

"Principles, Elements & Insights"

By Rob Moore

Today's topic explores the elements and principles of designing California native gardens and their practical application.

- Discussed will be the sequential steps that you will need to understand in order to successfully design and install a California native garden.
- Design theory will be covered as it pertains to developing a California native landscape, as well as how to perform the site inventory and site analysis.
- Also included, the development of your hardscape, the identification process of the California native plant community in which you live, and the correct way to choose your plant palette.
- Lastly, I will share insights and anecdotes as it pertains to the practical application of design elements and principles.

Introduction to Design

Miriam Webster defines Garden Design as the art and process of designing and creating plans for layout and planting of gardens and landscapes.

Sounds simple enough right? Well, it is a bit more complicated than the definition states, but by applying due diligence and taking a logical and sequential approach to the process, you too can successfully design a California native garden!

I think it's important to focus on the word 'logical'. Most folks think of design as a creative endeavor and they're right to a degree, but in actuality most of the work is done from an analytical frame of reference.

Design Principles and Elements

It is said that landscape design can be likened to that of a short story; one that is composed of elements serving as the building blocks of design guided by principles creating functional and aesthetically appealing outdoor spaces.

Let's start with principles which are the standards for *arranging* the various elements to produce the intended landscape design.

Focalization directs visual attention to a point of interest or prominent part of the landscape. Emphasis in landscape design may be achieved by using a contrasting color, a different or unusual line, a plain background space, or a specimen plant or grouping of plants.

For example, utilize this principle in areas that would traditionally be seen as you are approaching your home and pulling into the driveway as well as the front entrance of the house. Use this principle to enhance a specific area of the yard, or to detract focus from an unsightly aspect of a neighbor's property.

Rhythm creates a feeling of motion which leads the eye from one part of the landscape to another part. Repeating a color scheme, shape, texture, line or form evokes rhythm in landscape design. Proper expression of rhythm eliminates confusion and monotony.

Balance including symmetrical which is the balance of formal gardens, i.e., one side of the composition is a mirror image of the other; Asymmetrical or informal balance which suggests a feeling of balance on both sides, even though the sides do not look the same (designing with California natives typically utilizes asymmetrical balance). The third type of balance is proximal/distal. This type deals with depth in the field of vision taking into account off-site features. Distant mountains, large off-site trees and other such features can affect the balance of a design.

Proportion describes the size relationship between parts of the landscape design and their relationship to each other. This principle is one of the primary difficulties people have with plant selection. For example, consider the size of your home and yard. If you have a typical sized house and an area where the garden design is to be implemented that's 2500 sqft, you probably don't want to include a Coast Live Oak, or multiple large shrubs on your planting plan. In this instance, small to medium sized plants would be proportional and the use of larger shrubs would be limited -if used at all. Think of the objects in your landscape in terms of scale.

Unity refers to the use of elements to create harmony and consistency. Unity gives the design a sense of oneness and interconnection. This principle can be achieved by using plants, trees, or hardscapes that have a common hue, similar texture or materials that define a certain style of landscape.

Transition creates visual movement. Sequence in landscape design is achieved by the gradual progression of texture, form, size, or color. Examples of landscape design elements in transition are plants that go from course to medium to fine textures; that step down from large to medium trees to shrubs to

bedding plants. An insight into the element of 'color' is that it works hand in hand with the principle of transition. For example, I base the color of rocks in the landscape to the color of the house and existing hardscapes to create a transition between the hard architecture of these materials and the soft organic plant material in the garden.

Simplicity is last, but certainly not least. This principle seeks to make the viewer feel comfortable with the landscape. Few people are happy when exposed for any length of time to settings that are cluttered. Properly designed landscapes involve many elements but they always avoid the use of *too many* species, colors, textures, shapes, curves and angles within an area. Consider the philosophy, less is more. Case in point, even when taking a minimalist approach, there are a lot of materials that will be placed into your landscape. Make an effort to keep it simple.

