

# Planting Design Tips

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

plants, focal point, design, bed, texture, hardscape, nice, layering, grouping, shrubs, perennials, lisa, color, big, space, house, blooming, planting beds, form, funneling

## SPEAKERS

Lisa Ordler, Christa Hartsook

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**C** Christa Hartsook 00:00

Welcome to the small farms podcast, a production of the small farms program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. This is Episode 10, where I interview Lisa Ordler lecturer in the Department of Horticulture at Iowa State University. Today we are talking about planting design tips. I'm Christa Hartsook, small farms program coordinator and we hope you enjoy the show. Lisa, welcome. Thanks for being here.

**L** Lisa Ordler 00:23

Thanks, Christa. I love being here.

**C** Christa Hartsook 00:25


What does it mean? If we talk about planting design tips? What are we encompassing when we say that

**L** Lisa Ordler 00:30


what we are encompassing is what's happening in the actual planting beds. So so I'm going to give you a broader view of landscape design really quick, there's a difference between planting design and spatial design. Spatial design is when you organize the spaces your rooms in the garden, so you might decide that your lawn is a square shape or a circle shape. And that's kind of a room that would be your, your outline of your room. And then the plant materials are the beds that go around that shape or that space to give the walls to that space.

**C** Christa Hartsook 01:03

Gotcha.

 Lisa Ordler 01:04


So planting design is really about what's happening in those beds, and how you would arrange them within those beds. Okay, spatial design is a whole nother process. That actually that was the article that was on your site.

 Christa Hartsook 01:18

That was on acreage living yes.

 Lisa Ordler 01:19

Yeah, exactly.

 Christa Hartsook 01:20

Yes. Perfect. So if we're really going to think about that, what do what are our first steps? What do we need to think about?

 01:28

First step, of course, we'll get to spatial design done so you know what your planting beds are, the next step would be to figure out, you're going to have to narrow down your choices for plants. So usually, I have a funneling system. So the first thing you would think about are cultural requirements. Obviously, if it's sunny, or shady, or these plants, the dry conditions or wet conditions, that would be number one, always. After that I narrowed down plant choices by a theme, okay, so it could be a color theme. So for instance, maybe you like pink, and you want to have all your plants be pink. So maybe that would be a theme in my own garden, I have a perennial board and boardere out front. And I like to keep everything less than two feet, because I have a hedge behind it as three feet. So my funneling is, besides the cultural things are out, it's got to be less than two feet. And then it also has to have great textures. So when you mix them together, they look nice together. So you just you just have to fill out a funneling system for yourself. Usually colors are great, a good way to start with that.


 Christa Hartsook 02:24

And I'm assuming when we get to the point, Lisa, where we're going to be, you know, actually putting in plants, we would obviously want to start with the big ones first.

 02:31

Yes, I would guess I would go that direction first. And trees, obviously, you could put trees in


first and then the larger shrubs. And then of course, the perennials would be the last thing. The you know, the the woody plants, of course, are the anchors. And like you said they're larger. So if you get those in the ground first and you're not stepping on anything else,

 Christa Hartsook 02:51

what kinds of recommendations would you have for us for grouping some of those smaller shrubs in in bushes that might maybe make our framework.

 03:00

My website, actually, which is Lisaordler.com. It focuses on design tips. And I actually have a whole list of different design tips, but I'll highlight some of them. So for grouping plants, some of you may have heard that massing plants is one of the things to consider when you're massing plants to think about those mappings and odd numbers. Okay, so instead of just putting one of everything in a planting bed, think about how you can have maybe three to five to seven of something. So if you're gonna put ground covers in the front of your bed, instead of just having one, maybe think about massing them in a larger group. And when I mass I not only mass, I try to do them in a way where the, the gaps between each grouping is overlapping. So if you think of it as like a brick wall, and you're building a wall with Legos, for instance, you're always trying to get the gaps stabilized by overlapping those. So I do that with plant materials too. And I'm doing the masses, I tried to have the gaps be in the center of another maths. So it just feels like it's more pulled together. So that's probably number one is to try to mass plant materials and try to have odd numbers. The reason we have odd numbers is because when there's an even number, you're eye for some reason separates them visually, you start to see plants as two and two. Instead of a grouping of four, you see two and two. So when you start to use odd numbers, your eye visually sees it as a mass instead. That rule can be totally dropped after 10 plants though, because after 10 plants, no one's gonna count the plants out. Yeah. So you don't have to worry about it after that. But but lower than 10 usually would follow that rule. Yep.

