

Freeing Yourself from the Tyranny of the Plants

Ricky Ginsburg - April 2008

You've always wanted a house in Florida and the minute you finally figured out how to escape the frigid northeast, northwest or wherever you spent far too much time trying to leave from, you decided you wanted a Bismarck Palm on the front lawn.

Okay, nice palm, powerful statement, but what's next? What are the rest of the plants going to be? Don't bother making a list, because you've already limited your choices by placing the Bismarck into the plan. What you've done is bowed to the desires of one plant, which now has control over the rest of your garden. Everything else that goes into your garden or landscape must now work with this one specific palm and that's going to be a tough list work from.

I'm exaggerating? What happens when you find something else you want but don't have the room for it because the Bismarck is getting too large? And remember, you gave it the center spot in the landscape, so now this three-story monster with a thirty-foot spread has taken over the space you might have used for a water feature or a flowering tree or, well, a hundred other spectacular ideas.

When you choose one, or two, or a dozen specific plants before you've even decided on the boundaries of your garden, you've given in to what I call the tyranny of plants.

There's a commercial running on television right now where a snooty-looking man and woman sit down in front of an architect and place a faucet on his desk. They tell him, "Design a house around this." Tyranny of the plumbing but its effect is similar - an immediate limitation on creativity.

Is it wrong all the time? Of course not. I wanted a Bismarck so I bought two of them and worked them into the plan once the plan had been established. I would have been happy with just one, but the plan allowed for a second one, and overall it's worked. Keep in mind, the choice of plant material is one of the last things a garden or landscape designer will do when they fill your empty canvas. Any good designer will have at least two selections for every plant in the plan, just to avoid the unforeseen when the project gets under way.

Instead of saying Allamanda or Thyrsalis, the plan might simply say, "Yellow flowering shrub, medium height." Rather than specify a certain palm, you could see, "Small, triple trunked palm" in the plan. Which palm? Here's six different ones, which one do you like best? The point is - any one of the six will work in the overall design.

The goal should always be to maintain control and not let the plants decide what your garden or landscape is going to look like. Trust me, Mother Nature is going to have the final say, but you can at least try to point her in your direction. Your job is to be as flexible as you can until the basic plan is complete and even then, be prepared for last minute changes. Changes that your Bismarck would have taken away from you at the outset.

Now don't confuse the selection of a specific plant with the choice of theme. Deciding to have a tropical look or a Mediterranean feel for your landscape is perfectly acceptable. Neither one ties you down to one plant or another. They do limit the choices of which plants will work with that theme, but that's miniscule compared with putting fifty-foot wide Royal Poinciana into the drawing without any contemplation as to what will work with it.

However, even with a certain overall design theme, you should still retain control and not even think about the plants until you know (or think you know) what the final layout is going to look like. The best designs are often changed so radically from the original that to look at the start and finish side-by-side would make you think they are two different properties.

One other point to consider - most landscapes and gardens are nothing more than green globs on the horizon until you get up close and personal with them. Which doesn't mean forget the details, but to most people, the individual plants and trees you spent so much time selecting just all blend together. Of course, to another gardener they're as clear as facets on a diamond, but even then, it's going to be the total picture rather than just one plant.

But what if you *really* want that Bismarck? Fine, put it on a list of possible plants and shove it in the lowest drawer of your desk until the plan is finished. Then pull out the list and see if you can make it fit. If you have to, you can always move things around to make it work, but if the Bismarck was truly destined to be in your garden you won't have to.

With these thoughts in mind, I'd like to give you some basic concepts to think about in planning your garden or landscape. If you have nothing or are starting over, then these precepts will make the job much easier and you'll probably be happier in the end. For those of you who have established gardens and mature landscape, these will help guide your advice to friends, neighbors, and relatives who see you as an expert.

Keep in mind that rules are meant to be broken, but when you do, make sure you can pick up the pieces, put them back together, and still make everything work!

1. What is the purpose of the garden / landscape?

Every landscape or garden is built for a reason. It could be as simple as wanting to improve the overall look and feel of the property. But usually there are multiple reasons and each one must be considered at the outset of the project. There are an infinite number of these purposes, so I'll just list the more common ones:

Appearance - to make the place look nice to live in or sell, what the realtors call "curb appeal."

