

# Make the Most of Small Spaces



Divide the garden, vary its grade, and select plants carefully to help give an illusion of greater space

Cynthia Gillis

**A** GARDEN WITH less space need not have less interest. Just because your garden can't include shaded woodlands to stroll in or sweeping lawns doesn't mean it must be cramped or boring. You can still have spaces that are a constantly changing delight. There are special

techniques of planting design that can help small spaces feel larger and more open.

The tiniest garden I ever tended was roughly seven feet by 35 feet—a bowling alley of space between two buildings. To make it seem more open, I divided it—by planting a

mountain ash about two-thirds of the way down. Instead of the tree, I might have used a vine-covered arch or a raised planting bed to break up the narrow garden. Dividing a small space this way—into two or more partially seen, smaller ones—enlarges it visually. It is a common practice in interior





design but is not used often enough outdoors. Gardeners are more apt to try scaling down a design created for a grand country estate.

In another small garden, a 20- by 40-foot backyard, I placed two Chinese dogwoods (*Cornus kousa*) only five feet apart. The paved space between

them created the effect of a narrow path separating two distinct patios. Everyone who sees the garden has the same reaction: "The backyard is so much bigger!"

Though I often use plants alone to shape spaces, I sometimes use walls, fences, or paving. Some options, such

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*To make the most of a narrow lot, the author added two sets of steps and planted a pair of kousa dogwoods to prevent the viewer from seeing the entire garden at a glance. To complement these alterations, she planted pale-colored flowers to the rear of the garden and bright or bold-foliaged ones in the foreground.*

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as the vine-covered arch mentioned above, combine plants with architectural features. The arch is reasonably easy to build (or may be bought pre-assembled), and it's the plants covering the arch that divide the area.

Another way to suggest more space in a garden (though it involves extensive construction) is to create different levels. Taking a few steps up or down as you go through a garden gives you the feeling you're passing through separate areas. Even a subtle change of levels has a dramatic effect, as I learned in another backyard, this one about 50 feet by 50 feet. From the patio one sees a path going around and

disappearing behind a gently rising slope planted with a changing display of perennials. But what you can't see from the patio is the small pool behind the slope, nestled at the bottom of the rock retaining wall that forms the other side of the slope. The slope, which rises to about four feet, is only a partial barrier. You can see beyond it, but not everything that's behind it. That's what makes it so interesting.

When you can see everything at a glance, a small garden feels even smaller. Breaking up the space, partially veiling some of it, makes the eye move to what it can't quite see. The mind wonders, "What's through that

arch? Beyond the tree? Over the rise?"

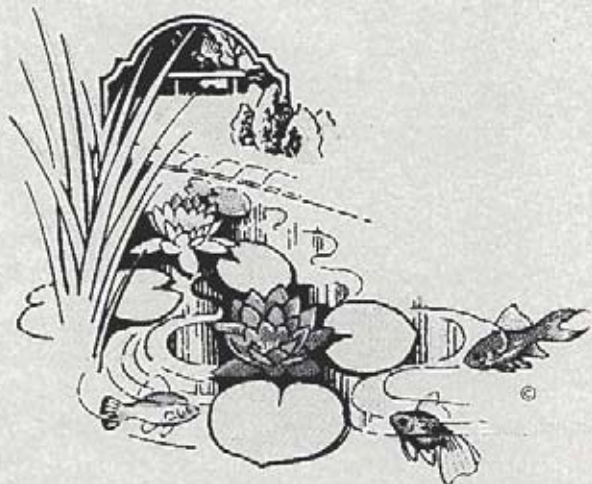
A mature oak in a city backyard makes the house look like a dollhouse. But so does a garden filled with tiny plants. A few dwarf trees and shrubs can be lovely and give the owner the opportunity to grow more types of plants, but if you also use small perennials and annuals it feels as if everything has been scaled down. That exaggerates the small space.

I like to use a few unusually large perennials in even the smallest garden. A big, bold *Ligularia desdemona* in a slightly damp corner provides a feeling of massiveness that can't come from a cluster of little astilbes; a six-foot-tall *Cimicifuga racemosa* gives a shady spot stateliness—without taking up too much space; one huge hosta like 'Blue Umbrellas' is often better than three or four smaller ones in the same space.

IT IS A WELL-KNOWN visual principle that cool, pale colors seem to recede, and hot, rich colors advance. Artists use this principle to give a feeling of distance, of depth, in a painting. We can use the same principle to shape space, to increase the apparent depth of a small garden, using foliage color, flower color, or both.

