

Features

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Selling Beautiful Earth-Friendly Landscapes

Dr. Richard Ludwig

For garden center owners, there's nothing more satisfying than a customer walking down the aisle looking for a new plant friend. We love folks who are enthralled with our offerings, wanting to add them to their landscape.

Whether they're purchasing plants for pleasure, purpose or pollinators, this activity drives our business! Too often, however, when we're asked, "Where should I put this? Where should it go?" we give a deer-in-the-headlights response. You see, that's a design versus horticulture question. It requires an understanding of the art versus what makes it grow.

Helping Customers Design a Garden

Goodness, don't get me wrong, the cultural needs (sun/shade, moisture, pH, etc.) of the plant location cannot be ignored. If it dies ... or barely survives, its artistic qualities are irrelevant. However, after that, being able to help a customer analyze a plant by its design characteristics is essential in figuring out "Where should I put it? Where should it go?"

This skill is particularly important when folks buy natives or plants for sustainable reasons. Attracting butterflies or feeding the birds presents a placement challenge. Many times, it means squeezing them into an existing bed or wandering around the property looking for a few empty square feet.

Author Nan Fairbrother in her iconic text "The Nature of Landscape Design" puts it this way: "A collection of choice plants is not a landscape, any more than a list of choice words is a poem." Ouch! Just buying more stuff and finding a place to put it creates a busy, chaotic jumble. A drop dead gorgeous landscape is rarely achieved just by adding more plants.

Let's try something different and help customers be designers as well as plant aficionados. Base—and place—plant choices on their artistic qualities of form, texture and color rather than acting like kids in a candy store.

Eye-Catching Texture

In this story we'll take a closer look at texture, too often the least considered of the three design tenets (form, texture and color). Texture ranges from extra coarse to extra fine. What exactly does that mean? Essentially, texture refers to size, spacing and shininess of leaves or other plant parts.

Coarse texture means the leaves are large, glossy and far apart (see Example 1). Conversely, fine-textured plants have leaves that are small or thin, dull finished and close together (see Example 2). Which would you guess is the

most eye-catching or (another way to say it) has the most visual energy? Coarse texture, for sure! This has to do with how light hits the plant. If the leaves are shiny, some of the sunlight hits the leaf and reflects directly into our eyes with pure, white light.

Because the leaf isn't flat, some of the light is reflected and refracted in different ways, and we see tints and shades of green. And, because the leaves are far apart, some of the light misses the leaf and gets absorbed in the ground, so we see shadows or something dark. Pure white light, tints and shades of green and black. And if the leaves have a long petiole or leaf stalk, they flutter in the wind and the whole plant shimmers! Alternately, fine-textured leaves have low visual energy, as they're dull and close together. All the leaves absorb light in a similar manner and it's not nearly as fascinating to the eye.

So why pay so much attention to texture? Because you can direct the eye with the correct use of texture. You can set a specific mood with the correct use of texture. You can manipulate space with the correct use of texture!

Objects May Appear Closer ...

Coarse-textured plants have the most visual energy, so use them judiciously in the landscape. They arrest the eye and are fascinating to gaze upon, so place them only where you want to draw attention or encourage further interest. You can get away with one or just a few of them strategically placed. Coarse-textured plants also advance. In other words, they look closer than they actually are. Placing them around the perimeter of a space makes the space more intimate and cozy.

If the walk to the front door is a bit long and dreary, place coarse textures near the door and it will feel a bit shorter and more interesting. One of my favorite design ideas is putting coarse-textured plants in the front of a bed and fine-textured in the back, making the bed appear deeper and more substantial. Coarse textures partner best with rustic or coarse-textured hardscape elements. They're perfect in front of a dry stacked stone wall or split rail fence. Fine-textured plants often get overwhelmed when used with those type of elements.

