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Garden design -- how to make a plan

Patricia Evans' class balances practical and aesthetic

by Nick Gosling
Palo Alto Online Staff

When building a landscape, there's a certain formula landscape designer Patricia Evans of Los Altos usually sticks to. It involves creating a delicate balance of color and low-maintenance, low-water plants.

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Unfortunately, those features don't often go hand-in-hand.

"Everybody wants low maintenance," Evans said while surveying one of her works at a home in Menlo Park. "Lots of color, not much water and low maintenance. ... Those items are pretty much incompatible though."

Evans will deal with overcoming such obstacles in a class called "Garden Design for Homeowners," at Palo Alto Adult School beginning Sept. 15.

Flowers often need lots of water, she adds, so the best alternative is leaves with lots of color. The Menlo Park garden she stands in, which she designed two years ago, is a perfect example of her landscape design acumen: The area is rife with colorful leaves and stalks, requires little water and needs maintenance only a few times a year.

"I try to get as much color in the leaves as possible," said Evans, pointing out the tall colorful stalks of a drought-tolerant restio plant from Africa. "That's the only way you can get it, is by putting color in the leaves."

Evans has been designing and building landscapes since 2000, when she graduated from an environmental horticulture program at a local community college. Her interest in gardening reaches much further back though.

"When I started (the program) I didn't really plan on being a landscape designer. I started it because I was retired and I loved to garden," Evans said. "It was a program training landscape designers so I became a designer."

"I've always been a totally over-the-top gardener," she added.

Her credentials and experience include sitting on the board of directors of Palo Alto's Gamble Garden, grafting fruit trees in her backyard during her free time, and working as a member of the Native Plant Society. Last April, 850-plus people toured her garden as part of the Going Native Garden Tour.

In her backyard lathe house, a place for growing plants, she grows hundreds of native plants for the society each year.

"I'm just nuts about plants," she said, adding that the interest stems from her childhood days, gardening with her grandmother in southern Michigan.

"She was a gardener and my stepfather was a gardener and they were the people most important in my life and they were always out in their gardens and I would go out in the garden to spend time with them," Evans said.

Evans' own garden is an "experimental garden," or a place where she will often try out her ideas first before introducing them into other people's landscapes.

"I don't ever put anything in a client's garden that I haven't tried myself," she said. "A large percentage of my garden now is native plants."

Native plants are not as common and the conditions they grow in are not well understood, making them a greater risk to put in someone else's garden, Evans said, and also making them good experimental subjects.

One of the biggest mistakes gardeners make in this area is to introduce tropical plants into their landscapes.

"What is traditionally done is really inappropriate for California -- it's not very sustainable," Evans explains. "And it's the reason why we have to spend so much water on everything. Instead of using plants that are adapted to the climate and plants that are low

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water and plants that are from a similar climate or native to this climate, we put in things that are not native to this climate or from temperate climates Back East and expect that they are going to grow here."

Another common mistake: planting young plants at an inappropriate distance from one another.

"They plant things without regard to how big they are eventually going to get," she said. "They do not leave enough space."

Evans said she usually tells people they have three options to avoid this: Purchase small plants and put them at the appropriate distance so they grow into place, buy larger plants that won't grow much more and put them at the appropriate distance (which will cost more money), or thirdly, buy inexpensive plants and put them close together and take some out in a few years.

Evans has also seen plenty of instances where people don't properly group plants. Plants that require shade and lots of water should be separate from the plants that need sun and less water.

"You have to group the plants," she said, citing four common categories: sun, shade, water and dry.

"So the combinations are dry-shade, wet-shade, dry-sun, wet-sun," she said.

Evans' Garden Design for Homeowners class will "enable people that want to do their own garden design to do it.

"What we do is we go through all the steps in the design process," she said. Students are guided through the entire design process, including thinking about what a person wants a garden to do, measuring and drawing a plan for the lot, laying out the patios and walkways, selecting all the plants and dealing with contractors.

"At the end we talk about maintenance and irrigation and how we are going to take care of it," Evans said.

The class includes a field trip to a wholesale nursery to look at plants.

The first step to establishing a landscape layout, Evans said, is establishing what a person wants to use their land for.

"Are you interested in entertaining? Do you want a place for kids to play? Do you want to grow vegetables for your kitchen?" are just a few of the questions people need to ask, to determine the functional needs.

The end result is often an easily-maintainable property that balances functionality and appearance, and is a perfect place to entertain.

What: Garden Design for Homeowners

When: Tuesdays, Sept. 15-Nov. 3, 6:30-9 p.m., plus a Saturday field trip on Oct. 17

Where: Palo Alto High School, 50 Embarcadero Road, Palo Alto, Room 1708

Cost: \$135

Info: Call 650-329-3752 or visit www.paadultschool.org.

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