Elements of Landscape Design

Design elements refer to the basic visual materials used to establish a design. Landscape design is defined by manipulating any of its five elements which are as follows:

Color is used to convey emotion and influences the mood and character of the overall landscape design or its individual parts. It has three properties: hue or chroma, value, and intensity. Hue or chroma refers to the relative purity or strength of the color. Value determines how light or dark the color is, whereas intensity refers to how bright or dull it is. Use color based on your tastes as noted in site analysis. Keep in mind that color can be used to draw attention or evoke a response. For example, using hot colors such as red, yellow, and orange create excitement. Use them to attract attention to a focal point and to evoke a sense of anticipation. Cool colors such as pink, blue, or green evoke a more relaxed response from the viewer. Use them in a quiet sitting, or meditation area.

Form defines the shape and structure of an object. In landscape design, form indicates the shape of a plant and the structure of its branching pattern. Tree forms are defined by branching pattern, while shrub forms are determined by growth pattern. An example of this is when you are researching plants for your palette and hear or read terms like 'mounding shrub' or a descriptive botanical name such as *Ceanothus arboreus* -arboreus literally meaning 'tree-like'.

Line is another important element to consider. Line creates order by directing eye movement or flow. Proper use of Line in a landscape design subconsciously directs your eyes. Lines may be used to draw attention to an object, group related objects together, or separate unrelated objects. This can be achieved through the arrangement of plants, borders, paths, walkways, and strategically placed plant groupings. In native garden design your paths will be

the primary use of the element 'line'.

Scale refers to the size of an object in relation to its surroundings. Scale in landscape design is inferred by the size relationship between adjacent objects. As a general rule in landscape design, plants and structures in landscapes should be proportional to the human scale. In other words, on an average-sized property choose trees and large shrubs that won't dwarf your home, and shrubs that size-wise, fit the 'feel' of the garden space.

Texture is the surface quality of an object. Texture is how something feels when it is touched or looks like it would feel *if* touched. Both animate objects such as plants and inanimate objects such as buildings and structures in landscape design have texture. For example, the coarseness or smoothness of the leaf, bark, and foliage of plants and trees. The surface values of buildings, patios, and walkways all define texture in landscape design.

Design Process

Site Inventory is where the design process really begins. Taking note of what is present on your property both positive and negative is your first practical step prior to the development of your landscape design. Some of the basic things to take note of in the site inventory are:

- Views you want to block or screen or enhance
- Views from inside the house (applies especially to child and pet areas)
- Utilities such as overhead power lines
- Underground power or gas lines
- Washer/dryer exhaust
- Air conditioning unit(s)
- Future addition or renovation plans
- Existing hardscapes to be kept
- Existing hardscapes to be removed
- Existing plants to be kept and integrated
- Existing plants to be removed
- Color of the house

An insight that I like to share with people is that I usually choose the color of the hardscape elements based on the color of the house. We spoke of the design principle 'transition' earlier. This is an example of how to use it. The rocks, paving stones, decorative gravel, the creek bed, are all transitional elements that bridge the gap between the hard, inorganic architecture of your house, and the organic, soft earth tones of the plant materials.

- Consider the Architecture of your house

Does your home's architectural style lean toward a specific style of landscape, i.e., Japanese, cottage garden, modern, ranch, adobe, or mountain meadow. Grab a clipboard and walk around your property and make notes addressing all the important items listed above.

Site Analysis is your next step in the process of designing a California native garden. Gaining a clear understanding of what your motivation is for developing a California native landscape coupled with how you intend to interact with your future garden is a critical component in the design process. At this stage you are basically mapping out areas (spaces) with paths to connect them. Is your main motivation to attract specific wildlife? Maybe habitat restoration or something as simple as water savings or reduced time spent in the garden performing maintenance tasks. Create a list and consider the following:

- Children and/or pets

You may want to consider developing a specific area or areas with their needs in mind. They will interact with the landscape in different ways than you will as an adult. Security considerations should be paramount.

- Outside entertaining

Do you plan on having parties with lots of people? If so do you want to integrate outdoor cooking equipment and a patio? Do you like to have a friend over for lunch? Do you want a sitting/viewing area? If you answered yes to any of these questions you will need to consider outdoor furniture. When choosing furniture take into consideration its style, does it fit with your homes architecture and the style or the theme of your landscape design?

- Outdoor lighting

Decide in advance if you want outdoor lighting, and if so, what type. Lighted pathways, perhaps back, or up lighting on a focal point such as a specimen plant like a manzanita or deciduous tree or shrub? Will they be solar, or will you need to install electrical during the construction of your hardscape?

