

A “Look-Into” Garden

An often neglected aspect of garden design is how the landscape looks when observed from primary indoor viewing areas. Here are tips for making your garden look spectacular from the inside out.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLE OTTESEN



A ‘Natchez’ crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia* hybrid) and a China fir (*Cunninghamia lanceolata*) screen the street in this snow-covered view from the front window of the author’s house.

EVEN IF YOU spend many hours in the garden, the likelihood is that you will spend much more time inside the house looking outside at your garden. If what you see isn’t completely uplifting or even somewhat satisfying, one of the most rewarding things you can do is to enhance the view from inside. You can create a “look-into” garden—an exquisite little scene to enjoy from inside, from the kitchen window or from the comfort of an easy chair.

The notion of looking into a perfect, enclosed little world is rooted in my childhood. My favorite aunt presented me with a confection in the shape of a giant, hollow Easter egg. It was decorated with pink and white icing and had a hole at one end. When you peeked through the hole, there was a tiny world inside: a house, a little garden, a wide-spreading tree with gnarled roots, and rabbits poking up among the flowers. I found it enchanting.

That enchanting scene stayed with me over the years and was the inspiration for creating “look-into” scenes in my own garden. But that didn’t happen until much later.

THE EPIPHANY

Designing a look-into garden didn’t come about until after I began escaping the hot mid-Atlantic in the summer months, turning the care of the garden over to house sitters, and spending time in a vacation cottage on the Canadian coast. Each fall, when I returned to Maryland, it was to a few weeks of a sad diminishing garden. Throughout the fall, my garden was lackluster with little to please the eye. And then, all too soon, winter arrived, and I was spending the days indoors.

The main reason for the disappointing vista was obvious. Most of my plants were summer bloomers. Like that proverbial tree falling in a lonely forest, summer-flowering plants go right through their life cycles whether or not you are there to see them. And if you aren’t there, you miss the entire show.

Because summer is so gloriously awash in gorgeous perennials and flowering shrubs it is seductive to keep buying more. If you go away, choose instead a sensible mix of plants that shines at the times of the year when you are there to enjoy them.

This logic led me to the bittersweet recognition that most of the plants in my garden belonged to a phase of my life that



Above: The dining room overlooks a side garden edged by hollies (*Ilex* spp.) and shaded by a big leaf magnolia (*M. macrophylla*), here in autumn color. Left: Dangling blossoms of a yellowwood (*Cladrastis kentukea*) grace the view from the desk in the study in spring.



from January to March. That's when we need eye candy—glossy evergreens, the bark of crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia* spp.) and stewartia, the fat promise of magnolia buds, and the berries of hawthorns (*Crataegus* spp.) and winterberries (*Ilex verticillata*). Masses of winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*), snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*) or tommy crocuses (*Crocus tommasinianus*) should follow as cheerful harbingers of the returning growing season.

Finding ornamentals that shine in the off seasons turns out to be delightfully easy. Integrating them among the ones already in the garden is more challenging.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON DESIGN

Viewed from inside the house, it seemed to me that many of the long-established plants were awkwardly situated. To remedy this, all through the cold months, I

was now over. This epiphany also had a bright side: On the next trip to the garden center, the choices were clear. Any new plants had to be showy in spring, fall, and winter when I would be there to see them.

Does it flower in midsummer? No, thank you! Does it bloom in spring, fall,

or winter? Does it have berries and/or outstanding fall color? Is it evergreen or does it have an interesting shape or bark when leafless? Yes, please!

"It's a long, long time from May to December," goes an old song. But, especially for gardeners, it always seems even longer

gardened through the windows with my eyes, moving a shrub here, limbing up a tree there, expanding a bed to achieve more graceful proportions and, sometimes when it couldn't be helped, removing a plant altogether. By earliest spring, I knew what had to be changed and, with the help of the notes and sketches, I rushed outside to accomplish it. With each change, my satisfaction level ratcheted up.

The place to begin planning a look-into garden is at a window—the bigger, the better. Then narrow the point of view to a chair, your desk, or the kitchen sink—ideally to the places where you spend the most time.

