

# The Providence Journal

# HOME

## PLANNING MAKES PERFECT



WARREN JAGGER PHOTOGRAPHY

The color of lavender plants, foreground, complements the colors of the architectural elements such as the pool and its tile, in this landscape design.

### *Plant for the future as well as the present*

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**T**HE BUSINESS OF PLANNING A GARDEN is much like planning a wardrobe: Fads come and go, but good bones are always “in.”

That’s why it’s so important to have a plan in place for creating or enhancing those good bones in a garden, no matter what particular flowers or plants you choose to dress them with.

“A lot of people have a single concept of what they like, or they think that what they want is a little bit of everything,” said Newport landscape architect Katherine Field, whose offices (in a Mary Street Colonial that dates to the 1700s) are lined with glossy photographs of projects she and her associates have done over the past couple of decades on Aquidneck Island, in Jamestown, in Boston and France, and in Palm Beach, Florida.

The photographs show lifestyles that are grander than those of the average homeowner, but the principles of landscape design that they illustrate can be applied even to the simplest of suburban colonials or ranch houses.

“Before you do anything else—and even before the



KATHERINE FIELD AND ASSOCIATES

A garden sketch from Newport landscape architect Katherine Field shows elevations, buildings and suggested plantings.



KATHERINE FIELD AND ASSOCIATES

Confining the azaleas to only two colors increases their impact. Too many colors in a landscape design create a hodge-podge effect.



# Successful garden grows from a well-ordered plan

house is built, if it's a new one — make sure you have a master plan for the site in place that you can chip away at," is Field's first rule of landscape planning.

A topographical site plan is important, because having one means that costs can be projected accurately for such big-ticket projects as grading, drainage-laying, paving and stonework.

"Often, especially in new developments, the soil is terrible because there has only been a minimum of topsoil put back after the construction process," says Field. "If that's the case, then no matter what you plant, it won't take hold. You've got to get the soil and the drainage right before you do anything else.

"It's best to get a landscape architect in at the same time as the septic engineer, because the placement of the septic field and tank should be fitted into an overall plan."

Field, whose company works on both residential and corporate/commercial projects, has been awarded two Professional Excellence Awards for Residential Design by the Rhode Island Nursery and Landscape Association. Her firm also took a first place award for public design for the Children's Garden at the Providence Children's Museum. Another recent high-profile project in Newport was the landscape design for the renovated Chanler Inn on Memorial Boulevard overlooking First Beach.

In speeches to garden groups, Field says she often lays out a list of guidelines to follow when planning any landscape.

■ First, it's important to understand the difference between a landscape architect and a landscape designer: "A landscape architect has been licensed by the state and approaches a project looking at all of its dimensions, such as grading, drainage, viewlines and privacy. You might spend as much as \$250 an hour for a consultation, but it's money well spent because you will start with a good concept that will help you evaluate your choices all along the way."

■ Think long term: "A garden is a dynamic adventure. It's about change, and our task in planning it is to be visionary. What will this landscape look like 10 years from now, or 20, or 50? Plan for the future as well as for the present."

■ For that reason, Field says she always advises planting a couple of heritage trees. "These are trees that will not be major players in this generation, but in the next one they will be. A beech tree, for example, an oak, or some of the disease-resistant elms."

■ Speaking of trees, Field has some favorites for certain purposes that she says are often undervalued. "The catalpa, for instance, has a coarse outline and drops these unsightly seed-pods in the fall. It's messy, but in the right place — not up close but at some



KATHERINE FIELD AND ASSOCIATES

**This wooden fence, stained light blue to complement the flowers nearby, adds a defining architectural touch to a cutting garden**

distance, like a park tree — it provides a bold note of an unusual green foliage that gives great texture."

Other trees that Field would like to see more of are Zelkovas (similar to traditional elms but more disease resistant), American beeches (which thrive in New England forests but are hard to find in nurseries), and white cedars (another strong native tree that does particularly well in wet areas).

■ Field advises looking to the natural environment for ideas on what to plant on your own little acre (or acres). "For a project in Newport near the Country Club, I studied what trees and plants are growing well on the club land to get ideas for my client. A particularly bad problem on Aquidneck and in all of Rhode Island is deer. You need to know what plants deer are attracted to, such as yews and hostas, so that you can avoid using them in your landscape."

■ A frequent misconception is that "perennial" means planting once and then ignoring. "The true meaning of perennial is 'perennial maintenance,'" says Field. "Every garden, every landscape, needs to be managed, or it will eventually revert to wild. Even in a 'natural' landscape, you've got to manage the invasives, like bittersweet, that will crowd out other plants."

■ Take lessons from Japanese principles of gardening. "People often try to put in too many varieties, when using just one or two kinds of plants would have more impact," says Field. "Plant in groups of three, or in a large space, of odd numbers. If you have one of each thing, you end up with something that looks like a hodge-podge."

■ The same rule of "less is more" applies to planting pots: "The simple combination of heliotrope, verbena and sweet allyssum is great in a pot. And remember that there's nothing wrong with green in a pot or in the garden.

The flowers in a perennial garden will come and go, but the greens add texture and color that will be there all season."

■ Mulch is everywhere at this time of year. Field prefers the darkest mulches, not the reddish ones, and adds that mulch is fine to use around trees or as a pathway, but it has no place in a garden. "You can't work mulch into the soil. And NEVER use peat moss as a mulch for the same reason. It will sit on the top and take up moisture. In a garden, you need to work the soil by adding compost, not mulch. There's nothing prettier than a garden full of rich dark soil."

■ Watch the weed-whackers and mowers. Weed-whackers, especially, are the enemy of trees because their whipping strings ring the bark, making wounds that kill the tree by starving it of nutrients and allowing diseases to be introduced through the cuts.

■ One of the toughest problems for a homeowner is trying to landscape around an above-ground pool. "It's a huge structure in the landscape, yet it needs to be integrated in some way. You don't necessarily want to ring it, because just by doing that, you're really drawing attention to the structure. Make sure the seating area faces away from the pool, and maybe go for a xeriscape look by planting some tall grasses for a beachy concept? It's a hard one."

■ A few of Field's pet peeves: "I think that ornamental grasses have been overused in suburban gardens. To me, that's mixing a wild with a suburban palette, and it doesn't work. I think that colored foliage is not done as tastefully as it might be. Not reds, because they enhance any landscape, but the yellow-tipped arborvitae, for example. They need to have the right place, to be an accent plant, not a hedge."



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**This Jamestown garden features a classic perennial border that enhances the effect of a stone wall.**