



Ten Easy Steps for an Aesthetic Ecosystem Design

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Welcome to the Aesthetic Ecosystems Community!

As a thank you for your interest, I have compiled this resource in hope that you find some value in it and are driven to action.

These tips are a small gesture of my appreciation for your interest and time. This compilation is a reflection of the time and effort I have spent over the past several years pursuing a passion for making our world better. I believe we all have the capacity to change the world in our own way if we set our mind to it. So I hope this inspires you in two ways: to go improve the planted world around you, and to go improve the world in your own special way.

To learn more about me or the work I am doing, head on over to aestheticecosystems.com.

Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions.

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Clickable Contents:

- 1. Reduce Lawn**
- 2. Plant in Groups**
- 3. Multi-species plantings**
- 4. Preserve Views**
- 5. Catch and Hold Water**
- 6. Cohesive Site Design**
- 7. Assess and Enhance Existing Natural Elements**
- 8. Add Focal Points and Accents**
- 9. Reduce Bare Areas**
- 10. Think Before Planting**

Bonus Tips!



1. Reduce Lawn

Reducing the size of an existing lawn has many benefits. What is cherished as the dominant element of most landscapes is also a very non-sustainable element.

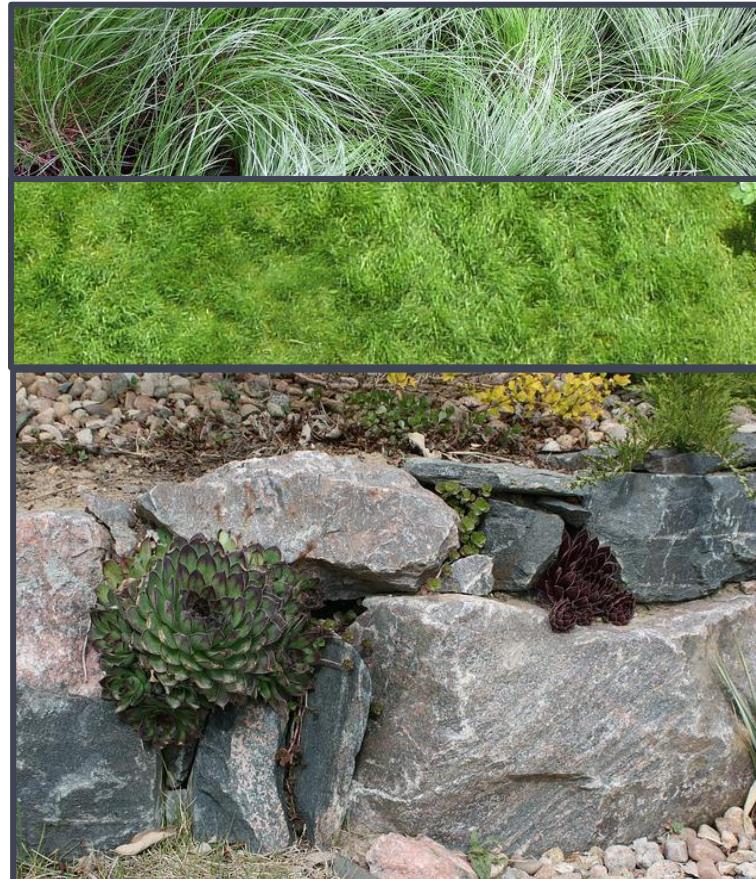
Originally used to show wealth and evoke a sense of pastoral beauty, a lawn is now a symbol of status by how neatly trimmed and uniformly green it is. This requires a lot of work, cost, and resources to maintain. We are asking a natural element – grass – to fit an unnatural form by growing *en masse* as thick as carpet, but only 2-4" tall.

So how do we reduce our lawn? A lawn can be replaced with grouped plantings, ground covers, and hardscape elements.

A grouped planting adds a third dimension to a previously two dimensional area. These grouped plantings can be strategically placed to block a view or focus a view to another desirable area based on the type of planting. More on this later.

A ground cover planting will still maintain a sense of openness and is generally a species that is more accustomed than grass to growing in a large area by itself or with a few other species, while staying low

to the ground. These plantings require minimal maintenance once established.



Top: Sedge (*Carex spp.*) Ground Cover Planting

Middle: 'No Mow' Lawn Planting – Overhead View

Bottom: Effective Xeriscaping

If it is desired to maintain a grass-like appearance, there are many varieties of sedge (*Carex spp.*) that can be planted in place of the grass. Another option in some areas – generally the northern half of the US or similar climates – could be to plant a 'no-mow' type lawn that uses sun-tolerant varieties of fine fescue.

