

Our Gardens—Designed or Accumulated?

BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES

“A garden that didn't change and grow wouldn't be a garden at all.” Ken Druse

How did your garden become what it is today? Is it just as you planned it and imagined it to be? Did it happen just like that, with all of it coming together in one year or one growing season?

We're guessing not. Planning is an excellent thing. We believe in it, encourage it and, for public grant projects, require it. But how many gardeners have a blueprint or written plan? Or, if we have one, stay with it? It's not because we don't value designs or because it's easier to “wing it.” It's not. The problems associated with not having a plan can be expensive and time-consuming.

A landscape design, whether you created it yourself or someone developed it for you, will save time and money in the long run. Why then are gardeners hesitant to create, hire or stick to a plan?

- Gardeners tend to be do-it-yourselfers, and opinionated as well. A garden is no easy thing to create, so it requires a certain amount of stubbornness, commitment, flexibility and hard work. Those qualities can make it difficult to commit to a plan.
- Assumed expense. Planning and planting as you go usually seems less expensive... though that may well be because the expenses occur little by little rather than being made clear from the onset.
- We're frugal so we use the plants we have access to. Our own plants get crowded or a friend is removing or dividing some plants—do we want some? And so the garden shifts. Constantly.
- Plants change, like all living things, and require flexibility. We have a plan for the perfect shade garden carefully with complementary sizes, shapes, textures and seasonal characteristics. Then a storm takes out a limb on an overstory tree or pests or diseases intrude, and suddenly the shade-loving plants are in full sun. Even without external changes, plants rarely grow as expected in terms of height, width, aggressiveness, month of bloom. Sometimes the resulting serendipity is better than our plans, as when annuals like larkspur, cleome or milkweed seed themselves around; other surprises may be less to our liking.

Our gardens, in short, accumulate. We may have started out with the notion of having a native plant garden, a pollinator garden, a spring garden but suddenly it is, well, what it is.

This is not an argument against planning, not at all, but it is a kind of confessional about how much our goals and gardens change. So yes, do have a plan for your landscape, but recognize all the influences that affect our landscapes, use what you have knowing that things will change... and enjoy it.

Karma Larsen, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, plantnebraska.org



POTENTIAL CUTLINE: For good or for bad, change is constant in any landscape, with plants like milkweed seeding themselves in while others gradually fade.