

# Beyond Curb Appeal

*Achieving real design change in your front garden*

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Text and photographs

“Everything seems so predictable. I can't figure out how to make it work as an interesting space.”

I often hear this complaint from my clients about their front yards. Many gardeners know plants inside and out but struggle with implementing design ideas they see in magazines and books. In the Rockies, we also want to enjoy summer living as much as possible without spending the entire season under construction. The front yard is our transition space from public to private, also communicating messages about taste, routines, and personal style. Professional designers have the advantage of being unattached to the views and circulation patterns you live with every day, which makes it difficult to view your garden with an objective eye.

Here's how to implement two of the techniques pros use to solve common design problems that can maximize a front garden's wow factor right away:

## COMMON PROBLEM #1

“I try to duplicate plant and material combinations from magazines but they never look as good.”

## Solution

Take a cue from Mother Nature to unify your planting layouts. The next time you stroll a meadow or hike a trail, notice the large drifts of single plants with oddballs popping up here and there. In nature, plants weave in and out of each other effortlessly, a dance of texture and color. When the plants meet an obstacle such as a fence or rock, they become intertwined with the twigs, pebbles, and soil that land there. Birds, wind, and other forces are at work here, creating perfect design; the edges are where everything meets in nature. Attention to these edges in your

garden is how you can create one-of-a-kind planting design.

## How to do it

Mimic natural tendencies where materials changes occur, when paving or raised beds meet lawn, for example. During your next walk, take a sketchbook or camera and imagine yourself hovering above an area you want to reproduce in your garden. Squint to allow an abstract view of only shapes and colors, making note of the textures, shapes, and colors you see only at the intersections. This may take practice, but becomes a great way to capture the core essence of a space.

At home, use large masses of similar plants for bold effect to replicate the large areas, setting others plants and objects of

contrast in the transition areas between those planting masses. Pepper these intersections with containers, plants or art objects that provide interest during the winter months. Taller grasses or shrubs can create an enclosure for sculpture; a shrub with the bottom branches lifted provides shelter for plants that need wind protection. Before planting, recall the colors or texture combinations that gave you pause during your walk.

## Tip

Place plants as you would decorate your living room: larger furniture first, then smaller items such as coffee tables and lamps. Last are the pillows, sculpture, and books that would be the smaller items in the garden, grouped together.



*Top: A house remodel begs for updated curb appeal and better use of space in the front yard.*

*Above: New garden walls to match the house siding and a built-in bench near the door with generous paving, extends architecture into the garden while providing gathering space outdoors.*

## COMMON PROBLEM #2

"I have a small, narrow bed against the foundation. It's hard to decide what to plant and the shape is hard to work with."

### Solution

Stop putting plants where you can't see them. Lining plants in a row resembles a firing squad, especially when some aren't thriving. Foundation planting was originally designed to help tie older homes to the landscape when they sat much higher up than today's structures, which are generally lower and wider. If you look out your window and see lawn and street, try pushing a bed out from the house 8 feet or more and expanding your entry with paving that reaches out to that bed. This provides an updated look, a place to group containers and also increases outdoor living space.

### How to do it

Sit inside and look at the view. Now gather some objects about 3-4 feet high as plant stand-ins and place them where you think your new bed should go. Add smaller items to double as lower plants. Group the lower in masses, curving around the higher ones, hugging them.

View them from different locations until you like the layout. Now, locate your new paving so it touches at least two sides of the current entry area and meets the new bed for at least half of its length. Bigger is better—you can soften patio edges using soil you excavate for paving, creating low mounds where the bed or paving meet. Add a grove of trees or shrubs on the mounds for a semi-private space seating area that also provides less grass to mow and more usable space to view and enjoy, without re-doing the entire front yard.

### Tip

Look for the conditions that make outdoor rooms successful: a spot for catching sunsets, an area sheltered from wind or one that thaws quickly in the spring for early bulbs. Take a chair outside and move it around until you find the right place for your new outdoor room and relocated bed.

By looking at the same old plants, objects, and locations in new ways and working to capture the fundamental essence of a garden seen in person or print, you can change a forgotten or outdated area of your garden into a modern, custom space. 🛠️

## DESIGN CHECKLIST

- View your design from at least three different locations.
- Push beds away from the house for a semi-private space and updated look.
- Use mounding to create outdoor room boundaries.
- Watch for special areas in your garden that capture light or offer new views, building your garden around them.
- Connecting new beds and paving helps areas blend together.
- Rotate and change proportions on your idea to see better alternatives.



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