- Water features

Running water is attractive to garden-friendly critters such as hummingbirds and Goldfinches. Clean, fresh water is a difficult necessity for these animals to come by. Adding a water feature provides a crucial resource to your garden and adds an element of song and motion to your home's outdoor spaces.

- Garden structures

- Garden art-Sculptures

- Herb Garden

- Fruit trees
- Vegetables/raised planters

Once again, gaining a clear understanding of what your motivation is for developing a California native landscape on your property, coupled with how you intend to interact with your future garden is a critical step in the creation of a sound foundation for a solid design.

Hardscapes and Their Role in the Native Garden

Your hardscape is the physical foundation that your new California native landscape will be built on. It is every bit as important as the plants you choose. With native landscapes the Hardscape is just as much aesthetic as functional and is literally intertwined with the plant materials you will choose. Elements like paths, mounds, swales, dry creek beds; whether your topography will be flat or rolling, rocks, boulders, and even snags and mulch, all play an intrinsic role in a functional, healthy, and aesthetic pleasing, natural landscape.

Unlike traditional landscapes which are usually created based solely on the physical appearance of the plant material, native garden design should be approached from a broader perspective. Think about how the plants and hardscape elements will work together in groups as opposed to individually.

For example, consider what looks good to your eye when you are out walking in nature. Usually when you stumble upon that 'Kodak moment', it's a combination of things working together creating the image that is pleasing to the eye. Design and build your hardscape like you are baking a cake, the hardscape being the cake, the plants the icing. Step one:

- Evaluate soil for drainage, type, and problem areas
With native plants drainage will be the most important aspect of soil evaluation. Dig a hole 1' deep by 1" wide and fill with water. Let it drain completely then fill again. Note the amount of time it takes for water to percolate into the ground. If this process takes more than a few hours consider using riparian species when choosing your plant palette.
- Site drainage
Analyze the way water moves across your property. Surface-drainage patterns fall into two categories: water collection and water dispersion. You will want to make note and address this issue by grading.
- Note where downspouts exist

- How does water moving across your neighbor's property impact your property

- Paths and/or access routes

Consider traffic patterns around your house and through the landscape both from an aesthetic and utilitarian perspective. Paths created with surface materials such as DG lend more to a casual (natural) feel. Flagstone and decorative gravel create more of a formal style in the landscape. Consider which camp your overall vision falls into prior to choosing paving materials.

- Mounds

Mounded soil in the landscape creates vertical interest, employs the principle of focalization, and evokes curiosity in the eye of the person viewing the garden. It invites one to explore the paths that flow between the varying elevations and curve out of site. It also reflects the natural topography of our native landscapes emulating our rolling hills, canyons, and valleys.

There are functional aspects to consider as well. Perhaps you have poorly draining clay or compacted soil on your site, but have your heart set on one of the beautiful Manzanitas you've seen here at Tree of Life. By creating mounds you can now include plants that require better draining soil in your design. You get a lot of bang for your buck by reusing your excavated soil, and by retaining materials on-site you mitigate the environmental impact!

- Snags/deadwood

Snags, and dead wood create habitat and beauty in the natural garden. They provide critical habitat for many species as well as providing food, shelter, and nesting places for many birds and other garden-friendly critters. Hummingbirds, Phoebes and other birds usually perch on dead limbs as opposed to ones that are foliated, and deadwood provides insect-eating birds with added food sources and can double as garden sculpture and/or art.

Tuck a piece of deadwood between a rock and a couple plants and leave a little open space around it for wildflowers to pop up through in the spring. They look good in a dry creek bed or pond as well. Find a piece in the wild that looks good to your eye and place it according to your taste.

- Water features

Water offers an important resource; fresh and clean water will not only attract butterflies, but will also keep your garden lively with a variety of birds and other beneficial backyard critters. Put rocks or stones in your birdbaths to give the butterflies and birds a supportive landing area.

- Rocks, boulders & cobbles

Utilizing these materials in your design is beneficial aesthetically as well as

functionally. I can remember hiking as a kid and turning over a pretty good sized granite boulder, and noticing all the life forms living under it. Even though it was the middle of summer and there hadn't been any rain for months, there was a cool, moist micro-climate under there.

