

# The Limitations of the Urban Garden

Part 3 of the Creating Great Landscapes Series

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY DEREK THOMAS

Over the past two months we have explored the important role that contrast, balance, symmetry, and repetition play in the development of a great garden. We have created an outline of considerations that everyone who gardens in the constraints of a 10x12 space must embrace. We have looked at the importance that soil and water play in every garden. In our final article, we will look at some of the limitations that challenge every urban gardener.

Many of the reasons that our city gardens thrive, or fail, come down to some simple yet real issues -- environment, space, and time.



Scale has to be considered when designing great gardens, statuary and garden art must not overwhelm the space.

ing or redoing an existing garden. If your front garden is 10 x 8 feet, using an arbor, statue, or fountain designed for a country estate will not work. One of the main reasons small gardens fail is the determination to fit one of everything into the space. This is poor design. Perhaps the second most common failing is not considering the mature size of the plants that are installed. A good design will work both when installed, and when it is fully grown 10 or 15 years hence. A 60-foot tree that takes up half the garden and shades the rest is not what you ultimately want.

## Time

When considering your garden design you have to be realistic on your time constraints. How much time do you have to devote to the project? Many homeowners turn the actual maintenance over to a professional. This by no means indicates that the garden is no longer yours. You are the one who can decide how much involvement your schedule allows. A small garden demands at least two hours a week to do basic maintenance. If you can't do this, consider hiring a professional company to come two times a month.



This water feature fits into the garden and is a part of the good design.

will go a long way to protect your plants. Another consideration is the postal worker. If your mail carrier has been using a short cut to navigate your garden consider this when planning a redesign. Perhaps a walkway can be installed in flagstone or steppers as a design element of the garden. This will give a proper place for your mail carrier to pass.

## Scale

Scale is the most important element to consider when design-

## Planning

From initial design, to consultation with a professional, to assessment of soil and light, appropriate plants, your own time, your budget – planning is the most important element in achieving garden greatness. Put together a good plan now and this summer your garden will thank you for it.

## Traffic

Our city gardens can be up close and personal with the good and bad attentions of our two and four legged neighbors. Planting delicate flowers in the tree box in front of your home is beautiful, yet everyone will not be as caring of your handy work as you. Planting a border of liriope can be just as beautiful and many times more hardy.

You can install fencing to help protect tree box plantings, but make sure you are not creating a hazard to pedestrians. Many DC gardeners do install fencing for their front yards. This is a good idea and



This lush garden has all the trappings of a great garden, be realistic, if you install a high maintenance garden do you have the time to maintain it?

## Budget

When deciding what to do with your garden keep in mind that traditional thinking says that you should expect to spend 5% to 15% of your homes value on landscaping. There are ways to reduce this cost if you are willing to do some of the work yourself. If you are working with a landscape professional, you should decide how much you are willing to spend before meeting with them. Most landscapers charge between \$50 and \$75 per hour

for regular maintenance. And when purchasing a one time renovation or new install expect to pay a 50-100% mark up per installed plant. This will make a \$4 plant cost \$6-\$8 at install time.

This is one place where letting the hired professional know your budget range will probably help you both have a good experience. Landscapers can make adjustments in the size of plant material they are installing to meet most budget ranges. A one-gallon plant may cost \$15 installed where as a five-gallon plant of the same variety may be \$100. The good thing about plants is that with proper care the \$15 plant will grow to fill the space of the \$100 one.

**Avoid Costly Mistakes.**

Think about what you really want for your outdoor space. If you love water features yet hate the summer heat, perhaps your water feature could be an indoor fountain that would give you year round enjoyment. Keep in mind that your garden is ever changing and you can do things in phases. The investment you make in your garden should be comforting not filled with anxiety.

Over the past three months we have hopefully helped many of you get started on your quest for garden greatness. Take the time to print out the three articles and refer to them as you set out to design, create and most importantly, to enjoy your garden.

*Derek Thomas is principal of Thomas Landscapes. His garden designs have been featured on HGTV's Curb Appeal. His weekly garden segment can be seen on WTTG/Fox 5 in Washington. He can be reached at [www.thomaslandscapes.com](http://www.thomaslandscapes.com) or 301.642.5182. Find parts 1 and 2 of this series at [www.capitalcommunitynews.com](http://www.capitalcommunitynews.com). ★*

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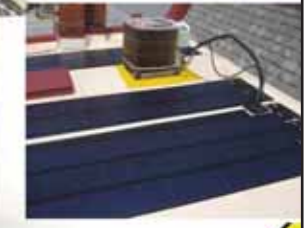
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