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# Using Plants in the Landscape

*Landscaping* encompasses all the features that add beauty and utility to your property beyond the walls of your home. Plants are one primary element of landscape design. Good design with plants involves an understanding of each plant's individual qualities and needs. Winter hardiness, form, growth habits, texture and color are important considerations in selecting plants for the landscape. Often, some feature such as exceptionally showy flowers, fruit or fall color is sufficient reason for selecting a landscape plant, but consider other features before you make final plant selections. For example, many shrubs are valuable as accent plants, hedges, windbreaks, screens or as fillers among more showy varieties.

Use highly colored plants – red and yellow-leaved varieties and those with variegated foliage – with great restraint, especially those located near the house. Take special note of plant hardiness, selecting only those known to be “usefully hardy” in your area. Though a plant may grow fairly well, if it is sufficiently injured by cold to destroy a desirable feature, it will not fulfill its purpose in the landscape. Plants usefully hardy in one section of New Hampshire may have no value as ornamentals in another section.

The shrubs you choose should not grow too large for your planting area. Not all shrubs are the same size at maturity and it is important to select those that meet your needs. Low shrubs, one to three feet tall, are useful for foundation plantings, particularly around contemporary homes. The permanent low stature of these plants is in keeping with simplified architectural features. Some low shrubs are also useful for rock gardens or other small-scale plantings.

## **Frame your house with foundation plants**

Your foundation planting can add or detract from the value of your house, so it pays in many ways to consider carefully before buying plants for this purpose.

Over-planting is the most common error made by amateur landscape gardeners. Perhaps the reason for this is a natural impatience to fill the empty spots quickly. Hence the tendency to plant too much and to choose materials that grow fast, without regard for their ultimate size.

To develop a height guide for your foundation plantings, draw two lines beginning at the middle of your front doorstep running in each direction to the front corners of the house and ending at a height halfway between the eaves and the ground.

You might draw this on a snapshot of the house or on a line drawing made to the proper scale; or you might anchor a string at the middle of the front of the house halfway between the eaves and the ground. Your foundation plants, when they are fully-grown, should fall within these lines.

If the door is in the center of the house, the lines will be symmetrical; if the door is to the side, one line will rise more steeply to the corner, indicating that taller plants on that side will help achieve a balanced effect. If you would like your house to appear wider, place plants beyond the corners of the house that will grow to a height that continues the lines from your doorstep.

Although many people prefer evergreens for foundation plants, the twig coloring and winter effects of many deciduous shrubs are equally interesting. If you do use evergreens, choose varieties of such species as yew, juniper and holly that will grow only to the height you desire. Avoid full-sized trees such as hemlocks and pines. Except for small flowering species such as dogwood or flowering crab, which may produce a pleasant effect at the corner of the house, trees have no proper place in foundation planting.

In general, with modern houses, foundation plants should be low and spreading. Low plants are especially desirable at doorways and under windows unless the house has a high foundation. And remember it is not necessary to hide every expanse of wall. Placing plants at the doorway and near the corners and letting the lawn elsewhere run right up to the house can also create a pleasing effect.

Lawn trees should frame and not hide the house. For this reason, most homes look best with an expanse of lawn directly in front of the house. Plant trees on the front lawn beyond the corners of the house.

*original fact sheet by Charles H. Williams, Extension Ornamentals Specialist, edited and reformatted 3/01*

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