In a tiny, dramatically terraced city garden I worked on, this effect is achieved solely with shrubs chosen for their foliage—foliage that changes from red to silver and dark to light as the terraces rise in the distance. The vantage point in this garden—the patio—is at the lowest level; two garden tiers rise above it. On the foreground tier is the purple leaved *Cotinus coggygria* 'Purpureus', surrounded by red-leaved *Berberis thunbergii* 'Atropurpurea', *Abelia grandiflora*, *Leucotoe fontanestana*, and *Cotoneaster horizontalis*. The rich, deep colors of these shrubs bring the space forward to create an illusion of depth as the eye moves back to the increasingly lighter-foliage shrubs on the next tier. These include bluish-green white pines (*Pinus strobus*), gray-green *Spiraea vanhouttei*, *Cornus alba* 'Sibirica' (its red stems help to unite the color range of the two tiers), and finally a Russian olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*), truly silver-leaved and shimmering in what seems to be the great distance.

Limiting the number of colors in your garden is another way to make it appear larger. A mass of cranesbill geraniums can give a small garden the



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effect of a field. Fill a small garden with blue flowers (or pink, or yellow) and the space opens up; mix them all and you have a patchwork. It's probably the most frustrating rule that small-space gardeners who love color must deal with: You can't have everything.

In the 20- by 15-foot front yard of a creamy-white clapboard house is a yellow-flowering garden. Three golden-chain trees (*Laburnum*) are underplanted with *Kerria japonica* and flanked by a group of Oregon grape hollies (*Mahonia aquifolium*). In summer there are yellow columbines (*Aquilegia longissima* 'Maxistar'), yellow daylilies (*Hemerocallis* 'Hyperion' and 'Madame Chang'), and yellow lilies. There are also some touches of blue-lavender: *Allium christophii* and *A. aflatunense*, some early purple and yellow crocuses, and of course the dark sapphire-blue berries of the grape hollies. But these touches only serve to enhance the overall yellow effect of the garden. The single color isn't boring for an instant, but it is restful, and the garden doesn't seem like the tiny patch it really is.

Another way to limit colors is illustrated by the enchanting jumble of an English cottage garden. While it seems like an exception to the rule—it is an incredible mix of hues—the colors are limited to muted pastels. Instead of trying to combine bright orange, hot pink, electric blue, and yolk yellow, a cottage garden will typically combine pastel tones of apricot, pale rose, azure blue, and lemon yellow, all muted further by the generous use of silver-leaved plants.

For those of us without the strength to resist colors—lots of lush, vibrant, lively colors—there is a way to have them: one at a time. If carefully planned, a garden can completely change its colors from one season to the next. For example, here's a planting scheme for a sunny flower border that is yellow in the spring, becomes blue-violet in early summer, and changes once again in autumn, to pink. In spring, combine yellow-flowering bulbs like *Eranthis* and *Crocus* with *Alyssum saxatile* (which proceeds to act as a foliage frame for the front of the border for the rest of the season). You can also use the small, early-blooming species narcissus, but not the larger hybrid daffodils, because they bloom too late for our purposes. For early summer this border has *Allium christophii*, *Campanula persi-*

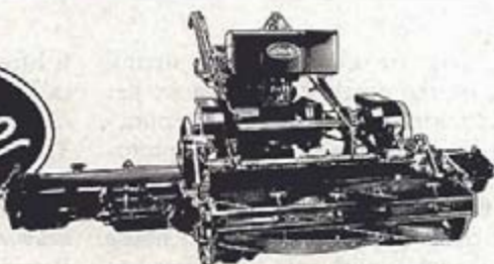
*cifolia*, *Aquilegia* 'Hensol Harebell', and *Iris sibirica*, giving a lovely mix of blues and violets with good contrast of heights and of foliage textures. The foliage is an important consideration: From about mid-July to mid-August this border is in transition and is predominantly a foliage border. Then in autumn it becomes a pink border. *Aster novae-angliae* 'Alma Potschke' flowers at the back of the border. *Lilium speciosum* is interplanted with the mid-border *Aquilegia*, which now acts as a foliage plant, cloaking the skimpy lily foliage. *Sedum spectabile* adds its rose-pink. *Anemone vitifolia* 'Robustissima', which is planted over the *Allium* to

hide its dying foliage, flowers shell-pink.

A garden can change from blue to red, violet to orange, or white to yellow. The point is that by using plants with relatively brief flowering periods (to avoid unexpected and unwelcome color overlaps) and different foliage seasons, you can design even a small garden that satisfies the yearning for riots of color—but not all at once. ❧

*Cynthia Gillis designs gardens in and around New York City and tends her own in Brooklyn. She wrote about making new plantings seem established in the June 1988 Horticulture.*

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