

## Most Common DesignErrors

People often want pruning to fix things that pruning won't fix. More often than not, pruning is used to mitigate the ill-effects of BAD PLANNING. A well-planned yard needs little pruning on an annual basis (except the vines, espalier, raspberries and roses, of course), and one large-scale re-working every 15 to thirty years or so.

New yard owners usually buy and plant enough trees and shrubs to make their gardens look good now. This leads to the most common error -- overplanting. But plants are only a fraction of their adult size when they are purchased, and they will inevitably grow from one to one hundred and thirty sizes larger before they stop.

For the first five years, plant owners long for larger trees and shrubs, the next twenty years are filled with angst that it's all gotten "too big" and is "out of control".

Unfortunately, homeowners are not the only people to overplant. Landscape designers and architects commonly overplant, "to satisfy the customer" and because they too fail to understand the laws of Nature. Unfortunately, it usually backfires ten years later, giving the green industry a well-deserved bad reputation.

A couple of myths commonly accompany these over plantings. One is that the customer can selectively remove half the plant later. This works rarely in practice. It seems like such a waste to cut out plants which are really just coming into their prime, that most people won't do it. No one remembers the initial plan, and selective removal rarely even occurs to a landscape owner. Instead they hire the gardener "to prune".

The second myth is that, "if the pruner is good, (and if they get on top of it early), they can keep plants small and even shrink them in size." Although some pruning does entail size reduction, the vast majority of pruning cannot and will not succeed in stopping plant growth to the degree that the average homeowner expects. Total size control, as achieved in some Japanese gardens and topiary gardens, takes incredible diligence and enormous budgetary outlays. It is seldom achieved elsewhere. I compare such pruning to lion taming: an interesting exercise for the devoted professional, but not suitable for the average person. The level of commitment is high. There is a large downside risk factor involved. Perhaps a housecat is a better option or a well-designed landscape.

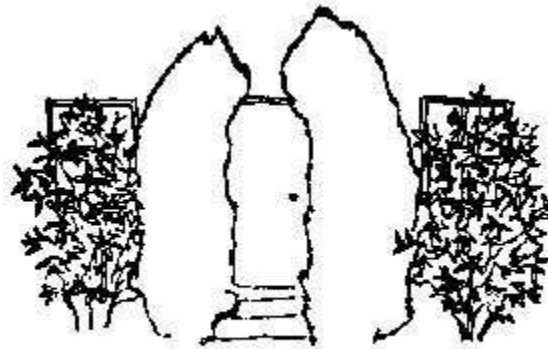
The PlantAmnesty pruning guide divides plants into categories according to their malleability. Cane-growers and mounding-habit shrubs are the easiest to keep down or return to their "mature heights". Tree-like habit plants are those best left to grow to their ultimate (twice the mature height) size.

Another common design error is siting of "tree-like" shrubs under windows and next to walkways. The most mis-sited plant in the Northwest is the rhododendron, difficult to reduce in

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size or keep small.



Trees and tree likes under windows and next to doors.

Most conifers and other needled evergreens are also impossible to reduce dramatically in size (not Yews). If one cuts a laurel hedge clear back into a mass of dead-looking stumps, it will surely grow back and be fine in a year's time. Not so for an Alberta spruce or row of junipers. Cut heavily into the dead zone, they will rarely grow back. Unfortunately there are always a few exceptions around (the amazing juniper comeback, the made-short rhodi) to spawn homeowner hope and instill self-doubt in the minds of professional gardeners.

In some parts of the country, one is advised by landscapers and landscape architects to shear conifers all over, every year, to keep the size controlled. What an incredible waste of time and natural beauty. All such plants eventually become giant gumdrops, nosecones, hockey pucks, and cubes. Needled evergreens can be carefully situated to allow for their ultimate size, requiring little maintenance and assuring maximum beauty for decades to come.

Another common design error is placing large-growing shrubs under relatively small trees. (One example is the rhododendrons that are growing under my cherry tree.) One of my favorite "deadly dull" landscapes consists of five purple leaf plum trees surrounded by masses of Photinia. Both species will "max out" at about the same size. The futility is built in.