 Christa Hartsook 04:38

So we know we want to play in an odd numbers then and we want to try some of this massing. Is there a rule of thumb in terms of how many different types of plants we want to incorporate in a bed?

 04:51

That is a great question. I don't know if there's a rule of thumb per say. You know, you can you can cram a lot of plants into a small bed and you can have very few plants in a large bed, I think it depends on the impact and what you're trying to create with that. For, for instance, maybe maybe the mid century modern home. So you want really clean lines and you want few plants, you might have a really large bed, but it may only have three plants in it. Okay, because you're massing larger, certain plants are larger massings of plants, but you may have a cottage garden, that's a smaller bed, and you want to replicate in this beautiful English mix border, and


you might end up having 15 plants in that bed. So just depends on the style and what you're trying to come across. I think the biggest thing is when you're combining plants is to think about the textures and the colors in the form. When you're organizing plants in a bed. There's three elements to always consider besides massing is from texture, color, and a lot of people have heard of those things, but maybe not really sure what that means. In that order form is the most consistent and then texture then colors the most fleeting. And when you base everything just on color, when things are not blooming, they may not look very good. But if you base things on form and texture, it will always look good, even if the color is not blooming. With that said though, I still make choices for plants with color first, because it's easy to narrow down plants with color first, but then once I narrow down that grouping to the 15 or so plants, then I go through them and make sure I've got good form and good texture. So I want to make sure you understand form and texture now. So form is basically the outline of the plant. So some plants have a vase shaped. If you're looking at the plant in elevation, which is in look, you're standing in front of it and looking at my head on. Plants have different shapes, some are V shaped, some are round, some are columnar like grasses, some of them are columnar. Some are weeping, some are very horizontal and low like a juniper. This is lots of different forms. And when you mix those different forms in a planting design, that's what makes it really interesting. So even if things aren't blooming, even in the winter time form is usually there. And then if you've if you have a great mix of forms, it looks really good. texture to me is the hardest texture is it's many things, but I like to explain it, it's the size of the leaf, that's the simplest way of explaining it. Texture can also be the bark. It can also be the thickness of the bark or the thinness of the bark and twigs. But in the summertime, I like to use leaf shapes. Because if you have a large leaf, so you explain texture by coarse, medium, and fine. Coarse ones, of course, leaves are big leaves, and finalizar small leaves. So the trick is you want to put coarse leaves with fine leaves, that's a successful design. So if you put grasses next day lilies, that's a weak combination, because it's too they're too similar to each other exactly. And you can put those two things next to each other if you put in a coarse textured plant with both of them, okay, now there are some fine textured plants that can go together because a fine I like for one. One example is I have a small Allium that's more grassy like, but also have thyme and they're both very fine texture. But thyme has around leaf and the allium has a grassy leaf. So they actually worked well together, even though they're both fine texture. So you can sometimes break that rule by depending on the size of the leaf. But the big thing is, is to make sure you mix fine and coarse. And that is the trick of a few of them a big secret and landscape or planting design in particular, I would say texture is one of the hardest things. But once you have that figured out. That's where the amazing plant and designs come from. Yep.

 Christa Hartsook 08:39

And really working toward creating that year round interest.

 Lisa Ordler 08:43

Exactly. So by considering form and texture, and particularly form, you're getting that year round interest more, because if you're just focusing on a color, you're going to lose color after even a couple of weeks in some cases. Sure. So by considering that, that form year round, you're going to always have a strong planting design, which is really nice.