Not only do rocks in the landscape provide transition between the architecture of your home and garden, they create a beneficial micro-climate for good garden bugs and your plants. Native plants are not getting a lot of water in the hot months so by including a decent sized rock strategically placed within a plant grouping (like you would see in nature) you are providing a lasting source of moisture that will assist them to get through the several-week interval between watering.

California Native Plant Communities: Identifying the natural ecosystem. Generally speaking, most of us live in the Coastal Sage Scrub plant community. This plant community occurs along the California coastline from San Francisco to San Diego. Inland, the Riverside and San Bernardino areas have their own variation known as interior or Riversidian sage scrub.

California native plant communities are the point from which you begin the plant selection of your landscape design. Working with natives, your first step is to identify and emulate the natural ecosystem that existed prior to your home being built.

Specifically, look around your neighborhood. Are there areas that aren't developed where intact native plant groups are naturally occurring? Note what plants are growing there. Look for native plant volunteers popping out of people's ornamental landscapes.

On my website <http://www.californianativelandscapedesign.com/> on the links page, Tree of Life Nursery has a pdf titled Sage Advice "The California Garden". This document is available for download and lists different plant communities and a recommended plant palette for each.

Choosing Plants to Recreate Your Native Plant Community

Working with native plants, it's safe to say that you have to flip your perspective 180 degrees. Point being, that in order to implement a successful design utilizing California native plants, you need to approach it from a different perspective. Resist the urge to think in terms of individual plant aesthetics being the end-all. Instead think in terms of multiple groupings of plants –combined with their hardscape counterparts, strategically placed through out your landscape with the principle of unity tying them together.

After referencing plants specific to your plant community, choose a dozen or two

species from the Tree of Life Plant Catalog which you can download from their website. Think in terms of groups and how the plants fit into the bigger picture - working together, and leave some space (about enough to walk through) between groupings spaced at their mature sizes.

Set out your plants per your plan before you dig the holes. This is the time to make adjustments with regard to their final placement.

Planting Notes & Specifications

It is very important to consider the mature height and width when choosing and placing plants in your landscape. Be sure to leave adequate room between plants so that when they mature they are not growing over each other into a mass. This creates a maintenance nightmare *and* an unhealthy garden!

If you design your native garden correctly, the new landscape will look very 'open' after installation, with considerable space between plants –especially where larger specimens are used. This is good as it will allow for healthy growth and establishment of the landscape as a whole.

Drawings

- Site Inventory

Use a clipboard and notepad to take notes during your site inventory.

- Site Analysis

Use a clipboard and notepad to take notes during your site analysis.

- Preliminary Drawing

This is realistically as far as you will get on paper. At this point, you will want to either create a rough drawing to scale, or literally draw circles and lines in the dirt to get an idea of how and where your ideas will be implemented. Hiring a professional landscape designer is another option at this juncture.

Fortunately, with California native gardens, much of their beauty is in their simplicity as I alluded to earlier in 'Principles'. This will translate into significant savings for you the homeowner with regard to the overall cost of implementing your new native garden!

As you're probably realizing about now, there is a lot that goes into a California native landscape design! To review:

Start with the site inventory and site analysis. An honest assessment will give you a clear understanding of your site's attributes and limitations. Consider what your motivation is for developing a California native landscape and how you intend to interact with your future garden.

Develop a hardscape that will support a healthy community of plants chosen from an aesthetic and functional perspective—based on the California native plant community you live in.

Following these sequential steps, and applying the principles and elements of design will all but ensure the manifestation of a glorious new California native garden, one that will bring you, and all who visit your home, many years of interest and joy!

Resources

Need professional assistance with your California native landscape design?
<http://www.californianativelandscape.com/>

Choose your Plant Palette from the Tree of Life plant catalog
<http://www.californianativeplants.com/index.php/plants/plant-catalog>

Certify your new California native landscape with NWF
<http://www.nwf.org/gardenforwildlife/certify.cfm?campaignid=WH10ANWF>

Mac's Field Guide Good Garden Bugs of California
<http://www.amazon.com/dp/0898867118>

The Basic 123 on soils for natives
<http://www.californianativeplants.com/index.php/resources/kill-your-lawn>

Replacing Your Lawn resources Tree of Life Nursery
<http://www.californianativeplants.com/index.php/resources/kill-your-lawn>