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ACCENTUATE THE
POSITIVE

Landscaper strategies for displaying assets —
and keeping secrets veiled in mystery



framing

Opening pages: Impatiens, Endless Summer hydrangea, climbing roses, clump river birch, and a maple tree define the curved contours of a Somerset County home's bluestone patio. Design and installation by Parker Homescape in Scotch Plains. **Left:** The home's front entry becomes a focal point bordered by a katsura tree, Fat Albert Colorado spruce, Bar Harbor juniper, and perennials. The front walk is bluestone, the risers are natural stone, and the asphalt drive is lined with Belgian blocks.

When it comes to displaying a home

to its greatest advantage, the art of landscape design is like the art of getting dressed. For the most attractive look, choose elements that highlight the positive while minimizing the negative — layering a little here, revealing a bit there. With property — as with physiques — some things are worth accentuating and others are best kept under wraps. ➤

framing

Columns of natural stone created by Parker Homescape frame a vista of hosta, impatiens, blue spruce, fountain grasses, and river birch. The table and chairs are from Parker Gardens.



Downplay Drawbacks

Just about every property owner has something to hide, whether it's the pool heater hunched ignominiously next to the cozy fire pit or the air conditioning unit that blights the side yard. It's usually impossible to do away with these eyesores altogether, but you can minimize their impact on your outdoor design scheme.

Scott Parker, owner of Parker Homescape LLC in Scotch Plains and landscape designer for the property pictured in this article, recommends the use of broadleaf evergreen trees or shrubs for screening. They keep their leaves or needles all year, so that bulky oil tank will remain hidden no matter what the season. (For more of Parker's recommendations, see "Hide & Seek" at right).

Often, the key to good camouflage is restraint. John Carlton, owner of Carlton Design in Montclair, encourages an understated approach to concealing the less attractive aspects of a property. Rather than use thick clusters of plants as screening devices, he often creates a "living wall" to hide unsightly equipment, training vines on a wire trellis or a lattice. "It's a little subtler," he says.

In fact, Carlton warns that tight planting to obscure problem areas can have the opposite effect. "If you use groupings of heavy plants," he says, "a lot of times it's the most densely planted area [and] your eye is drawn to it. That's not your intent; you [should have] as light a touch as possible." Carlton often uses clematis, honeysuckle, and Virginia creeper when building screening walls.

There's another advantage to planting lightly around technical apparatus. "The important thing to remember is that you're going to need access to [this equipment]," says Ed Clark, a landscape architect in Oakland. To allow for periodic service and maintenance, Clark sometimes uses a combination of hard-

Hide & Seek

Landscape designer Scott Parker offers suggestions for plants suited to framing and screening. Take into consideration sun and shade and the extent of the local deer population. Plants with asterisks are deer-resistant.

Plants That Enhance

- ✿ **Boxwood**,* part sun/part shade.
- ✿ **Globe blue spruce**, full sun.
- ✿ **Gold thread cypress**, full sun.
- ✿ **Japanese holly**,* part sun/part shade.
- ✿ **Montgomery blue spruce**, full sun.
- ✿ **Pygmy barberry**,* full sun.
- ✿ **Skip laurel**, shade.

Green Screens

(For areas that require up to six feet of height to screen)

- ✿ **Arborvitae**, full sun.
- ✿ **Rhododendron**, shade.
- ✿ **Skip laurel**,* shade.

(For areas that require eight feet or more to screen)

- ✿ **Arborvitae**, full sun.
- ✿ **Blue spruce**, full sun.
- ✿ **Hemlock**, shade.
- ✿ **Leland cypress**, part sun/part shade.
- ✿ **Norfolk pine**, full sun.
- ✿ **Skip laurel**,* shade.
- ✿ **White pine**, full sun.