However, they evoke a much more relaxed and restful feeling. Best to use them en masse. One or two of them don't make much of a statement. Finer textures serve as a foil and "play nice" with just about everything. In good design, it's critical to have foils or places for the eye to rest and fine-textured elements offer that respite. As you can imagine, most grasses are fine textured and fit easily into many combinations and situations. Extra-fine textured grasses, such as Muhly grass, recede. They look farther away than they are and can make a space appear larger by their placement around the perimeter.

Compare & Contrast

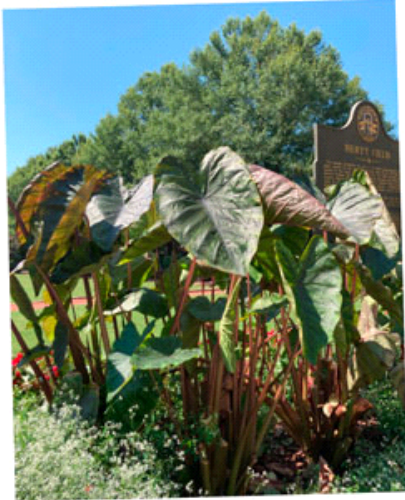
Finally, creating textural contrast (see Example 3) can truly make or break a design. Big leaves next to small ones, glossy next to dull, leaves that are far apart against those that are close together make magical combinations. How can you tell if you've got a lot of textural contrast? A simple and very effective way is to take a black-and-white picture of the combinations. This allows the eye to concentrate on shapes and sizes versus hues. Too often, color overwhelms our minds and it's tough to evaluate anything else. However, be judicious where you attempt lots of textural contrast. Try to be very deliberate and decide where you want to draw attention and arrest the eye.

Perfect places include near the front door of your home, in a container or at a portal to an outdoor room. Too often you see this in front of the compost pile or next to the storage shed in hopes of "dressing up" that area. That's the perfectly incorrect way to do it. It draws attention to those areas versus encouraging the eye to go elsewhere. Choose fine-textured elements or little contrast, as there's much less visual punch. Too many focal point areas make the landscape busy and chaotic.

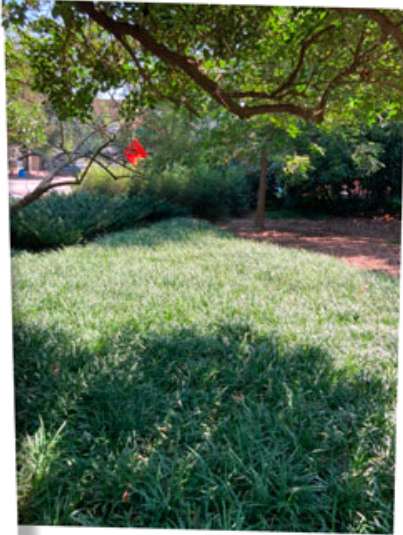
Be a designer and help your customers make their choices based on artistic qualities and what they want to achieve in the landscape. Don't leave out texture and you're on your way to creating a stunning landscape that is beautiful,

functional and emotion-evoking! **GP**

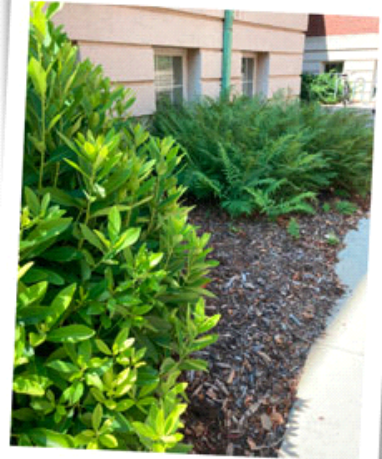
Richard Ludwig has been a college educator for more than 30 years in horticulture, landscape design and landscape management. He also was a host of "GardenSmart" on PBS and was a garden specialist for Southern Living magazine. Contact him at lsapeworkshops@bellsouth.net for information on sustainable design workshops.



[Example 1]



[Example 2]



[Example 3]