**C** Christa Hartsook 09:05

How about planning for growth? Lisa, what do we need to think about you know, in terms of five years down the road in our bed,

**i** 09:11

there's a couple of ways you can think about growth. One is obviously looking at the mature size of that plant and making sure when you put them in the ground that you're accommodating those sizes. Another trick actually is if you have some plants in your design that are slower growing like evergreens, for instance, I would invest in larger plants. Okay, there's evidence I'm talking about shrubs in particular trees, you have to be cautious. You don't want to plant calibre of a tree, the diameter of a tree too big, because the bigger it is in the beginning, it's going to be harder for it to recuperate. But for shrubs and perennials, if you have a slower growing plant, I would purchase a larger plants of that in the first place. And then maybe like if you have to buy reuse or other things that are fast growing around it, you can buy smaller ones. Still making sure you understand the mature growth that in the short term, that way they won't overpower those evergreens because they're faster growing. So sometimes I'll invest more in slower growing plants and just get a bigger specimen of those to make that impact a little bigger or a little bit more in the beginning. Okay. And then the faster growing plants, you can buy smaller ones and save money. So that's another trick with was growing, but in the end, making sure you understand the full size of everything.

**C** Christa Hartsook 10:27

Yes. What about a garden focal point do we need to think you know, in terms of one anchor plant or grouping, that's going to be our focal point?

**i** 10:36

Let's see. So emphasis or focal point is a design principle. And I think it's nice when you walk into a landscape to have something to rest your eye on. And it doesn't necessarily have to be a plant, it could be a bench, or it could in our in our house is actually a shed, we have a shed as a focal point. And you can make sheds look nice.


**C** Christa Hartsook 10:56

That's good to know

**L** Lisa Ordler 10:56

I always tell people that. But yes, it could be a plant too. So if you're going to it, I personally think if you're going to do a focal point and place it where it's important, so you want to lead somebody into your yard. So in case in my house, our house and our garage, have about 10 or 15 feet between them and our sidewalk goes right between them. So our focal point is at the end of that sidewalk, yes, and it leads you back into our backyard. So from our front yard to our


backyards, I can see that shed in the back. So use focal points in a way to draw you into the garden. Okay, so so it's kind of fun. I mean, the Chinese do this, they lead you into the garden with a focal point, you get in there, and then you see another focal point, and then you turn and you go towards that one. Yeah. And then you see another one, then you turn and you go towards that one. So that's how I like to use focal points is to pull you in. And the focal points are also nice for a resting pose for your eyes. So let's just say you have a big lawn space in the back and you have a bench and you're relaxing and sitting. Sometimes it's nice just to have a place to rest your eye. Sometimes it's the lawn space, and that's okay, too. But sometimes it could be a specimen, you know, Magnolia or something like that. Exactly. And of course, they bloom at different times different plants. So you have to decide is the focal point because the form is different from everything else. Maybe it's some really cool columnar plants that you've grouped in an area or it could be blooming, though. I mean, it could be maybe you have a special focal point of a magnolia and early spring, and then the focal point changes in something else. But that's the different ways that I would use focal points is I actually like the idea of leading somebody through a garden with that.

 Christa Hartsook 11:03

Sure. Sure. You know, we just talked about how a shed or a bench could become a focal point. What other kind of hardscape elements do we need to think about in terms of our design and our overall plantings?

 12:40

Of course, it depends on what the so lets define hardscapes hardscape is anything nonliving. So it can be anything from paving to walls to arbors, to pergolas, any of those things. When we do hardscapes. I just think about what does how do you use your space, okay, so if you're someone that likes to entertain and eat outside that, obviously one space you want to consider as a patio space. If you're out there a lot, you might want shade, so you might want to create a ceiling of some sort. For materials though, I always love the architecture tell you what that is. So if you have a house, with a lot of brick on it, maybe you use brick or brick and limestone will always look nice together too. I'm always cautious about not repeating too many materials in a yard. So be cautious about having timbers brick, limestone, metal, concrete and having all those things try to decide like what are the two items maybe two or three at the most even threes get a little pushy there. But try to limit your choices, but you let the architecture tell you what it should be or the style. So maybe the traditional house maybe limestone in cut in an informal way might be really pretty but if you have a very contemporary home, maybe clean cut squares out of concrete would be more appropriate. Sure. So I had to just look at the what the house tells me or that the style tells me which direction to go in that in that regards.

 Christa Hartsook 14:05

It makes sense to me. Talk me a little bit about layering of plants.

