

Planning for Plants in Your New Naturescape

Choosing Plants: Some Starting Points

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- I. **Research & reflection:** In landscape design, rarely is it immediately clear what the best aesthetic and functional approaches will be. You must spend time exploring the various options and considering the attributes of different plants that get you closest to your goals (while remembering that everything will likely evolve over time as plants mature!). The pointers and questions below will provide some guideposts if you’re not sure how to get started! But keep in mind that this is an iterative process involving much research, reflection, and time spent looking at your space over and over again as you consider the options and which ones will best fulfill your objectives.

- II. **Goals & challenges:** We discussed these concepts at various points throughout the course. Be sure you keep these in mind as you start wading through the myriad options for plant choices! Ultimately, you will arrive at plant groupings that take into account your design objectives (functional and aesthetic) as well as the practical limitations of your landscaping space.

- III. **“Right plant, right place.”** Let’s start with our basics: First narrow your list to the plants that will thrive in the conditions you have, paying special attention to sun exposure, soil type, moisture, and microclimate. *A general assumption that I encourage: Given our overarching “Naturescaping” theme, we’re going to **only** work with plants that are native or “water-wise” and won’t require supplemental water after they are established (not including vegetables, fruits, and “patio” containers).*

- IV. **Figure out your layers.** Consider **where** you want to layer; **what** species you might want to layer; and **how** intensely you want to layer.

1: Canopy. Start with your tallest plants—usually trees, but this could also be large shrubs, depending on the size of the space. Consider the following:

- How tall/wide?
- How many will fit/how many do you want?
- Overhead powerlines?
- Below-ground utilities?

These questions will help you decide not only how many **total** and of what size, but even how many different **species or varieties** can appropriately fit in the space you have.

2: Other woody plants. Plan your woody plants at all levels – midstory & understory – before thinking about perennials and ferns. Some of the “subshrubs” we discussed in Module 5 might fit in this category, especially for sites where you aren’t planning many trees or shrubs.

Using the *same questions above*, look at spacing guidelines and consider how many will fit in your space, and if you want loose/open spacing or more tight-fitting spacing. Again, spacing helps you decide how many different **species** you can plan for, as well as total numbers.

3: Perennials, ornamental grasses, ferns, vines, groundcovers. After you’ve figured out numbers and spacing for your larger and longer-lived plants, then you can start planning for these smaller understory plants. Use the same strategy as above, but also recognize that you can stuff more perennials into a space that might eventually be crowded out as the woody plants or grasses grow to their mature size.

4: Short-term fillers/bulbs: Don’t forget to plan for some plants that will give you more “instant landscape” while you wait for bigger plants to expand and establish! Bulbs are an economical option, as are bare-root, 4” and one-gallon pots of perennials and smaller ornamental grasses that will grow **big** in just one planting season!

V. Consider Plant Characteristics.

Only **you** can decide what’s important to you, what you like and don’t like, and how much you want to feature certain plant characteristics.

Here are some organizing themes to get you started:

- Colors:** consider *foliage* (in different seasons), *flowers*, and *fruit*. Organizing around color can be a fun way to start. You can explore color theory with choosing analogous or contrasting scenes; you can repeat color themes; and so on. We discussed some of these ideas in the Live Webinar #2 (Module 7). Perhaps most important: *What colors do you like and not like? What combinations please you?*
- Persistence:** Evergreen, semi-evergreen, deciduous?
- Persistence:** Ephemeral perennials or some winter presence?
- Leaf **shape**?
- Flower & fruit **shapes** and potential for ground drop?
- Bloom & fruit **sequence & timing:** If you are looking to create a sequence of bloom, pay attention to this. It might be secondary to getting the plants that work for your space, but it might also govern which plants you ultimately choose, and which go on your “later” list.
- Textures** of leaves, bark, other plant parts? Organizing around texture is a classic strategy, especially for your woody plants! Having a balance of fine, medium and coarse/boldly textured plants, or using a scheme of mostly fine textures with occasional focal points of bold textures are some of the strategies that designers use. But mostly, you’ll want to be sure you **like** the texture of your choices in all seasons!
- Form:** See Module 5, Segment #1. Don’t forget to consider forms of deciduous plants in all seasons!