screening

Left: Brightly colored daisies and hibiscus draw the eye to this seating area at the same Somerset County home, while trees and plants off the deck shield it from neighbors. The wood deck with natural stone pillars is by Parker Homescape. The table, chairs, and umbrella are from Parker Gardens. **Right top:** Montgomery blue spruce, cutleaf Japanese maple, rhododendrons, weeping white pines, spiraea, Norfolk pines, clump river birch, and boxwoods create interest and shield the front of the home. Cotoneaster and vinca provide ground cover. **Right bottom:** Miscanthus grasses spill over a driveway leading to the home, surrounded by hoopsii blue spruces, and butterfly bushes. Ivy covers a natural stone wall at left.



scape and landscape. "Quite often I use a wood screen ... and then put plants in front of it. You don't have to worry about plants growing into the equipment. With air conditioning, in particular, you want to cut down on sound, and plants don't really do that. A solid wood screen works better and doesn't consume as much space horizontally."

Augment the Assets

Certain areas of a property deserve to be thrust into the landscape limelight. Plants and hardscaping elements,

when prudently placed, can bring focus to areas that merit emphasis, such as entryways, seating areas, and outdoor kitchens.

Symmetrical plantings are often most effective for creating a frame that draws the eye toward a particular area. That's why Parker suggests using plants that keep their shape and grow slowly so balance and proportion are not lost over time. His list of suitably symmetrical plants includes boxwoods, Japanese holly, Montgomery blue spruce, and gold thread cypress.

Frame-worthy flora can be used to delineate different sections of a property. For example, Carlton says plants can create walls for outdoor “rooms” and “hallways,” and hardscaping materials can be added to emphasize borders between backyard areas. “Stone masonry — building low planters out of stone and planting on top of them — creates a nice visual barrier, and the edges of those walls can be used as informal seats,” he says.

To avoid maintenance headaches, choose plants carefully. For instance, Parker advises against using plants that grow large near a patio, walk, or deck. In addition, he says, be careful of trees and shrubs with invasive root systems that may uproot a patio, walk, or deck. He also cautions against planting fruit and berry trees too close to a patio. The mess you’ll face come shedding season may not be worth the short-term beautiful view.

Pool Puzzle

A backyard pool represents a unique landscape challenge. In warmer months, it should be an inviting oasis, a focal point of a property. The problem, of course, is that pool season is relatively short in New Jersey. “Three-quarters of the year,” Carlton points out, “there’s a big plastic cover over it” — not exactly a feast for the eyes.

As a result, landscaping a pool area for year-round appeal requires a bit of finesse. “The best way to achieve this is to use broadleaf evergreen shrubs and then coordinate [plants with color] to keep interest,” Parker says. “Annuals, perennials, and flowering shrubs will be an attractive part of the landscape [in the spring and summer], but will shed in the winter. Broadleaf evergreens will provide screening all year.”

The choice of plants and accessories used to frame a pool also depends on the pool’s style. For natural, free-form pools, Clark recommends plants that are loose, such as grasses like fountain

grass or panicum. “I also like to use plants that resemble things that would normally grow near the water, such as iris or day lilies,” he says.

For a more formal pool, Clark chooses plants such as yews, boxwoods, and hollies — “things that can be sheared and have a more structured look.” In these more traditional settings, Clark also places flower-filled urns around a pool to add interest because hedging plants often lack color.

When Less Is More

With all artistic endeavors, the trick is knowing when to stop. Certain landscape elements are better left untouched. Carlton feels this way about properties that adjoin wooded areas. The best way to bring out the natural beauty of woodland, he says, is to simply leave it alone with only a green lawn for contrast. “The green lawn becomes a nice frame for the natural area. [It creates] a counterbalance between a highly manicured [area] and an [untamed] natural area,” he says.

Parker also prefers keeping “the contrast of the woods with a neatly manicured lawn.” If accents are desired, he recommends azaleas, rhododendron, andromeda, skip laurel, acuba, lily of the valley, fern, astilbe, and hosta. “These are all great choices for a shady area,” he says.

A little bit of planning goes a long way when it comes to creating a flattering landscape design scheme. Choose plant and hardscaping materials that make the most of positive features. And for the less desirable aspects? Make the most of them as well. Using attractive screening plants, you can transform a problem area into a thing of beauty. As Carlton says, “Sometimes you discover something interesting. You may turn a constraint into an opportunity.” **DNJ**

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