Hobby - do I really have to explain this one? However, a hobby garden doesn't, and shouldn't simply look like a collection of plants, there needs to be something more cohesive than just one genus.

Privacy - hide your house from the neighbors or hide their house from you.

Playground - and not just for the kids. I've built swing sets that could hold adults in the middle of the garden.

Food - hey, this is Florida; you can grow just about anything edible here, why not?

Utility - as in "hide the FPL poles and wires in my backyard" or make the a/c disappear.

Regardless of the reason, we still don't have to talk about specific plants at this stage of the process. We may consider size, especially when it comes to privacy, but there are so many plants and trees to choose from that there's no sense to making that choice just yet.

2. Where do I start?

The best place is the perimeter of the property, the boundaries, and then work your way in. Look at your property boundary as a frame with the house as the focal point on the canvas. You can also reverse this and build what I call "the mountain" where the house and all the tall stuff are in the center and everything else slopes out toward the edges. This works where you have a lake or canal forming part of the perimeter or where your neighbor has done a similar configuration. However, normally, the largest plants will be on the outside.

You can do a combination of inner and outer height, by the way. The lakefront home is a perfect example of this, but try to frame both - the house from the front and the lake from the back with your tallest trees and palms.

Here's something to think about: if you put the biggest stuff out on the edge then if a storm comes it'll fall over on the sidewalk, the street, or the neighbor's house instead of yours. (Just kidding about the neighbor's house.)

If you start in close by the house, then everything else you plant will be hard to see from inside the house so make sure not block the windows. Always consider the view from inside looking out as important as any other view of the property.

3. What's first on the plan?

After the house, driveway, utility poles, and property boundaries are in place, add the large trees and palms. Again, no specific plants, just - three large trees here, a cluster of palms over here, a flowering tree in the front, maybe another one in the back.

Solve the problems early in the planning. If you have a neighbor's house to hide, figure on having large trees or palms to make it disappear. Likewise with utility poles and unsightly views. If you want a vegetable garden, allocate space for it immediately where you're going to get maximum sunlight. If there's going to be a gazebo or a swimming pool in your future, make

