

Garden Topic: Party Eyes

By Cass Turnbull

People Are Coming!

So, you are having some important company over to your house. You know how that changes your perceptions of how things look! Suddenly the windows look dirty, that pile of unfinished paperwork seems huge, and the stain on the tablecloth is utterly unacceptable.

They were all okay just minutes ago.

What do you do if you only have fifteen minutes warning? Well, you prioritize and take some short cuts. For example, my sister taught me to hide the dirty dishes in the oven (temporarily of course).

The same thing happens when you are a gardener and the homeowner tells you she is having an outdoor summer party next weekend—or, God forbid, she decided to put her garden on a garden tour. Your plans for the day change dramatically, and your ideas of what needs to be done are completely different. I call it party eyes, which is a good lesson on what makes a garden look good.

The Biggest Difference

I have trained myself to see what affects the perceptions of the casual observer— it's not what you'd think. The single most effective thing you can do to make things look better is to have a sharply mown lawn with a perfect edge. Second is to have that

lawn be green, not ecologically responsible tannish (note: it doesn't need to be weed free). This is accomplished by giving it obscene amounts of water for two weeks in advance.

Cleaning and Clearing

The second most telling thing—and you won't like this one any better—is to clean the walks and outdoor cobwebs, especially at entrances. There is an old saying that “rich ladies like clean walks.” Actually, all ladies like clean walks, just not all of us can afford to have them. I realized early on that some of my customers wanted me to come simply because I had a blower.

Alternatively, you can hose the hardscapes off with water, or exhaust yourself with a push broom—in the manner of Seattle's ecologically virtuous.

If you are new to blowing, there things to know. As you blow, the walks and beds go from *very clean* at the entry way, to *not-so-anal-retentive* farther away from the house. When you get behind a blower, the tendency is to make it all spotless. Aside from annoying every neighbor for 100 feet, you make the rest of the yard look worse. Sometimes, a lighter blow farther away looks better, but not perfect. Being over 40, which is to say nearsighted, helps.

If you are new to professional gardening and blowing, you need to know a couple of other things. Take care not to blow debris

under the front door into foyer floor, which the cleaning lady just finished mopping. Do, however, blow off the landscape rocks, hardscapes, flat edgings, and irrigation boxes. And get those aforementioned cobwebs off from under eaves and on outdoor window sills (unless the windows have been freshly washed). Do the tops of patio tables and chairs. If there is dead bulb foliage hanging over a pot's lip, cut or pull it off and brush the weeds and debris out of the abandoned pot while you are at it.

When blowing, be sensitive to who is near you. If, say, the book club members arrive, gear down the throttle and blow lightly (more quietly), or perhaps go to the other side of the house. At times you should politely switch over to sweeping and hosing—you know, if the baby's gone down for a nap, the homeowner is asleep on the patio, or the cat is napping in the middle of the path. Sweeping and hosing down walks was how it was ALL done in the past, and the not too distant past at that. In the Parks Department tool shed, I spotted many old hand tools such a grass scythes (think grim reaper), hand-held grass shears that were used before sting trimmers, sod lifters, half-moon edgers, five-gang riding push mowers, and double buck saws. It was a quieter time for sure. And for God's sake, if somebody is approaching to talk to you, TURN IT OFF and take it off your back. You have on ear protection, they don't.

But back to overgrown garden clean-up. If you have a day or two to prepare for guests yourself, and your landscape is a real mess because, uh, you've been battling a rare but not fatal disease or tending to your aging aunt, or traveling, yeah that's it....traveling, read on—you can do even more.

Prune and Weed the Edges and Clear the Paths

In the summer there comes a time when the shrubs and trees begin to encroach on the walkways and run into each other and the other hardscapes—like the house, the walls and fences, and the rocks. Then I find myself armed with various pruning implements doing what I call a *Sherman to the sea*. Windrows of cut branches and pulled weeds are dropped behind me as I work my way through. If you can have someone else doing the loading and hauling, you are not subconsciously restrained from tackling big or thorny jobs.

Get the Brown Out

With the shrub beds, I try to get the worst of the brown out. This is the part that makes me feel the most guilty about my job because the brown is what critters, bugs, and birds like.

Snap out the big hunks of deadwood, delete that dying shrub, rake the big or shiny dead leaves out of the beds. If the garden has been neglected for some time, or you are in a native section, you may just want to lightly rake out the top layer of light-colored leaves and grab just the biggest dead twigs that lying on the ground. Take special care to get the conifer windfall and hangers that still have brown needles on them.

Sticks, Strands, and Stubble

If you cut down a shrub or perennial (to kill it, renovate it, or because you don't have time to dig out the dead plant), cut it down

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correctly. That means you cut it very low and round it down at the edges, making a tidy, compact mound. Using your fingers, rake out the debris at the base. The thinner twigs get cut shorter than the fat ones. Then it looks more on purpose. You might not think these things make a difference, but they do. “Go get the sticks, strands, and stubble” is what I tell my crew. Sometimes, just ruffling, combing, or fluffing debris and crashed perennial leaves with your hands makes things look better.

Weed-Patch Abatement

What about that neglected area full of weeds and blackberries? What if a guest finds some obscure reason to wander back there? You know they will. My husband actually mastered the technique of doing a once-a-year party cleanup using a weed-eater to just string trim it all down to bare dirt. I didn't approve, but I was certainly impressed. Of course, the area looked good for only about a week, but that's all the homeowner needed.

When new gardeners are faced with a big patch of weeds and insufficient time, they always head for the middle or the worst part. My strategy in this situation is both good weeding strategy and good aesthetic strategy. Do the edges first.

Weed, and not necessarily well, along the lawn/bed interface, but not in a straight line. Make bays of clean earth along the bed edge. