

# Landscapes function as outdoor living space

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson



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The wide availability of a diverse range of high-quality outdoor materials and furnishings has motivated a growing interest in outdoor living. Examples of materials and furnishings range from a multitude of distinctive pavers to high-performance grills to calming water features.

More Americans are looking for ways to enjoy their landscapes and also to be kind to the environment. In the past decades, the focus of environmental issues has dramatically changed from that of simply conserving precious natural resources from a global perspective into creating a sustainable environment in the home landscape.

As gardeners become increasingly sophisticated and

knowledgeable, they will move beyond some of the traditional ideas about landscape design and maintenance.

Outdoor living is becoming a primary focus. Our gardens are more often being looked at as an extension of our homes — an area to live in and use — rather than just pretty plants to look at from the living room window.

Designing private, intimate spaces into the average home landscape is becoming more important as our fast-paced world creates an ever-greater need for places to relax and enjoy a little quiet time. Private outdoor living areas can be fashioned out of hedges and screens as outdoor garden rooms to give a sense of en-

closure and respite from the world.

In addition, accessories that help personalize and enhance landscapes are becoming more popular and will continue to do so. Examples include wind chimes, gazing globes, topiary, gazebos, arbors, decorative containers, and sculptures and other art suitable for outdoor display to individualize our outdoor spaces.

New garden designs are increasingly interactive. We crave gardens that appeal to all of our senses — sight, sound, smell, touch and even taste — with an emphasis on personal enjoyment and the therapeutic values of gardening.

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An example would be creating a garden that includes a variety of fragrant plants you remember from your childhood.

Water provides sparkling light, beautiful reflections and a most relaxing sound in the garden. Regardless of the garden's size, we are more and more frequently enhancing the composition by adding a water feature — such as a fountain, reflection pool, waterfall or water garden — that can range in size from a half barrel to a large pond.

The “flower power” generation has brought to gardening a deeper understanding and appreciation of ecology and a respect for natural environments.

Realizing the amount of water and energy our landscapes can use, gardeners are switching from plants that need frequent watering and maintenance to those that require less irrigation and maintenance once the plants have become established.

Smaller turf areas, low-volume irrigation systems, mulching and low-input plant care are important components of these energy-efficient landscapes. An example might be replacing a traditional high-maintenance lawn area with ground covers and easily maintained decks, terraces and patios of wood, brick, paving or stone.

Gardeners are composting and recycling more, using less fertilizer and choosing environmentally friendly products for dealing with pests. Pest control now tends to utilize the concepts of Integrated Pest Management, where many strategies are employed (especially using plants that are less prone to problems) to manage pests. Pesticides — whether organic or chemical — are applied only when absolutely necessary. It's also appropriate to accept some level of pest damage to landscape plants.

Many of us have decided it is OK to share our gardens with other creatures, and even create habitats to provide for their needs. Landscapes designed to attract and provide food, water and shelter for wildlife such as butterflies, birds, beneficial insects and natural predators have, and likely will continue to, become more commonplace.

It is remarkable that gardeners “on the cutting edge” are not only looking for new and interesting plants and cultivars but also continuing to focus much of their attention on rediscovering or preserving our garden heritage. Antique roses, heirloom annuals, perennials, vegetables and bulbs and other tried-and-true, old-fashioned garden plants have gained new interest and use.

Overall, our concept of gardens and landscapes is becoming more personal, interactive and relaxed. Landscapes still might include formal elements, but large turf areas, monotonous pruned shrubs, clipped hedges, foundation plantings and precise annual beds are likely to become less common.

A more diverse palette of plants, both native and introduced, will be used in a way that is more resource-efficient and lower in maintenance to create beautiful, functional landscapes that nurture both nature and people.