Another option for replacing lawn would be to replace some areas with a hardscape element, such as a rock garden or 'xeriscape' garden. A rock bed can be designed in such a way to be very attractive, require minimal maintenance, and provide a specific microclimate for certain plants.

2. Plant in Groups

Planting in groups provides aesthetic value to a landscape. All too often, plantings are implemented haphazardly or one-at-a-time, where they end up scattered or isolated. The human eye is naturally and pleasantly drawn to group plantings, if done properly. For small groups, odd-numbered plantings are generally considered optimal, especially groups of three.



These groups may be planted in various forms, to provide direction, perspective, or to screen out an undesirable view.

The key to an effective group planting is to first understand its purpose. What are you trying to do? Add perspective? Screen a view? Provide an accent? Whatever the answer is will help determine the shape, organization, density, and species of your planting.

3. Multi-species plantings

In order to support your main plants in a way that they were meant to live, they need to live in a multi-species setting. Planting with a grouping of multiple species with each serving a specific set of functions yields a synergistic effect between plants. This can get very complex very quickly, as each plant has evolved with a very specific set of strengths and desired conditions. However, the key to keep this simple is to see if similar plants either grow well together in nature, or have been known to grow together well in designed systems.



Top: A well-known grouped planting design at Blenheim Palace, UK by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown

Bottom: Effective multi-species planting. Tree - Apple. Understory - Comfrey (minerals, fertility), Vetch (flowers, nitrogen), Strawberries (fruit, ground cover, fertility)

Observing plants in an arboretum or local conservatory or talking to a garden center caretaker can be very helpful in understanding what plants can grow well together.

It works like this: Let's say your primary plant is an oak tree. We often see oaks standing solitary within a landscape. But an oak grows naturally in a forested or savanna ecosystem. The tree will be much healthier and less susceptible to environmental stress and disease if grown in a multi-species setting.

Adding supportive plantings with specific functions will help all species in the system support each other. A few examples of such functions are nitrogen fixation, shade, pollinator attracting, predatory insect attracting (this is a good thing because they eat pest insects), food producing, nutrient accumulating, and ground cover. There are many more functions that plants provide. And the combination of possibilities is endless. It all depends on the functions needed, what is your main planting element, and what function does the overall planting provide for you.

4. Preserve Views

Most landscape settings allow for at least one desirable view that can be preserved or enhanced through a design. In Asian garden design this tactic is commonly known as 'borrowed scenery.' Unless you're looking to design an enclosed oasis from the surrounding high rises in a dense urban area, there is probably at least one view outside of the design that is worth preserving. This helps create a sense of openness and continuation of a design beyond the confines of the actual design.

Preserving a view can be done simply by not planting in the primary sight line toward that direction. However, this view can also be enhanced with a few simple tactics.

By placing grouped border plantings to each side of the intended view helps to frame the view and lead the eye. These grouped border plantings also help shield undesirable views.

An additional enhancement is to add shorter plantings along the bottom edge of the preserved view to serve as an additional frame element or to provide an accent, depending on the type of planting and the type of view being preserved. An accent is appropriate if the view is better as a backdrop to the accent planting. However, if the view is preserved as the primary focus, the additional planting should add to the view, rather than take focus away from it.



A preserved view

5. Catch and Hold Water

Water and soil are the most precious resources of any given design. Soil can be created with conscious design but water cannot. Water can only be slowed in its departure from a design.

There are many strategies that hold water on a landscape – some intensive, some less intensive – some attractive, some less so.

The most common type of catchment that is quickly becoming popular is the rain barrel. The rain barrel is a great way to retain some water on a landscape. Most commonly, rain barrels hold somewhere around 55 gallons. This is not very much water, compared to the amount of water that runs down a downspout in a rain event.

For example, if a 55 gallon rain barrel is connected to a 12'x16' shed with a roof footprint of 192sf, and there is a 1" rain event over the course of a day, how much of the barrel fills up? Once you do the math, the runoff totals to 119.7 gallons. That's over twice the capacity of the rain barrel. Now imagine the amount of water that leaves your roof in the same rain event.

So the bigger the barrel, the better. There are many attractive options for larger catchment containers that are beginning to be available.

The best way to retain water on a landscape is in the soil. How is this done? Any way the water can be slowed will allow it to better soak into the soil.