 14:10

Sure. So layering of plants has different ways you can think about that. One is if you're viewing

sure. So layering of plants has different ways you can think about that. One is if you're viewing a planting bed from the front, and you have a back you can go of course from short to tall. That's that's one way of thinking about layering. If you do that, don't forget about the smallest plants in the front. Okay that I like to call those the trim plants a lot of us don't think about having the really beautiful ground covers that can spill out onto a hardscape and and I'm saying hardscape because if we have 10 spilling out over onto the lawn that becomes a mess because when you mow you might move them off so I when they spill over onto a hardscape sort of sidewalk patio, those types of things. But those little plants are the ones I get the most compliments on my own garden. People are always amazed like one of those fun little creeper crawlers that you know the front of your border and those beautiful colors and spring, whatever they are, but those are the ones like the most compliments about and to be honest with you, I learned that tip at Reiman Gardens when I worked there because those horticulture staff were just amazed, are amazing at doing those little details that I never thought about. So that's one kind of layering. Another layering that we should consider is, when we're looking at the scale of our house, I know a lot of us like to just put one row of shrubs all the way around their house and be done with it if you have a two story house, and I'm not sure there's a formula necessarily for this. But if you have a two story house, don't be afraid to have three, four, or five, even six or seven layers of plants coming out from your house. Okay, in art, we have a two story house ourselves. And it's an old house built in 1916. So it's a Foursquare and some of our planting beds are probably 10-15 feet wide, and especially at the corners, so that like when they kind of spill around the corner, then you can have really large shrubs or small trees in the back, and then you kind of then you have medium shrubs, and then it kind of breaks down to the perennials in the front. And it's just I don't know what it is it just hugs the house small, it just kind of makes it feel cozy and brings it into the landscape when you can do that. So that's not to be afraid of layering several layers and not necessarily that sometimes you only have space for one layer, and that's okay. But how neat would it be if to try two or three layers or more, three or four or five layers if you can, how much nicer that is. So that's another way of thinking about layering is in terms of scale, to make sure your house feels like it's in scale with the landscape,

 Christa Hartsook 16:28

that is a great tip. You know, when I'm thinking of my own house where I know, in the back, it doesn't feel as warm and inviting. And now I'm thinking that planting bed is really one hedge deep, probably not as inviting as layering those plants out there,

 16:45

which is neat. And then there's another little trees actually. So speaking of that, you if you put trees on a 45 degree angle from the corners of your house, it starts to frame the house. And that helps you that scale. Sure to so not only frames, but it helps with that, just to kind of bring it in the scale just a little bit more. And then you can incorporate those in events too. If you're depending on how far out you want to go. And yeah, you don't have to be in beds. But yeah, it's easier to mow if they are.

 Christa Hartsook 17:13

You know, let's let's talk a little bit at least if we have people who are thinking, oh my gosh, I have to start completely over. You know, what would you suggest to them in terms of a plant

nave to start completely over. You know, what would you suggest to them in terms of a place to start?

**L** Lisa Ordler 17:24

Wow, that is a great question. I'm thinking of my neighbors right now because I know their front border was starting to they felt was getting weedy and they're trying to decide what to do. I mean, I guess one option is just to rip it out. Take one bite at a time, and just rip it out of if it's something I'm not sure why they would start over is because of the health of the plant or because maybe something has taken over Yes, I've had plants taken over and I've had to just rip everything out and I hate to do that because it's such a pain but shrubs hopefully you can keep in the ground the perennials don't ever be afraid just to rip them out and start from scratch if you need to. If it's if it's a plant that's non invasive, you can definitely give it to a friend I'm sure somebody would love them but as as anything invasive, you might want to just kind of compost and get rid of I think it depends on the situation and to answer that question because sometimes I think you could just walk around and rip out certain things but leave certain things in place because if there was strong structure there with woody plants Yeah, you could probably leave some things but then come back in and and clean up some others I will tell you this I have a border front of our house it's probably 50 to 70 feet long. I have moved those plants so many times you wouldn't believe it and I started in the beginning I just moved plants in there that I got for free or that I got inexpensively and I just put them in then after a while I realized that I wanted to make more of a pattern and that I wanted to work on the textures more so I've been pulling plants out and moving them around constantly so I'm I'm taking mental notes or paper notes all summer my neighbors think I'm batty I'm sure because I'm walking up and down that sidewalk all the time looking at those plants. Exactly and but I'm constantly taking things out and then I'll make notes of okay this one did this plant it and work I need to look for a low ground cover that's this color in the spring and then I'll and then that'll be my shopping list and I'll look for that. Yeah, so I always have the back of my mind certain plants that I need to improve that particular bed it's getting close enough but it will never be perfect but but it is getting closer. So I am, I didn't rip the whole thing out but I am constantly moving things around dividing plants like I have alliums and I love alliums, but some of them can get expensive like I have summer beauty and that one very expensive at an auction. And so few years later I divided it I knew where I wanted the future ones to go. So I just left them you know it looks funny. And now I'm finally filling them in so so don't be afraid to move things around and or revamp something and rip things out. If you have to especially perennials. Perennials are so easy to do that with.