Place ornamentals where they form a pleasant tableau that you can easily see from your vantage point. This part may take some running inside and out as you move the plants around to get the arrangement right. Then you'll be able to enjoy

of deciduous shrubs and trees can do a good job of trapping your gaze—especially if they are dramatic. For instance, the arresting bark on the trunks of crape myrtles (*Lagerstroemia* spp.), birches (*Betula* spp.), paperbark maples (*Acer griseum*), and Stewartias is almost as good as a fence for stopping your eye. In the same way, the brightly colored berries on the stems of winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) and American beautyberry (*Callicarpa amer-*



A towering clumping bamboo (*Fargesia robusta*), azaleas, and a fiery Asian spicebush (*Lindera glauca*) encircle an intimate patio behind the house.

The reason most gardens don't automatically form pleasing look-into vistas is because, most often, we designed them while we were actually in them, for movement through them to be viewed, perhaps, as we walked along a path from one focal point to another. Or they were designed primarily for the view of our property from the street or driveway.

How your garden appears from the interior of the house demands an entirely new design perspective. To enjoy the garden from inside, you have to shift a point, or points, of view to the inside.

your garden in a different way. It's a bit like watching a sporting event on television: You're not in the stands, but you have a much better view of the action.

Because you are aiming for a diorama effect, generally it is best to arrange plants with the lowest-growing ones closest to the window and increasingly taller shrubs and trees toward the back of the scene.

Tall trees and shrubs in the background impart a sense of enclosure and stop your eye from wandering over to the neighbor's house or to the street. It's great if they're evergreens, but the trunks and branches

icana) rivet attention from fall onward. When grouped together, their branches produce a berry-studded cloud that functions as a see-through fence.

Sometimes, though, the best solution is the real thing. A fence is quick and easy and provides immediate enclosure and privacy. It doesn't have to completely encircle your garden. A few judiciously sited panels can provide the backdrop and the privacy you are looking for.

WORKING WITH WHAT YOU HAVE

Most gardens have established perennials,

shrubs, and trees. While moving and dividing perennials is relatively easy, digging up large shrubs or trees to transplant is usually not feasible for the average homeowner. But removing them is. And while it seems to go against some deep-seated American mores, there really are times when cutting down a tree or large shrub is the right thing to do.

Before you give them the axe, however, consider pruning up dense, vigorous shrubs. Sometimes just removing the lower branches opens up a vista. Pruned-up shrubs or tree trunks in the foreground force perspective. They are a wonderful means of augmenting depth of field and framing the view of the garden beyond. Some ornamentals that prune up successfully include leggy nandinas, Florida anise (*Illicium floridanum*), and leatherleaf viburnum (*Viburnum rhytidophyllum*).

With a shapely shrub or tree in the foreground, draw the eye into the background with pleasing texture or color. A field of ornamental grasses such as fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*) or dwarf mondo grass (*Ophiopogon* 'Kyoto') makes a good, homogenous foil for a foreground silhouette.

MAKING USE OF NEW REAL ESTATE

Pruned-up shrubs yield room around their bases for lower-growing ornamen-



Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata* 'Winter Red') and a high groundcover of dog hobble (*Leucothoe fontanesiana*) form a pleasing view from the front study windows.

CAROLE OTTESEN'S BEST PICKS FOR YEAR-ROUND INTEREST



DENSE EVERGREEN BACKGROUND PLANTS

- China fir (*Cunninghamia lanceolata*, USDA Hardiness Zones 7–9)
- Clumping bamboos (*Fargesia* spp., Zones 5–9)
- Hollies (*Ilex* spp., Zones 6–9)
- Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*, Zones 6–8)
- Sweet bay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*, Zones 7–9)

EYE-STOPPERS

- American beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*, Zones 6–9)
- Canoe birch (*Betula papyrifera*, Zones 2–6)
- Deciduous magnolias (*Magnolia* spp., Zones 4–9)
- River birch (*Betula nigra* 'Heritage', Zones 4–9)
- Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*, Zones 3–9)

ROCK STARS

- Bigleaf magnolia (*Magnolia macrophylla*, Zones 5–8)
- Coral bark maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku', Zones 6–8)
- Crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia* 'Natchez', Zones 6–8)
- Hawthorn (*Crataegus viridis* 'Winter King', Zones 4–7)
- Paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*, Zones 4–8)
- Silky camellia (*Stewartia malacodendron*, Zones 7–9)

