Designing an Island Bed

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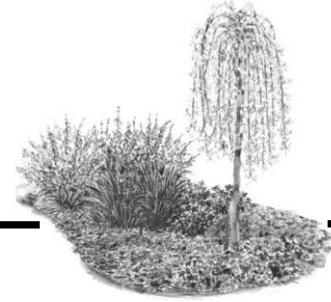
What is an *island bed*? An island bed is a freestanding garden, usually surrounded by grass and can be viewed from all sides. It may be helpful to think of an island bed as a lovely arrangement in the middle of a table—you can approach it from all sides and it looks wonderful from any angle.

Island beds can create an illusion of space or they can cause a vast expanse of lawn to shrink. The trick to making an island bed work in your yard is to first find the right location and then design the right size and shape.

Choosing the Right Location

Viewing point

To decide on the right location for your island bed, (first determine from where you will be viewing it.) Do you want to see your island bed from the deck or patio? From your kitchen window? Are you trying to obscure or mask a view, such as a utility box or your neighbor's yard?

TIP: It is not necessary to design a large island bed in front of an eyesore to hide it. A small island closer to the main viewing point can accomplish the same purpose.

Where not to place it

When placing your island bed, also remember it is a potential obstacle. Do not place the island bed where it will obstruct foot traffic or make lawn care difficult. If you have children, do not place your island bed in the middle of their play area. No matter how beautiful, any island bed that blocks a path or limits your activity will not be welcome.

Balance

You should also consider the design concept of balance when deciding on the right location for your island bed. Balance involves the visual weights of elements in the garden. Everything in a landscape has a visual weight. A large object is *heavier* than a small object. Dark colors are *heavier* than light colors. A horizontal object is *heavier* than a vertical object.

An island bed placed on one side of your yard can balance a large shade tree on the other side. Or, you can balance that large shade tree by designing your island bed with one side wider than the other.

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Choosing the Right Size

Scale

To determine the right size for your island bed, the design concept of scale becomes important. Scale involves the relationship of size. It is the visual relationship of each part of the landscape to every other part—the size of your house, the size of your lot and the space surrounding your property. A large island bed can overwhelm a small yard and a small island will disappear in a large yard.

"Basically, small houses and yards call for small plants and plantings, and large houses and yards call for large plants and plantings." (Buchanan, p. 38)

How big?

There is a rule of thumb many garden designers follow for the landscape:

One-third = Shrubs and flower beds
Two-thirds = Lawn

As with all rules, feel free to break this one. Perhaps you want to mow as little as possible. Then make your shrubs and flowerbeds two-thirds of your landscape and the lawn one-third.

In her book, *The Well-Tended Perennial Garden*, Tracy DiSabato-Aust suggests you make an island bed three times as long as it is wide. For example, a 6-foot-wide bed would be approximately 18 feet long.

Barbara Blossom Ashmun suggests that island beds be at least 8 feet wide in order to hold enough layers of color and texture.

And finally, Rita Buchanan states ". . . many people timidly create small islands . . . A better solution is to make a big, assertive island that demands and earns its space and to include openings or pathways so you can move through the island instead of going around it."

TIP: The most frequent mistake made by gardeners concerning scale is they make their gardens too small. Bigger really is better!

Choosing the Right Shape

Island beds can be formal with angular corners or informal with free-flowing, curvy edges. They can be squares or circles. Rectangles and ovals work well because they can be laid out so their longest side faces your main view. Island beds can also be kidney or crescent shaped. What's important to remember is the shape of your island bed should blend with the shape and size of your house. Above all, choose the shape that pleases you. After all, it is your garden.

Choosing and Placing the Right Plants

Selecting plants for an island bed is a little different than selecting plants for a typical perennial or shrub border. Why? Island beds have a front and a back and can be viewed from all sides. "The prominent position of an island bed demands that it look good year-round, and it is of key importance to create a planting plan that takes this into account." (Beckett, p. 73)

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Use the following guidelines to help you create your island bed.

