KPOV – *The Point*

Gardening: Get Good at It

“Create a Small Garden Big on Style and Function”

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When it comes to small gardens, every plant, path and patio matters.

According to landscape architect and Oregon State University Extension master gardener Eileen Obermiller, the challenge of a successful small garden design is that everything has to function, fit and flow well. Small gardens are a less-is-more situation. And while they can be richly textured, they *have* to be kept as orderly and tidy as possible.

As with any garden, start by assessing your site. Monitor the landscape to determine where the sun hits and where shade falls. Check for windy areas and wet ones. Where will runoff drain? Are there views that need screening, others you want to enjoy? These observations will help determine where to place hardscape and plants.

Next, consider how you’ll use the space and the elements you want to include. First, consider your priorities. For example, if you want a table for eight and a fountain, you might instinctively think about a smaller table. But if entertaining is a lifestyle joy, keep the table size you need and install a wall fountain that takes up less space. In other words, think creatively about where and how to downsize. Remember that “gardening up” – using trellises, walls and window boxes – can create additional space for plants.

Be sure to pay attention to the mature height and width of plants. One of the biggest mistakes to avoid in any garden is to select something that will be too big once it matures. Every season you’ll have to fight it, trying to prune it to fit.

**While the ultimate size of selected plants is critical, don’t** eschew those with large foliage. While our Central Oregon climate limits our background plant options, you might consider these shade plants, umbrella plant (Darmera *peltata*), Rodgersias, and Ligularias. Popular options for borders are Brunnera *macrophylla* and hostas. All add drama but don’t take over if used judiciously.

Size is not all to consider, though. Be sure to add in some plants with brightly colored foliage and flowers so the garden doesn’t blend into a mass of green. Put them up close and personal to enjoy them fully. Stick to two complementary palettes – shades of purple and yellow, for example – to keep the garden from looking too busy. Also, don’t play “onesies.” Groupings and repeat clusters of the same varieties of plants will enhance your small space.

Small gardens especially benefit from a focal point. Long, straight lines that taper slightly inward to the end make a space seem larger than it really is. And no matter how small the garden, pathways add structure and circulation. Though you’ll be tempted to make them narrow, keep main paths as wide as possible so your garden is comfortable to navigate.

As with paths, don’t miniaturize hardscapes. It’s better to build fewer structures than to make them too small to be used comfortably. There’s usually more activity swirling around outside than in, so leave enough space around table and chairs for adults, kids and dogs to get around.

Build in storage for tools, cushions, lighting, garden art and hoses. Select benches and ottomans that can store tools, gloves, candles and cushions. Shelves can also store plenty, and if you start plantings four feet from the house, you gain invaluable space to hide essentials like buckets, hoses and little garden carts.

For more information on this or any other gardening topic, call the Master Gardeners at 541-548-6088 or go to our website [www.gocomga.com](http://www.gocomga.com) and click on the KPOV tab on the orange bar. This has been Gardening: Get Good at It on KPOV, The Point.

Resources:

Oregon State University Extension, “Create a small garden big on style and function,” [**https://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/create-small-garden-big-style-function**](https://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/create-small-garden-big-style-function)**,** (Accessed February 2021)