**C** Christa Hartsook 19:56

Easily to divide in two and share with friends like.

**L** Lisa Ordler 19:59

Exactly, exactly. Which is nice.

**C** Christa Hartsook 20:01



Yeah. Would you recommend Lisa, that, you know, we kind of have a plan before we go to a big plant store or a greenhouse or, you know, you walk down those aisles, it's really easy to just start grabbing plants.



20:14

Of course, this is coming from the landscape designer. Yes, I think you should have a plan. I, my suggestion is I like to tell people at least have a spatial plan. Because if you have, maybe you don't the planting plan, perfect. But if you know where your beds are supposed to be, and you know, where the open spaces are supposed to be, I think it makes it so much easier. Because even I don't I, we have a plan a spatial plan. But I don't have all the plants picked out in that plan, because I know that what I want it to look like so when I go to the nursery, and I just find what they have available. And I just kind of get the make sure the textures are working and make sure the heights are working in the forms are working. But I always think a plan helps. Because when you do go to the nursery, to buy things and I know we all do this, I'm the same way when you have the sale, you buy tons of plants. This is so exciting. So some things I always suggest to people when they do that is if you're going to buy a whole bunch of plants, but you don't have a place for them at least try to buy three of them at the same thing. So you're massing, or buy plants that you can divide easily. So then you're you can mass them like hostas and you know, alliums those types of plants. Also, when you're at the nursery, think about what they look like next to each other. So don't be afraid to pull containers next to each other at the nursery to see what the textures look like next to each other to make sure you've got some fine textured plants and some coarse textured plants. So even though you're binging and you're having lots of fun buying plants, you can still think about maybe how they would look next to each other. And with all that said, I still just buy plants because they look cool. And I'm just like, I will find a place for this, I'm not gonna worry about it. And that's where all my changing happens my border all the times, I'll just buy plants that don't really fit anything. But I have to have it in that border. And then two years later, I'll be like, Oh, I guess I have to either move that or divided and have more than because it looks like that's the only orange flowering plant in my entire border. Sure. So then that's where I get messed up.



Christa Hartsook 22:09

Well, don't we all. it's nice to know, even the professionals do it



22:14

Yeah, I think I think it's I think it's the craziness of we love plants so much that we just want to try with the end, to be honest with you. Most of my plants in my yard are, were sale items that I just bought. I had never heard of them before. And now I have some of my favorite plants, which is insane.



Christa Hartsook 22:29

Any last minute tips or tricks we should talk about, Lisa?



22:33

Let's see. Yeah, I think the biggest thing is, when we approach planting design we get sometimes get overwhelmed. And the biggest one of the tips that I like to give people is to try to make a list that you can use in a particular bed before you just start designing. So what I mean by this, let's just say you have a small rectangle bed, and you know that you want it to be a red planting bed, all red plants. So instead of spending hours trying to design it and have all your books out and all the online plant databases open at the same time, what I do is make a list of potential plants, I could use that bed first before even arranging them. And I'll do that funneling system. So I know that let's just say my bed is shady. And you know, it's a dry bed. And I know that I want a certain color flower in that bed. So I will make a potential list first. And then when I have my potential List of 20 to 30 plants or more depending on how big it is. Then I sit down with that little plan with my small list and I start designing. Sometimes you have to go back because sometimes you might be missing a large leaf plant or something like that. But in general, that just is less overwhelming to do and you can use Pinterest to do that to maybe make a Pinterest board or potential plans you could use and then design the planting scheme.



Christa Hartsook 23:49

Thank you so much for your time today. This has been super helpful.



Lisa Ordler 23:52

You're welcome, thank you