- ❑ **Prickles & thorns:** Presence or absence of these features may be irrelevant to you, or you may seek plants that might repel some creatures while attracting others. Either way, if you choose thorns/prickles, make sure you are OK with what that might mean for (especially) your short-term maintenance requirements until they are established.
- ❑ **Rhizomes:** Spreading by rhizomes can be a great way to quickly fill in an empty area, or you might prefer not to have something wandering around! Some rhizomes spread aggressively, others less so. Be aware of this when choosing plants.
- ❑ **Wildlife value:** If you're especially keen to attract pollinators, for instance, make this a priority, and pay special attention to bloom times. However, remember that a diverse mix of plants is generally going to be pretty wildlife friendly, attracting insects of various types that attract birds, and so on.
- [Here's a great, concise summary](#) of some of the aesthetic characteristics noted above.
- Other characteristics are discussed in the online modules in Thinkific.

VI. Links & Tips

Review modules in Thinkific, especially:

- ❑ Module #7: *Plant-Design Principles I: Designing for Structural Beauty and Plant-Design Principles II: Designing for Success & Expected Maintenance*. These sections will help you think about what's important to you in terms of **aesthetics, function, and your expected maintenance capacity**. *From there you can start to research plants that specifically meet those needs.*
- ❑ Don't forget that there are abundant resources about plant selection in our ["Resources" section](#).
- ❑ Module #5: All the plant resources, especially in the first segment, on trees—there are a lot of general principles in that section, including useful resources links.
- ❑ Module #5 is designed so you can go at your own pace and take notes or skip ahead, as you prefer, to review some plant options.
- ❑ **Great Plant Picks:** In Module 5, Part 1, I walk through how to use this resource! Very handy for quickly drilling down on some options for consideration. *Check out [the GPP website](#) when you're ready.*
- ❑ **Don't forget books!** Check out [this accompanying list](#) of my "tried-and-true" companions when looking for ideas. Many of these are available from the library and in digital format! Some are even now downloadable PDFs.
- ❑ **Drainfields:** If you need to plant your drainfield, here are some resources. First, if you are unsure about your system's dimensions, etc., start with [this website](#); to look at original as-built drawings associated with your permit, you can go to [this website](#) and enter your parcel number to look up various permits associated with your property. If you don't know your parcel number, find it in Thurston GeoData: <https://www.geodata.org/>

- **Planting ideas for drainfields:** If your project includes a drainfield planting, please see [this guidance document](#) created for Naturescaping.
- **HOA regulations:** Check on covenants or any other requirements and get certainty that your goals and plant choices are OK under the rules governing your neighborhood.

VII. Putting it all together: create your “wish lists.”

Working through the steps above, you’ll likely find a robust list of options! The goal is to work toward a list of what you think will be the plants that will best fulfill as many of your functional and aesthetic needs as possible. As you start delving in, begin **making notes** and **listing plants** for your wish list(s) for different sites. Try to keep the layering categories in mind as you go. (**Tip:** If it will help you stay organized, print out the Naturescaping Worksheet and make hand-written notes for your different project areas as you do your research.)

You may fall in love with some specific plants so much that you want to repeat them over and over, even in different sections of your space—that’s great, if so! It allows you to create “theme plants.” Or you may want to try a lot of different ideas.

When making *draft plant lists*, start by **dreaming big!** Develop as *robust a list as you desire* within the constraints of the site(s) you are planning for. Consider noting tiers of plants on your worksheet—for instance, “definite favorites” and “maybe this will work?” kinds of categories.

Once you’ve refined your list, then you can start researching **availability** and **price** for some of your ideas. But don’t worry too much about those things just yet!

What about challenges and seeming lack of options? You might have an area where you are really struggling to find plant options. But there should be planting options for just about everywhere. Do your best to come up with *some* options, using the [resources](#) provided and online plant-search sites like [Great Plant Picks](#). As a last resort, you can always consider changing the conditions of that part of your project.

Remember, there is no true “right way” to do this! You’ll find lots of design ideas in the resources we provided, the [book list](#), and myriad articles on the Internet. Read away, but if something doesn’t resonate with *you*, skip it! You only need to please yourself (and maybe all the others in your household!).

Have fun and enjoy the creative process!