Designing Intimate Gardens

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Intimate Garden or Space Defined
There are many qualities that should be considered when designing a small garden. However, before these qualities can be explored, you must first define the principle use of the garden. In the simplest terms, there are two major types:
1. An ambulatory garden. It will be in service for day-to-day activities. This would include dining, sitting and reading, meditating (inward focus), observing (outward focus), sun bathing (sun worship?), production (vegetables), etc.
2. A viewing garden. A space that to be viewed, which could be on the same plane or viewed from an elevated angle. It is meant to look inviting, but not to be used physically.
The type of the space will help define how the space or outdoor room is to be shaped.

Shaping Intimate Space
What is space? In simple terms, it is the void in which we live life. Although we cannot see open space, we can perceive and understand the objects around us and the resultant space that they create. Space is formed or shaped by three mediums:
1. Architecture. This can be a building, a retaining wall, a free standing wall, a fence, an arbor, etc.
2. Plants. Small trees, hedges, tree trunks, shrubs and large perennials are typically your tools for intimate spaces.
3. Topography. Land forms and the associated changes in land forms.
A successful space plays off of the interaction between the shapes of the Architecture, Plants and Land Forms to create feelings of tension and comfort of the space. The shape of the space dictates how we interact and experience the space. A circular (square) space is static, and dictates that we stop, sit and enjoy the space. A space which is rectangular is much more energetic, and propels us to move through that space, not pause or enjoy the space. For an intimate garden, the space needs to focus upon human scale proportions to space, not public or ‘landscape’ scale.

Creating and Enhancing Spatial Qualities – the Final Frontier
What are the qualities that you should consider in a detailed garden? I have always found it best to consider that which makes you happy, and then translate that into physical items and spaces. Remember, people are but children in slightly bigger – albeit, sometime much bigger – outfits! Although adults are often influenced by learned events, it is often best to think of those things that made us happy as children, and then recreate them. These often-ethereal entities are all the more important in a small area, since it has personal scale and it is difficult to ignore! Some of these childhood entities to consider include:
- Sensual and Mental Details (up close and personal) – The mind needs constant satisfaction and indulgence. If the space is not stimulating, it will not be successful. This does not infer that the space needs to become overwhelming cluttered or confusing. But it does impart that our senses must be kept ‘amused’ with a variety of details. I make the statement of sensual, which often imparts a rather flesh driven and perhaps even negative connotation. For gardens in is quite the opposite and is very much a positive connotation. Most of the
elements of design (see below) focus upon the sense of vision, which is understandable since they were created for better understanding artwork and sculpture. However, a garden is much more than just visual art and should impact all the senses. These details include:

- Visual. The eye perceives color, texture (both shape and the surface quality of a material such as glossy and polished, vs. matt or pubescent), line, form, mass and negative space. Visual imagery can be translated individually via flowers, foliage, stems, pavement, or – in the case of a garden – a combination of all the above. As garden designers we are outdoors chiefs, and it is the **elements of design**, which are the ingredients. It is the melding of all these elements that creates a scenario of which the eye should never tire.
  - Color – See attached handout.
  - Line – Always present in the landscape, they occur as ‘bedlines’, at the edge of objects, as joints in a patio, etc. Bedlines are one of the more important lines that you will use in the garden. We have often confused a wavy and erratic bedline with a design that appears natural. Lines in nature can be long and sinuous, or square, but very rarely are they erratic! Lines also develop and describe the form. We read the edge of a form, which is a line.
  - Form – The shape of an object or plant. For plants there are two distinct divisions: the shape of the leaf, and the shape or habit of the plant (see attached handouts).
  - Mass – The bulk or visual weight of an object. This is often dependent upon the color (darker green plants are more massive than light green), form (dissected or irregular shaped outlines appear less massive than solid leaves or uniform outlines) and texture (glossy surfaces appear more weighty than pubescent).
  - Texture – Smooth or rough! Described both visually by the shadow lines cast in a stem, or the surface of a building, or tactility.
  - Sound – Is it through pavement (the sounds of shoe souls on pavement, or better yet on gravel), water (dripping, running, splashing), or wind (hard to control but easy to portray with plants) that yield this element.
  - Touch – A small space needs to have tactile relations as well. Are the plants smooth or pubescent? Is there a Yak Rhododendron nearby with fuzzy undersides to the leaf? Is there an associated glassy smooth element to touch for the sake of comparison? Remember, a garden is not merely just plants, it is architecture as well!
  - Smell – How can you possibly have an intimate setting without perfume? It need not be overbearing like some of the hybrid lilies. But soft and inviting, requiring up close inspection and a sniff! Fragrance need not be in your face either. For example, the subtle fragrance of foliage is often not released unless it is touched or you crush the foliage, such as Pineapple Sage.
  - Taste – Strongly interwoven with smell, the sense of taste is most often forgotten. Plants such as Kiwi, Nasturtium, Figs or other plants which are both ornamental and edible should included in the garden.

- Sense of place – Does the garden provide a sense of protection? Do you feel a ‘warm and fuzzy feeling’, along with a sense of security that makes you wish to linger? Does the space surround, support and ‘hug’ you, or does it push you away? It is often this nebulous term – sense of place – that gives a ‘place’ or given area a reason to linger and embalm yourself
with good feelings! In general, a positive sense of place is determined by the **principles of design**. The principles essentially organize the elements of design and the other sensory details. If related to cooking, it is the proportion of the elements or ingredients.

- **Simplicity** – Is the degree of development of line, mass form, color and texture. Somewhere between a minimalist and chaos is generally good. Too little is often boring, too much is unnerving.
- **Scale** – The proportions of an element to a given space. If a structure or plant is disproportionately small or large for a given space, it will appear awkward and disturbing.
- **Sequence** – Generally ascribed to a sequence of spaces or outdoor rooms. As a person moves through the designed spaces, there should be a feeling of cohesion and unity. The spaces can become larger or smaller, but have a feeling of unity. The same as walking through a house or structure – each space is appropriate to the structure and the style is connected to the previous space.
- **Balance** – Are the elements on one side of an axis line equal to that on the other side. Whether it is done formally, or informally (occult) is dependant upon the designer and architecture.
- **Axis lines or Focalization** – These represent the center of a view, around which the elements should be balance, with the axis line terminating upon a focal point.

**Methods of Creating Depth**

Even intimate gardens may need to appear larger! Some interesting tricks include:

- **Color** – The color of blue makes the area appear larger, while red makes it appear smaller.
- **Foot Travel** – If you walk on solid and wide pavement, the distance is short. If you walk on narrow or slippery (gravel) pavement, the distance appears more distant. In a small space, a single gentle curve, or a right angle will make the space appear larger.
- **Texture** – Large texture that is up close and small texture that is distant will create a greater feeling of depth.
- **Vertical Elements** – An acre of forest always appears larger than an acre of field, due to all the tree trunks to peer past. Regardless of how small the area, a tall element, whether it be a grass, a perennial or a small tree should be added in order to provide a point of perspective to visually understand the size of the space.
- **Change in Grade** – If the garden is all on one plane, it appears smaller than by splitting the garden into two elevations. Naturally, one must make certain that the two spaces created are each adequate in size to accommodate the intended use of that space.
- **Forced or False Perspective** – Having lines merge instead of running parallel.

**Parting Thoughts**

The bottom line – the Garden is a personal space and it should match your personality and interests. Do not allow your desires and motivations to be entirely run by rules. Rules are created to be broken and since the garden is the space in which you have control, make certain that you are not timid.