

The right lines for your garden beds

By ED HUTCHISON
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Straight lines are great for plotting the shortest distance between points A and B but in the landscape, they often lead to a rigid, stern look.

On the other hand, curved lines are more pleasing visually because they have a softer appearance, especially when they frame a bed filled with healthy plants.

Sometimes straight lines are unavoidable — sidewalks and drives are typically laid out as a straight run. It is hard to justify tearing out a perfectly good sidewalk just to have a curvy one because it looks nicer. You can accomplish about the same thing and for a fraction of the expense and effort by working a curved bed off the straight walk.

Curves also aren't limited to the shape of an edge of a bed or a run of concrete. Having a variety of shapes of plants inside a bed — even one defined by a straight line — can be very nice visually. Here are some ideas on working in interesting shapes in your landscape.

Consider reshaping existing beds with straight edges — look critically at the straight lines that now define the beds, especially those that contain the perimeter plantings, which typically consist of deciduous and evergreen shrubs. What if one edge was

brought out to begin a gentle curve? How much more room would that free up for plants, or might it give plants in the bed some "breathing room?" What if a very long run — say 100 feet — was to be softened by a series of gentle curves along its run?

A rope or section of garden hose provides a good visual aid. Lay it out along the proposed new edge, turning and shaping until you get a shape that is pleasing. You're not committed at this point — give the new shape a few days to "soak in" and if you decide you like it, have at it.

Make curves gentle and sweeping — this takes some room and is difficult to do in a run less than 30 feet. The curve needs some length to define itself, otherwise it will look like you tried to make a straight line but got sloppy. The objective is not to make the bed bigger but to make it look less rigid. Adding curves usually adds more square feet to the bed but this does not mean you must fill up the new area with plants. Open spaces within a bed are just fine.

Soften straight lines with unstraight plants — sounds silly but if you don't want to rearrange beds or can't, or have a permanent square-ish planter, use plants within the bed or planter that grow in a round or irregular shape. The choices are many — hostas and daylilies are a few of the many good choices among perennials while geraniums, petunias and impatiens are a

good choice in annuals. The main point is this: Don't use plants that are stiff in appearance if you are trying to soften the lines of a bed.

Use interesting textures on both sides of the edge — this is easily done within the bed with a huge choice of perennials, annuals, deciduous trees and shrubs — but not so easy outside. You don't always have to have grass. Pebbles, crushed stone, brick, shredded bark, fieldstone — really any number of materials — will add a nice look and texture to the edging, especially one that has some curvature.

Ed Hutchison is a freelance writer and gardener who lives in Midland, MI.

Photo by Ed Hutchison

Crushed stone and other mulch-like materials add interest to a bed, especially if the edge is somewhat curved.



Plants with a pedigree

By DEAN FOSDICK
The Associated Press

"But tho' an old man, I am but a young gardener."

— Thomas Jefferson

Even among heirlooms, some loom above the rest. Take plants and flowers as an example. Certain horticultural heirlooms are the darlings of the DAR.

Want some slips from boxwoods that grew at Mount Vernon in George Washington's time? Visit the home of the nation's first president 16 miles south of his namesake city and buy a living souvenir.

Care for a seedling from the original tulip poplar at Thomas Jefferson's plantation at Monticello? Order from an extensive plant catalog.

When Jefferson commissioned his personal secretary, Capt. Meriwether Lewis, to lead the Voyage of Discovery from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean in 1803, he also ordered him to collect plant samples and describe flora from the then little known area.

Jefferson could fill any number of job descriptions: author, politician, diplomat, engineer, scientist, educator. But first and foremost, he was a Virginia planter. More than that, he was one of the leading botanists of the day.

The former president is said to have schooled Lewis in natural history during a number of chatty strolls through his Monticello gardens. Jefferson believed no country gentleman should be without "what amuses every step he takes into the fields."

Lewis and Capt. William Clark were faithful to his order. They filled several journals with drawings, descriptions and specimens of plants new to residents of the settled East.

Jefferson later described the samples as curious — some ornamental, some useful and some that "may by culture be made acceptable on our tables."

Peggy Cornett is director of the Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants at Monticello, just outside of Charlottesville.

"While a lot of commercial nurseries will have it (cultivating heirloom plants) as a sideline, that's our total mission here," said Cornett. "It's part of the preservation and education mission at Monticello."

The center directs much of its attention toward roses and perennial varieties like dianthus and bearded iris.

To help commemorate next year's bicentennial celebration of the Lewis and Clark expedition, her staff is marketing a seed sampler kit with several of the flowers mentioned in the journals. Those include Lewis' Prairie Flax, Clarkia, Blanket Flower, Snow-on-the-Mountain and Skunkleaf Jacob's Ladder.

Horticulturalists at Mount Vernon specialize in growing plants and flowers with 17th- and 18th century

origins, said spokesman Dean Norton.

"But we're not set up like at Monticello," he said. "Our staff here concentrates on production and growth at the historic site. Whatever we sell (like boxwood) is iced on the cake."

Old Sturbridge Village, Mass., also is a good source of heirloom herbs, flowers and vegetables. The village operates a horticultural interpretive program that, among other things, develops seeds with the Sturbridge label.

Want a tree with historic origins? Select one or several from the American Forests' listings. Their authenticated tree kits are arranged in categories from "A," notable African Americans, to "W," for noteworthy women.

Collectors can choose a sycamore seedling from a tree that's a direct descendent of one fronting Brown Chapel at Selma, Ala., where Martin Luther King Jr. preached; a red maple from Henry David Thoreau's Walden Woods; a Japanese cherry from the Tidal Basin at Washington, D.C.; a southern magnolia from Helen Keller's girlhood home or scores of others.

"We try to expand our listings every year," said spokeswoman Karen Fedor. "The challenge is to get the seeds and authenticate the trees themselves."

Plant historians credit the interest in heirloom plants to the continuing popularity of gardening and the rapid rise in home restoration. A plant with a pedigree would seem to go with the territory.

On the Net:
Monticello/Historical Plants: <http://www.twinleaf.org>
Mount Vernon: <http://www.mountvernon.org>
Old Sturbridge Village: <http://www.osv.org>
U.S. Botanic Gardens: <http://www.usbg.gov>
American Forests: <http://www.americanforests.org>

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