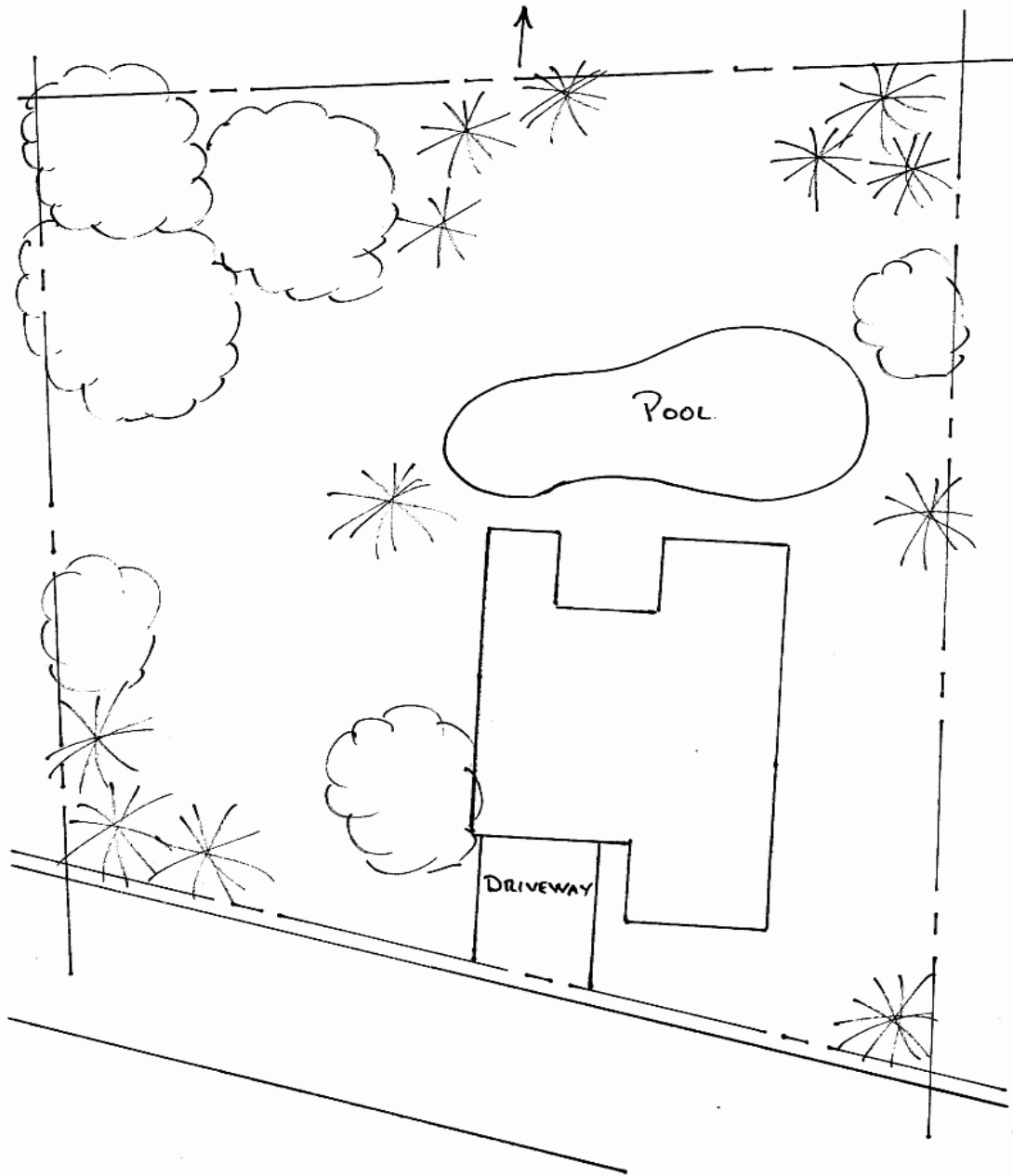
sure you have enough room for it. These are key elements that must be set in place before anything else happens.

Next, if you're going to have one, put in the water feature, the large sculpture, or the gazebo. It's going to determine pathways, views, and the various beds. Put it where you'll be able to see it the most.

Pathways are the next consideration - from the house to the street, from the house to the garden, from the street to the garden. Are you going to walk single file or side by side? The layout of the pathways will also help determine the size and placement of the various beds. You don't have to draw them into the plan, the layout of the beds and clusters of tall trees will determine where they're going to be. The exact shape of a path is usually not determined until you start putting ground cloth or stone on the ground anyhow.

One important rule to remember as you're drawing your plan and adding stuff to it - draw things to scale! And when I say scale, that pertains to the terminal size of the trees and plants. You might live in this house forever, but if not, the next person is going to have to deal with that large tree you figured for a forty-foot spread but only drew as a ten-foot one. Invest a few bucks in an architect's scale - a triangular ruler that has many different gradations. Even if you only do this once, do it right!

Here are the boundaries, the house, and the large trees and palms in position. Three large trees in the back left corner to balance against the house, softened with three large palms to their right. Another group of three palms in the opposite corner. This breaks up the property line and helps hide two of the three houses behind. A couple of more trees and palms around the property including a group of three palms in the front left to contrast with the three trees in the back left and a single palm on the front right to soften that corner. One more nice big tree by the driveway to shade your car from the hot sun. Everything that goes into the plan at this stage is there for a reason.



4. Still no plants?

That's correct; however we're at a stage where we can begin to identify groups of plants and their repeats without naming specifics just yet. Color and texture have not yet come into play, although they will once we start making a list. Right now we're just building blobs to fill the garden space or define the landscape.

Some points to remember here, as well:

Repeat often - the same yellow flowering shrub should be in three different places in the plan. The low ground cover, five, maybe more, locations. The small, single trunk palm - three together in front, one by itself in the back or maybe reversed. The more you repeat the same plant, the more your final plan will have a cohesive feel to it. You see the same plant in three different beds and it ties the garden together. Repeats make the garden feel less like a collection of plants than a series of conscious decisions.