Top: Attractive options for large rainwater catchment

Bottom: A small attractive rock-filled swale

Have clay soil? Build up your organic matter with mulching and plantings.

Have sandy soil? Build up your organic matter with mulching and plantings.

See a pattern?

There are volumes of information, detail, and finesse that go into holding water on a landscape and to have it done in an attractive manner. These tactics include the above as well as earthwork practices to passively do the work long term.

If interested, these tactics don't fit into the scope of 'easy steps' but are very interesting. To learn more, Amy Stross at tentha crefarm.com has a great introduction to swale design.

6. Cohesive Site Design

At first thought, 'cohesive site design' doesn't sound like an 'easy tip.' Well, it's not. But steps toward a *more* cohesive design can be taken rather quickly and easily.

If you want to ensure a full implementation is done properly, that is probably the work of a professional landscape designer or architect. But if the intent is to make a change and get your hands a little dirty, then this tip was meant for you.

Here's how.

Step 1. Assess all existing features on site.

- What looks good. What doesn't?
- Where's the area that needs the most help?
- What sticks out or looks out of place?

Step 2. Determine what you want.

- What do you want from your landscape?
- What would make life easier?
- Does access need to be enhanced?

Step 3. Determine how to get what you want.

- Does it just need to be more attractive?
- What's the most sensible way to get what you want?

Step 4. Get a simple, comprehensive design together.

- Use a similar theme throughout your design. That means don't put angles in one area and curves in another.
- Use similar plant patterns, colors, or shapes throughout.
- Use similar structural types throughout.



A cohesive design at Ditchley, UK by Geoffrey Jellicoe

- Put these ideas quickly on paper and get them out of your head.

Step 5. Get the details

- Focus first on the area that needed the most help. What makes it better?
- Remember the stuff that didn't look good? How do you blend it in or screen it?
- Remember the stuff that stuck out? How do you blend that in? A grouped planting?

- If possible without being overt, see if there's an easy way to echo the built environment into the landscape. Example – have a trellis that is shaped similarly to a design accent on a house.
- Put these ideas quickly on paper and get them out of your head.

Step 6. Get to work

- Stick to the overall plan. It's okay if the plan changes, but make sure to get that on paper too.
- Start first with the area that needs the most work.
- Tackle one thing at a time. It may take years, but you have direction and a vision.
- Remember, a cohesive design doesn't necessarily need to break the budget. Simple things can be done to greatly enhance the site.

Steps 1-5 don't necessarily need to be super in-depth. A very quick design vision may only need a few hours of work. Remember, these are supposed to be 'easy tips.'

This whole process can take an extraordinary amount of time, but the intent here is to help you get started and be able to accomplish something in the short term. Sure it probably won't be perfect, but it will most likely be an improvement.

7. Assess and Enhance Existing Natural Elements

The existing natural features of a site may have a lot of potential for beauty or enjoyment. Sometimes these areas simply need some enhancement to be further enjoyed.

Let's take an example of an overgrown side lot, full of grasses, thistles, and weeds. Can this area be better utilized? How about as a sort of natural retreat? A simple addition of a small winding rock pathway, coupled with bunched plantings along its edges, provide an established route through this mini wilderness.

Perhaps the addition of a few eye-catching wildflowers interspersed through the remaining area will bring a seemingly drab area into a fuller potential. You now have a low maintenance enclave for the next time you're avoiding the dishes.

This thought process can be applied to many areas. Remember that landscape design is a creative process. Think expansively, then bring your ideas back to the reality of your budget and capabilities. In addition, remember

that nature may be teaching you something with what it is presenting to you.



Top: A classical design focal point

Bottom: A prairie style wildflower planting to reduce bare space

8. Add Focal Points and Accents

A few select focal points or accents in a design add direction and value. The addition of accents or focal points can easily be overdone. The intent here is to find an area that the eye is drawn to within the landscape, and add an accent piece or planting in that area, to further enhance that focal point. An accent can be a unique or attractive planting, or an interesting physical piece such as a piece of driftwood or a sculpture.

The accent can help define the mood of the space. For example, a bust or urn would usually be found in a classical design as an accent. A piece of driftwood might be used as an accent in a more naturalistic design.

9. Reduce Bare Areas

It is fairly common to have open, unplanted space in a design. This often makes a design feel 'clean' and 'uncluttered.' While this may be, it is not healthy for the ecosystem within your design. There are other ways to achieve a 'clean' feel while using plantings, if desired.

