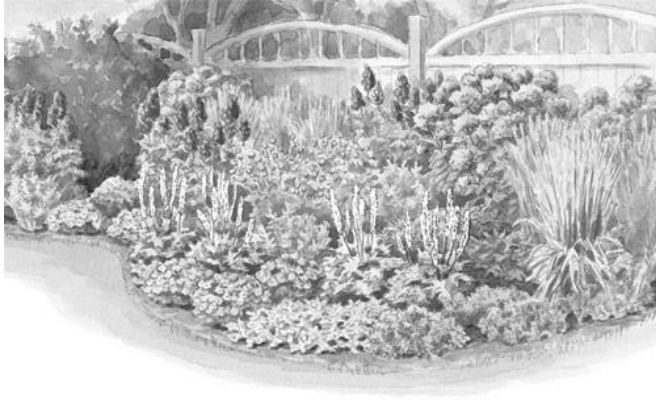


Creating a Border Garden



A border garden is a cultivated garden area that is bounded at least on one side by a structure of some sort, such as a fence (like the picture at the left) or wall, or the side of a house or garage. Border gardens differ from island beds in that they are normally viewed only from the front. If an island bed is like the dining room table in the middle of the room, a border garden is like the sofa pushed up against the wall.

Although you may be tempted to buy those beautiful plants you saw at the store and wing it when you get home, resist (just for a short while). Like most successful garden projects, you are more likely to succeed with your border garden if you step back and do a little planning.

Step 1: What's Been on Your Mind?

Pour yourself a cup of coffee, grab a pen and a piece of paper, and take some time to wrap words around the thoughts that have been rolling around in your mind. Have you been thinking about showcasing plants that are special to you? Did you see something in another garden or a picture that you loved and want to copy? Perhaps you've wanted to frame the entrance to your house, create a more inviting view from the patio, or add to special space in which to sit and relax.

Whatever your musings have been, the first step to make them a reality is knowing what they are enough to write them down.

Step 2: Pick Your Spot

When selecting a spot for your border garden, consider these things:

- The primary view—From where do you want to be able to view the border garden? From inside the house? The patio? From the front of the house?
- Sunlight—What are the sun and shade patterns of the desired spot? The amount of sun the area gets will determine the selection of plants available to you.
- Drainage—Select a spot that has good drainage or that can be altered to achieve good drainage.

Step 3: Decide on the Size and Shape of Your Border Garden

The size of the border depends on the spot you have selected. For easy maintenance, most borders should be 5-8 feet deep. The shape of the border garden—formal or informal—should complement the general style of your landscape and contribute to the look you want to achieve. Straight borders are more formal; curved borders are more informal and casual.

Mark out the shape of your border using a garden hose, rope, or flour (put the flour in a plastic bag and cut a small slit in the corner of the bag). Adjust the border until you like it, working the shape until it is pleasing to you. Step back and view it from the angle that will be the primary view. If you have a structure you want to put inside the border garden such as a bird bath, arbor, statue or bench, add it—then step back and see what you think. Trust your eyes. Our eyes inherently know balance and scale when they see it.

Step 4: Decide on Your Color Scheme

To get ideas to inspire you and determine plant combinations you like, tour public gardens and page through garden magazines and landscape design books. They are readily available from the library or by spending an enjoyable evening roaming through your favorite bookstore.

What color schemes appeal to you?

- Rainbow—Many colors mixed together like those you find in a cottage garden.
- One color—Flowers are the same color or shades of the same color (like white). The overall visual impact can be astounding!
- Analogous colors—Flowers are the colors next to each other on the color wheel, for example, red-orange-yellow (warm colors), or green-blue-purple (cool colors).
- Complementary colors—Flowers are the colors opposite each other on the color wheel—for example, blue and orange, yellow and purple, and red and green.

Step 5: Decide on Your Design and Plant Selection

Now it's time to compose the symphony. Most people are challenged by starting a garden design from scratch. Jump start the process by using what other people have done that you love. Again, touring gardens, garden magazines and landscape design books are great sources. Many area nurseries have free handouts on suggested flower combinations. You are safe with any plant that is recommended for USDA Zone 6a, which is the planting zone for the Kansas City metro area. Consider these tips in your design and plant selection:

- Select plants that require the same growing conditions. This is a must.
- Plan so something is blooming in each area of the border throughout the spring, summer and fall. Maybe add a little for winter interest with plants having colorful stems or interesting form, bark and seed pods.

- Choose varying heights to add interest, generally placing tall species to the rear and short ones to the front. That said, make exceptions now and then!
- Mix annuals with perennials for instant color.
- Add interesting foliage and variegated leaves. They will add dimension and further extend the range of color in your border.
- Plant three or more of the same plant. Groups of odd numbers—three, five, seven—hold the eye.
- Plant in drifts, not straight lines. Have a circular group of the same plants here, a rectangular shape there, a triangular shape in another spot.
- To create unity, repeat similar shapes, colors, leaf forms and textures.
- Try connecting drifts of plants using groundcovers.
- Include bulbs, herbs, vines and flowering shrubs in the border. The vines can climb over the structure that the border backs up to or over structures within the border such as an arbor or bench.

Make a rough sketch that shows your plant placement. Remember to plan based on a plant's mature size. The plan is helpful in knowing how many plants you will need (usually less than you think when considering the mature size!).

If you are like most gardeners, you'll probably adjust your plan somewhat once you get to the garden store and see the selection available to you. Your plan, though, will be a solid guideline for what you want and how much space you have.

Step 6: Prepare the Bed

Remove all weeds and grass, retaining as much top soil as you can.

This is your best opportunity to improve the soil. Add a 4-inch layer of organic matter, such as finished compost, peat moss, composted manure or all three. Till the soil to a depth of 8 to 12 inches.

Add a little general purpose, slow release fertilizer. Rake the bed level.

Step 7: Purchase or Acquire the Plants

Always purchase healthy plants. Generally speaking, you are better off buying smaller plants. It's cheaper and it won't take them long to catch up with their more costly older sisters.

Consider adding some perennials from a friend or neighbor's garden. There's something special about sharing plants and remembering that person when you look at the garden. In addition, the plants usually acclimate better than plants purchased at the store.

Step 8: Plant 'Em

Don't dig the holes yet. Take a trial run. Place the plants in their pots in your bed to make sure you have the look you're hoping for. Change things around as needed. Keep in mind the mature height and width of the plants stated on the plant tag.

Dig the holes for the plants following the instructions on the plant tags. Most plants are planted at the same depth as they were growing in the pot. Water thoroughly and mulch with organic matter to discourage weeds and retain moisture.

Enjoy!

Now it's time to sit back and enjoy. Developing a border garden is part experience and part experiment. As you see the plants mature, you may wish to add or delete plants, or include additional colors, forms and textures. If you continue to choose plants that are suited for the site, you will have the symphony you envisioned for years to come.

Garden Questions
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