Center nothing - nature has nothing exactly centered and the more you try, the more unnatural it will look. Over time, the ground will shift slightly, the wind, storms, and sun will affect the growth of all your plants so that the tree and two shrubs you thought were perfectly centered now look askew. Unless you are going for strictly formal, the position of everything in the garden should be as natural as possible.

Avoid acute angles - anything less than a right angle is hard on the eye and again, not very natural looking. Even if you want a manicured look to your hedges, rounding them off on the corners is much softer to look at and it imparts a more realistic shape (well, to a point.)

Avoid straight lines - again, in a natural setting, plants and trees form irregular patterns. If you must build a hedge to hide the neighbor's house, at least use different plants (not specific ones, but something on the order of "thick leaves, thin leaves, multiple colors, etc.) so you get some variation in color and texture.

Allow room for maintenance - the only maintenance free gardens are in your mind. Even rocks need to be weeded. Position the beds so that you can get to everything you plant.

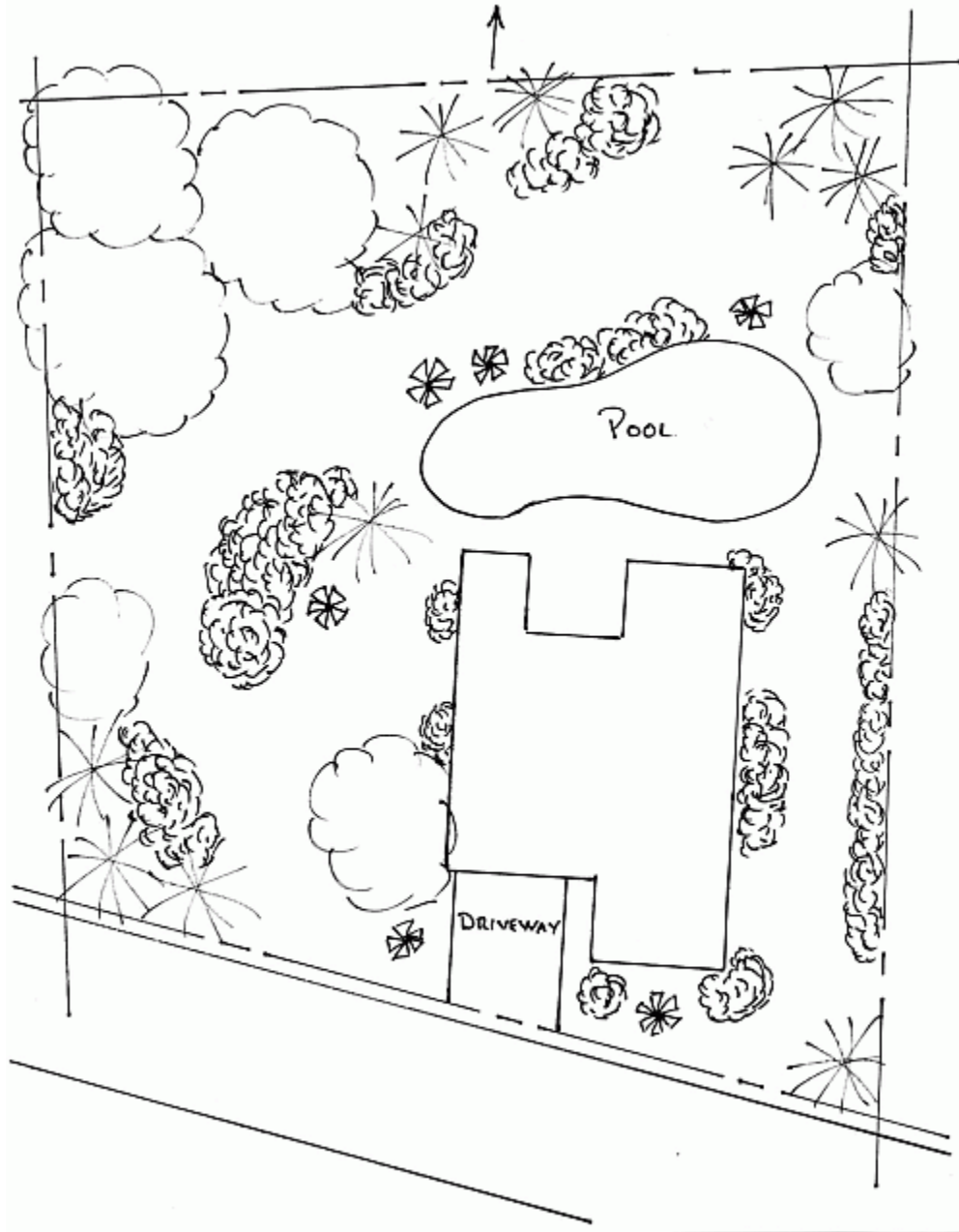
Allow room for growth - even though you haven't named any of the large trees, consider what a "large tree" means. A large tree is going to grow to at least 30 feet with an equal spread, probably even bigger. When you're adding large trees to the plan, make sure you account for their terminal height and width.