1. **Attractiveness**   Choose plants with attractive foliage, long bloom times and ones that don't require staking.

2. **Variety**   Use a variety of plant materials—trees, shrubs, perennials, bulbs and annuals. Also use a variety of heights, textures and leaf colors, but limit yourself. You don't want your design to become busy.

3. **Continuity**   Use some of the same plants in the island bed that you have used in other beds or borders.

4. **Analogous growing conditions**   Use plants that require the same growing conditions.

> *The two-dimensional "foundation planting" of shrubs against the house can improve the look of some older houses . . . but they don't enhance the property so much as islands of plantings. Trees and shrubs can add an extra dimension or expansiveness to your property if planted away from the house. They can also reach their full ornamental potential, will be more in proportion to the overall property, and will tie the house into the yard. Lawn is not the only way to fill up your square footage.*
>
> *Remember to use your entire property for designing. Get away from the "it has to grow next to the house" mentality.*
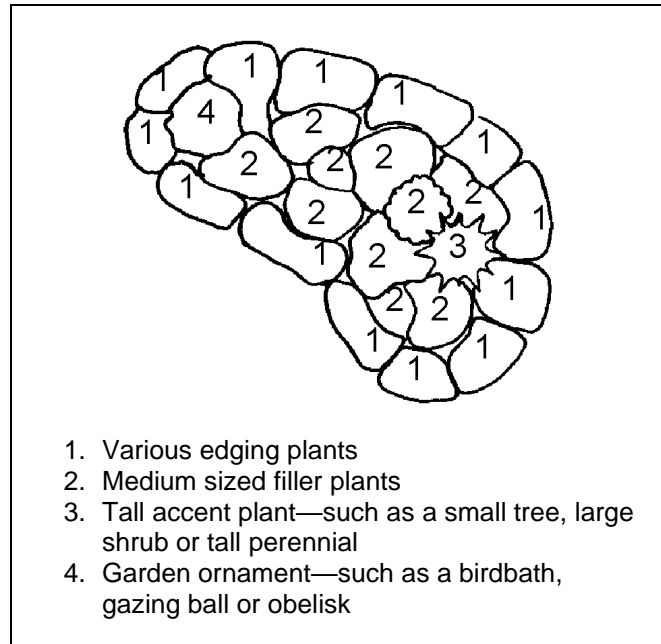> — Joel Lerner

5. **Drifts**   For the best effect, plant in drifts whenever possible—groups of three or more—and arrange the drifts along the length of the island facing the main vantage point

6. **Placement**   Tallest plants should be placed towards the center, medium-sized plants in the middle and short plants up front. Think of your island bed as a tiered wedding cake!

7. **Height**   Rule of thumb: The tallest plant should be 1½ times as tall as the island bed's width. However, if you want a feeling of openness, use shorter plants regardless of the bed's width. To provide screening or a feeling of enclosure, include taller plants even if the island bed is narrow.

8. **Edging plants**   Choose edging plants that have good foliage. Edging plants are the most visible part of the island bed. However, don't draw a ring or "picture frame" around the island with the same plant.

9. **Transition from lawn**   Short, fine textured plants along the front edge help make the transition from lawn to flower bed less abrupt. The island won't appear to be floating!

10. **One season of bloom**   For maximum effect, emphasize one season of bloom.

11. **Wintertime color**   If the island is close to the house, use plenty of winter color and evergreens.

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How to Plan an Island Bed Planting

Before buying any plants, determine a shape, size and color scheme for your island bed.

Next, sketch a planting plan. For beds more than 8 feet wide, be sure to include paths that provide access to the center of the bed for chores like deadheading, pruning and weeding.

The example at the right shows a pleasing design for a kidney-shaped bed.

1. Various edging plants
2. Medium sized filler plants
3. Tall accent plant—such as a small tree, large shrub or tall perennial
4. Garden ornament—such as a birdbath, gazing ball or obelisk

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