

New dimensions

When it comes to small garden design, following some simple principles will ensure your outdoor space is functional, regardless of its size

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Small garden design



Designing small gardens can be a challenge. Good planning is the key, which of course applies to all garden design. But in a small garden there are additional issues to think about.

Whether you have a tiny balcony garden, roof garden or small urban garden, there are plenty of creative ideas for small spaces. Rather than fighting it, focus on the benefits of a small outdoor space and there are plenty of benefits to enjoy. Consider the following four main principles when designing small gardens: simplicity, proportion, unity and functionality.

Simplicity

In a small garden, simplicity is the key. Without it, small gardens can fail miserably. But simplicity need not mean boring. A simple, flowing landscape can do wonders to help promote space.

- Keep the plant palette minimal; keep colours restrained, with an emphasis on foliage and form for year-round interest.
- Follow the rule of “less is more”. Over-designed, cluttered spaces look busy and contrived. The secret is to achieve a balance and symmetry in the garden.
- Stick to a strong design theme. Follow through using plants and materials that fit that style. Avoid creating a mish-mash of ideas.
- Pay attention to detail; choose high-quality materials and make sure the work is done by a skilled professional.
- Use strong, simple shapes for garden beds. Geometric shapes work well. This allows scope for more decorative, dynamic elements you can add into the garden, such as sculpture and water features.

Proportion

Many people think small gardens need small plants. Actually, the opposite is true. Well-chosen large plants in a small garden appear to enlarge the space rather than diminish it.

This principle also works on the ground plane, with paving and other hard landscaping features. A larger-format paver will make the space appear bigger compared with lots of smaller-sized cobbles or bricks.

- Keep outdoor furniture at an appropriate size for its space. Avoid bulky furniture. Use a few large, simple pieces of furniture in place of several smaller pieces.
- Choose plants that will not overwhelm or grow too big for the space and will eventually look out of place for the scale of the site. Vertical, narrow foliage allows plenty of light to filter through without causing over-crowding.
- Built structures such as pergolas should be carefully designed to sit effortlessly within the landscape and connect visually with the architecture of the house.
- Generate a feeling of space by laying pavers or garden beds on a 45-degree angle across the garden. This technique draws the eye along the lines to the garden edges and gives the illusion of length.
- To make a garden appear longer, place larger plants in the foreground and set increasingly smaller ones behind.





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- Create the illusion of depth by painting your boundary fences a dark colour, so they appear to recede into the distance.

Unity

There should be a link between house and garden as the architecture is a particularly prominent backdrop in a small garden. There are many ways to unify the two.

- Create continuity between the interior and exterior of the house by taking materials such as paving, tiles or timber from the inside out into the garden. This idea works particularly well if you have a courtyard or patio immediately off the kitchen or living area.

- Visually link the interior with the outdoors by introducing colour used in furnishings with foliage or flowers planted in the garden.
- Unify the planting in a small space by repeating groups of plants or keep to a single colour theme.
- Take a look at the external architecture of the house and repeat some of these basic shapes in the garden.
- Most small gardens are viewed from the house, so think about creating visual focal points viewed from within the house — such as a very special plant or an expensive piece of sculpture.

Functionality

Form follows function in a small space. In tiny gardens, where space is limited, every inch of it must be used to advantage. It needs to provide a useful function as well as look aesthetically pleasing.

- Use elements that have a dual purpose, such as planters that double as seating. Or create storage inside a closed timber bench seat.
- Include plenty of seating. Make sure paving or decking areas are big enough to include a table and chairs. Bench seating is the best way to deal with tight areas. They tend to sit on the perimeter of paving so it does not intrude too much.
- Some amazing dramatic effects can be created using lighting. By adding lighting you can utilise the garden after dark. Avoid putting too much light onto boundaries. Feature trees, water features and gazebos will benefit from subtle lighting.

By following some of these simple principles, your garden will feel comfortable, not cramped. Planning is the key when it comes to small garden design and will ensure your intimate space fulfills all your needs all year round. ■

1. A formal design complements this early 1900s colonial home. A palette of white and green plants creates a restful, simple garden setting, making good use of the small area. Photography by Michael Mansvelt.

2. A red feature wall doubles as a water feature as well as providing privacy for this modern outdoor space. Timber seating alongside the water provides an additional place to sit. Photography by Michael Mansvelt.

3. An existing Japanese maple set the scene for this Asian-inspired courtyard. Solid walls define the space and add privacy, while the water feature soothes. Photography by Michael Mansvelt.

4. A simple granite stone water feature acts as an all-important focal point in this small urban garden. Water gently slips down the side and into a hidden reservoir below. Photography by Sandra Batley.

5. A red wall acts as an eye-catching feature in this small townhouse garden. The small French-inspired iron furniture is perfect for a formal setting where space is limited. Photography by Sandra Batley.