Plan for irrigation - both automatic (sprinklers) and manual (hose). Unless you are xeriscaping, you're gonna need water.

Consider lighting - it's much nicer to walk in the garden at night without a flashlight in your hand and lighting up the large stuff in the front of the house certainly adds to curb appeal.

Don't get carried away with focal points - just about anything that's not repeated in the plan will be one. The more focal points you add, the more it will start to look like a plant collection rather than a garden. This goes for sculptures and found objects as well. You can quickly reach a point where the garden looks as though you've been dumpster diving or work for a garden center, taking all their discontinued statuary. Too many focal points dilute the effect of the one large piece.

Okay, here's the same plan with the addition of the larger beds and six small fan palms. The beds next to the house (about a foot away for maintenance) are used to soften the corners of the house; the gaps indicate windows. Several beds have been placed to hide the trunks of the taller palms as they grow and a hedge lines the east property boundary. I haven't drawn in the pathways, but you can get a pretty good idea where they go from the placement and shape of the beds at this stage.



5. Okay, let's talk about the plants.

We have an enormous palate to choose from here in Florida. Regardless of which zone you're in, the selection runs into the thousands. So which ones do you want? Think about these points before you open your wallet:

Color - The easiest color to work with in the garden (this and all the comments I'm about to make are personal preferences rather than science) is green. Most of the landscape around you is green and most of your garden will be as well. Red, orange, and yellow come next, especially since they work well with each other and with green. Blue and purple are difficult but not impossible; however, their usage in the landscape is often limited based on the color of your house. While you might think that white and black go with everything, but it's not true. You really have to work them in carefully as they really stand out against everything else.

Texture - Mix it up is the best advice I can give you. The large blue Agave against the soft green leaves of some plant is a sharp contrast, but it works every time in the plan. When you are laying out a hedge, and again, I'm not talking a formal one here, you want to have several different leaf sizes just so that it *doesn't* look formal. And don't focus on just one texture when it comes to trees and palms. You don't want every frilly leaf tree in the book or six different species of large fan palms (or maybe you do, if you're a collector.)

Terminal Size - I've mentioned this twice already and I'll do it again here because of its importance. Know how big stuff will grow before you put it in the ground. This will help you put plants on their proper centers so that all of them will grow correctly.

Sunlight, Water, and Fertilization - These three have to be considered together to avoid killing one plant while another in the same bed thrives. If you put something in your plan that requires lots of water, don't put a cactus next to it and expect it not to rot. The bed of red flowering plants near the young Slash Pines might look great and full of blooms when the garden is finished, but three years down the road, those Pines might have grown so large that there isn't enough sunlight to produce the red flowers anymore.

Fragrance - If you put a Night Blooming Jasmine into the plan, make sure you'll be able to smell it most of the time and not just your neighbors. Plants and trees that you want to smell should be close enough to your house that you can do just that. Of course, putting a pleasing odor in some hidden place in the garden is always a nice surprise, but unless you go there, it will always be a mystery.

Maintenance - Why bother even discussing this? Well, if you're the one who's going to have that task, make sure you'll be able to maintain what you plant five, ten, or twenty years from now or be prepared to pay someone to do it for you. If the choice of one plant over another is identical with the exception of its care, take the easier one. But hey, you're a gardener; maintenance is your life.

Everyone makes mistakes and this handout is not the be all, end all that will prevent them. But it should help. Happy gardening!