Variegated pagoda dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia* 'Argentea', Zones 4–7)

FALL STARS

- Bottlebrush buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*, Zones 4–8)
- Franklin tree (*Franklinia alatamaha*, Zones 5–8,
- Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*, Zones 5–8)
- Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*, Zones 4–8)
- Toad lilies (*Tricyrtis* spp., Zones 5–9)

LATE-WINTER STARS

- Lenten rose (*Helleborus* × *hybridis*, Zones 4–8)
- Red-osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*, Zones 3–7)
- Tommy crocus (*Crocus tommasinianus*, Zones 3–9)
- Winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*, Zones 3–7)
- Winter daphne (*Daphne odora*, Zones 7–9)
- Wintersweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*, Zones 7–9)



SPRING STARS

- Red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*, Zones 4–8)
- Silverbells (*Halesia* spp., Zones 5–8)
- Winter hazels (*Corylopsis* spp., Zones 5–8)



In winter, a coral bark maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku') captures the eye.

tals. Space behind foundation plants up against the house is lost from sight when viewed from the garden. Viewed through a window, it can become an important part of the overall scene, an excellent place to view small, shy plants such as emerging woodland wildflowers or little bulbs.

Intersperse early-blooming ephemerals with plants that shine when the early flowers fade—hostas, hakone grass (*Hakonechloa macra* and cultivars), and Japanese beech fern (*Thelypteris decursive-pinnata*) dovetail with early bulbs, becoming lush, but not tall, framing other, more dynamic plants. To keep a look-into garden lively, include plants that offer interest in the different seasons.

ROCK-STAR PLANTS

There are a few plants that celebrate all of the seasons with panache. In their arsenals are attributes to combat boredom at any time of year. Often, because of superior size, rock-star plants tend to be trees. Ideally, each look-into garden needs at least one rock-star plant to bring it to life.

One celebrity is the coralbark maple (*Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku') that shows off lacy green leaves all summer. In fall the leaves become yellow falling stars; in winter the stems and limbs glow an almost unbelievable coral-red hue.

The leaves of a Franklin tree (*Franklinia alatamaha*) are a scarlet conflagration



Baby robins occupy a nest in a Fosters holly (*Ilex x attenuata* 'Fosteri') next to the entrance to the study.

in the autumn sun. Similarly, the mountain stewartia (*Stewartia ovata*) with exfoliating bark and early summer flowers becomes a shameless exhibitionist in fall when its leaves fire riveting orange. Its relative, the elegantly reserved silky camellia (*Stewartia malacodendron*), exquisite with white spring flowers that balance on its branches like so many eggs, turns yellow in fall and exhibits a wonderful wide-branching, twiggy winter silhouette.


Solely by virtue of its stunning, exfoliating, cinnamon-colored bark, a crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia* 'Natchez') could stand alone in the forefront of any garden. The smooth, muscled trunks form a colorful sculpture—an elegant foil in any season.

My garden's biggest diva in both size and effect is a bigleaf magnolia (*Magnolia macrophylla*). Its enormous, wide-spreading branches serve as an umbrella for an entire side of the house. Picturesque from the kitchen, dining room, and reading room, this botanical leviathan grandly marks the seasons with foot-wide flowers in summer, three-foot banana-yellow leaves in fall, smooth gray bark and big, promising buds in winter.

THE FINISHING TOUCH

Unlike the static world inside that Easter egg, a garden tableau outside the window is dynamic and ever-changing. In all seasons, the bigleaf magnolia is a magnet for birds, drawing them to the window where they can be closely observed. Robins, wrens, chickadees, woodpeckers, cardinals, mourning doves, blue jays, titmice, juncos, and—seasonally—finches claim territory in the garden to nourish new generations in secret nests.

These lively inhabitants of the world outside the window provide the garden's finishing touch, bringing movement and song into the landscape.

Life in the garden penetrates the interior of the house. Sitting at your desk reading and writing, standing in the kitchen chopping vegetables or washing up, you are in the midst of a private, and magical little universe. 

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