

## Kiss My Aster

6/1/2024

# It Seems Like it Shouldn't Work, But it Does

*Amanda Thomsen*

"I'm going to come by this week with pictures on my phone so I can pick your brain!" the new, enthusiastic customer said to me while I'm checking her out at the register. I turn to her and say, "Please don't. And let me tell you why..."

While it may seem like too much information, in fact I'm bonding with her by setting some boundaries. I explain that if she comes by while I'm busy or in the middle of something I won't be able to give her the best of me. I go on to tell her that I think I might need reading glasses and it can make it hard for me to fully get what I need from a photo on her phone, so if she just makes an appointment online for one of my free 30-minute consultations she can send me those photos via email and I can blow them up nice and big on my computer screen and then she and I can go over them together in my cool, dark back room.

Every morning, I look at my schedule and I know that at 3:00 p.m. (or whatever) someone is coming in to talk about their yard. In fact, I'll look forward to that half an hour because I get to sit down; I'll be so grateful. I won't be harried or frustrated; I'll be ready and willing to share what I know.

I joked with her that if I'm constantly allowing people to "pick my brain for free" while I could be "making actual money" I'd be a TERRIBLE business person and really crabby. She laughed. So I ask her to go to my website, read up on the options and to book my time, for free, and she can have 30 minutes of me uninterrupted. I'll be in the right mindset to help her graciously. She's STOKED.

In these visits, I keep my skills sharp. I orient myself with what direction the house faces, when the house was built and how long they've lived there. I can deduct a whole lot of information about a person from their landscaping. It's like a party trick.

I've had about a dozen houses with the same architectural footprint from the late 1990s and it's incredibly easy to remix that design into a custom dream come true in even less than 30 minutes. In nearly every consultation, I've talked about getting rid of landscape block rings around trees, trench edging, why yews are awesome/proper yew pruning, good mulch choices, weed cloth, burying gutters and that their front door containers are too small.

Sometimes there's an initial resistance and then they see the light. Sometimes they get a mock-up photo, usually they get a hasty sketch. I then take a photo of the sketch that I email them immediately. This is the only way I can keep anything straight (and also one time a lady had the plan blow right out of her hand when she left the shop and did I look like a genius!). If the customer emails me a follow-up question the plan is right there in the thread and I can figure out what the heck they're talking about because MY GOODNESS I do a lot of these.

And then these people get SO EXCITED in these sessions that I flip these free design sessions into estimates for the plants we talk about at the end of our time together and then by the time the customer gets home she's so excited that estimate becomes a paid invoice. I order her plants and she comes in to pick them up within the week.

Sometimes they're so excited they come in during the interim with a friend. We chat again like we've known each other for years as I pull her into the Aster Gardens fold. We are plant besties now. She asks me about some houseplants she has at home, she wonders about a tree in her yard, she tells me I was right about something I said in our consultation. She's comfortable. I made sure I was comfortable. We are both winning.

Instead of standing out in the sun with distractions abound, both of us uncomfortable, we've taken this to another level. It's in my nature to want to help the most people in the most efficient way possible and the fact that it's turned the corner and has become profitable is a sign that I'm onto something good. Now if I could just get these satisfied customers to talk to their friends about it a little faster it'd be like a metaphorical thick layer of Bon Maman Cherry Preserves on my universe. **GP**

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*Amanda Thomsen is a funky, punky garden writer and author now with her own store, Aster Gardens in Lemont, Illinois. Her blog is planted at [KissMyAster.com](http://KissMyAster.com) and you can follow her on Facebook, Twitter AND Instagram @KissMyAster.*