Japanese lace leaf maple and coarse ground cover.



Mid-sized tree and coarse ground cover

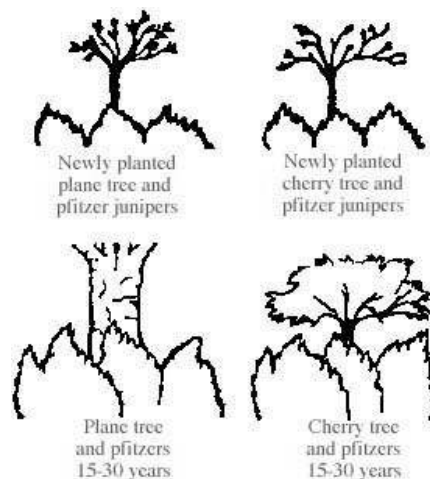
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Similarly, planting a small shrub in a coarse groundcover is unsightly and doomed to failure. The commonest of these is evergreen azaleas and young lace-leaf Japanese maples surrounded by coarse leaved and vigorous English ivy. Creeping thyme, fine textured sedums, or other diminutive ground covers are preferable.

A closely related problem is the yard which is planted predominantly in species whose mature heights are all roughly equal, usually the ten to fifteen-foot range. A recently visited backyard had full sized rhododendrons, lilacs, dogwood tree, styrax tree, weeping birch, magnolia tree, strawberry tree, etc. The only relief was one large tree (Atlas cedar) and a few lower things (heathers). The answer is to yank out fifty percent of the mid-sized plants and replace with low (1 -4 foot) plants. One need not yank out everything and start over.

A yard can be planned so that trees and shrubs retain a certain relationship in size (tall, medium, low) throughout the majority of the landscape's life. A huge bank of Pfitzer junipers at the local warehouse installation will look overbearing after fifteen years if it has been planted with small cherry trees. But the same mass planting will look "right" if the tree species stay "in scale", for example Plane trees or similar enormities. The term "not in scale" is too often incorrectly used to mean "too big".



Some people develop a taste for the rare or unusual in plants. They begin a collection of things with weeping or curly-Q branches, striped and peeling bark, dwarfs, spikes, or other specialty items. The most common error for such a plant lover is to fill a yard with these oddities. In so doing the specialty plants steal the show from each other. The eye jumps from one to the other. In order to properly show off a specialty plant, it must be surrounded by relatively unobtrusive mass plantings. I call them "the chorus line". Close neighbors should be nice looking, but more uniform and relatively uneye-catching.

The final myth leading to design error is the commonly repeated sentiment that "city lots are too small for big trees." There is a grain of truth to the statement, but in some ways a tall tree

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can fit a small space better. The vast majority of 'headroom' is taken up by a two-foot trunk. The really large part of the tree, the crown, is way above even a two-story house, interfering with nothing but air, and sun, I suppose. On the other hand, a small tree can take up a great deal of the yard where it is least wanted, in front of windows, next to walkways, paths and streets, thus dooming the tree to a life of bashing, snipping and skirting. A Saucer Magnolia for example NEEDS to be broad and low. Instead of deeding one quarter of the yard to it, mulching a bed beneath, people forever limb them up and up, just to get the mower beneath. But the tree never seems to look quite right.

Good planning is by far the cheapest and best way to ensure a low maintenance landscape. Unfortunately, it is in direct opposition to the "instant" landscape upon which everyone seems so intent. The clever designer will compromise by "overplanting" mounds and cane-growers which can be more easily pruned, renovated or removed as the landscape matures. The trees and tree-like shrubs, however, are carefully located in the middle of beds, far from roofs, walks and wires, so that they will be allowed to reach their ultimate height without molestation.

No doubt it is one of those laws of the universe: It costs less to build and take care of a good one than it does to replace it. Better to do it right the first time, than to do it over. One might equally assume that in sheer numbers "doing it over", the latter, will always exceed "doing it right," be it in politics, ecology, infrastructure, business, home, or yard.