

This one from Deb: “My garden is my therapist, my gym, my art studio, and my teacher. I learn and grow from my plants every time I step into the garden. Enjoy the sensuality of your garden, and it will never feel like ‘work.’”

And from Pam: I love my “forest garden.” We plant native food plants, but I also love to see what native (and other!) plants will pop up on their own from the soil seed bank and thanks to the wind, the birds, the “weed-free” straw. I prefer letting the plants grow semi-wild, wherever they wish, though I do knock back those that take over. My husband prefers neat, crop-only rows, so we strike a balance. For me the garden/ landscape is a learning lab full of surprises about our human relationship with nature.