Colored mulch, rock, or lawns are the most commonly used elements in these areas. These spaces remain relatively 'sterile.'

If the intent is to have an open view of the space with a relatively two-dimensional design, a ground cover or ‘living mulch’ may be established. This ground cover will help shade the soil and regulate temperature, build organic matter, and suppress the growth of other plants.

If the intent is just to fill empty space, this may be an ideal place for a wildflower or grassy planting to resemble a meadow. There are plenty of mixes available for different environmental conditions such as wet soil, clay, sandy, dry, or shade.

10. Think Before Planting

All too often, plants are established without careful thought toward what plant or where a plant should go. Planning is an ally when it comes to designing a landscape. A simple schematic of planting group locations, preserved views, and environmental conditions can immensely improve the quality of a design space.

By carefully selecting plant type and location, many errors can be avoided that may be unpleasant or costly. Some tips to think about to avoid common errors include:

- Plan with the mature size of the plant in mind
- Determine the soil type of the site and what plants thrive in that soil
- Take solar patterns, wind, water, and temperature into account
- In most cases, avoid isolated plantings
- Ensure a planting will not obstruct a desirable view
- Plan for root expansion to mature size – when planting near structure, do not plant closer than the radius of the mature root system to avoid foundation problems



But wait... there's more! I couldn't help but come up with a few more tips.

Bonus Tip 1. Mulching/Organic Matter

Addition of mulch or organic material beneath and around plantings will help build soil health by adding carbon material and enhancing microbial life. Healthy soil is a massive web of interconnected plants, fungi, and microorganisms. Healthy plants need microbiota, which provide many functions including fixing nitrogen, sequestering nutrients, extending the feeding surface area of roots, and preventing disease.

Mulch is usually thought of as wood chips. But it can be any organic material to cover a space, really. Mulch used in the proper manner can build your soil health while suppressing unwanted growth. This is especially useful during the establishment phase of a design.

But *don't* buy the colored mulch at the store. Many store bought mulches – especially the colored ones – are infused with dyes or toxins. Sometimes they are sourced from pallets or other treated woods that prevent proper breakdown and can leach chemicals into your soil where it can harm or kill your soil life. If you want wood chip mulch, it is usually best to get it directly from a tree trimming facility, where you can ensure it is from untreated wood.

For addition of other organic material, most materials will work. In the Midwest, streets are lined with garbage bags of leaves throughout the fall. Free high-nutrient fertility for your plants! Grass clippings, trimmings, and any other plant material will provide a benefit.

Bonus Tip 2. Utilize Perspective

Any landscape design is able to utilize perspective. A design can be made to look deeper, narrower, wider, or shallower depending on how perspective is applied. The easiest ways to apply perspective is with border plantings.

To make a shallow, wide space appear deeper, you can plant a design with open space that narrows the further you are from the main viewpoint.

Another way to help open up a space would be to find at least one external viewpoint to preserve by ensuring that view is integrated into the design with proper framing.

To make a long, narrow space appear wider, you do the opposite, where you design your open space to widen as you are further from the main viewpoint.

There are many other ways to apply perspective, but these are two simple examples that may help.

Bonus Tip 3. Plant for the Region

There is a longstanding debate about planting natives, which I won't get into here. Instead I want to point out some advantages to planting regionally adapted plants.

There are generally two types of plants that are considered regionally adapted plants – well established 'natives' to the area, and foreign plants that have integrated into the region.

Regardless of the type of regionally adapted plant, these plants have shown the ability to thrive in the regional

ecosystem and reproduce. These plants that have been in an area for several hundred years have weathered the regional extremes in temperature and moisture. They are also most likely fairly disease resistant or tolerant due to their survivability.

Thus, nature has shown us that these plants – whether native or not – are able to survive enough to reproduce in the select region.

A good resource for finding these plants and their native or introduced status, as well as their ability to grow in each region can be found at www.plants.usda.gov.

Thank you for reading, and hopefully these tips encourage you to take action! These tips are meant to get you thinking about more holistic ways to design our landscapes, and then to get you *designing* more holistic landscapes!

Thank you as well for your interest in aesthetic ecosystems design. To all subscribers and supporters, thank you for your continued support and guidance!

Be sure to keep in touch and check out [The Sprout](#) blog!

If you ever have any questions or suggestions, let me know at Facebook: [Aesthetic Ecosystems](#)
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Sincerely,
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