

Garden fever? Plant a plan in your head, first

> BY JESSICA WEBB

So there you are, staring at the empty patch in your yard or the nondescript space on your balcony, thinking it's time to add some life to the scene. But if you've never so much as stuck a spade into the ground, an innocent stroll through your local garden centre can leave you feeling like Hansel and Gretel, lost in a deep wood with no way out: so many plants, so many flowers, each as fetching as the next. Where do you start?

"I would say the biggest mistake people commonly make is, 'I think I know what I like, I go to the nurseries, I see a ton of stuff that I like, then I go purchase them and I just plant them with no set plan in mind,'" observes Caitlin Black, a partner and consultant with garden design group Aloe Designs. "I mean, it's like shopping for anything. Unless you kind of have an idea in mind, you can kind of go crazy in the stores, and you come back and you either bought way too much for how small your site is, or you've bought the wrong type of plants for the location."

Unlike shopping for shoes, picking the right greenery isn't an impulse buy. You've got to take some time to think about and plan your little oasis. "I tell people to walk around neighbourhoods," says Black, who also recommends visiting a few nurseries with knowledgeable staff, such as Southlands Nursery or Phoenix Perennials in Richmond, to help generate ideas and get pointed in the right direction.

"We always suggest, if you have a digital camera, to bring in a picture of your garden or the space that you want to create," offers Laura Doheny, manager of the David Hunter Garden Centers location in Kitsilano. "And the most important thing to know, for someone that's new, is to start small and build on that. Don't try to do a whole big project all at once."

For the truly overwhelmed, Aloe Designs has a new service called Design in a Box. Following a consultation, you're given complete scaled plans, along with plant and accessory lists and advice for long-term maintenance, so that you're fully armed and ready to get digging. (The package costs \$750 for a patio, \$1,500 for a garden, and \$2,500 for a landscape; details can be found at www.aloedesigns.com/.)

But if you're determined to go it solo, planters and containers, Black says, are an ideal way to get your hands dirty, especially if you want to get in on the latest trend of growing your own edibles. "Start with the easy stuff," she suggests. "Herbs are great because they're drought-tolerant, and the more you pick them the happier they are. Start even with lettuce seeds, or sprinkling some mixed greens. Great ones to get kids involved are peas and carrots and radishes."

Maninder Tennesseey, owner of Atlas Pots in North Vancouver, suggests a monochrome approach when picking containers. "If it's a small space, stick with one colour—it's always a good idea. And you can definitely change up your shapes." There's nothing wrong, she adds, with mixing edibles with ornamental plants. "You can certainly mix edibles and flowers together, which is really beautiful."

If you're looking to fill in a large area with plants, Doheny advises that foliage is the most important element. "Flowers are your bonus....If you have good, solid bones, you can always add colour afterwards." And when planting those pops of colour, she cautions against setting them up "like little soldiers in a row. Group them, because you get a better display that way. If you plant in a long, solid line, if something dies or doesn't make it, you're left with a gap."

Sticking to native plants and grasses, says Black, can make for a more stress-free experience. Besides, she adds, the traditional English-style garden—where there's a lot of cutting back and pruning—is falling out of favour. "I don't think I've had a client in the last three years that's asked for roses," she notes.

As for tools, less is more, according to Doheny, who relies on an old fork for weeding. "You just need something to dig with—a hand shovel....If you're on a budget and starting out, and don't know that this is going to be the thing for you, you're not going to get better results by buying a specialty tool."

The most crucial element of all? According to Doheny, it's "having fun—that's really the most important thing." ♦



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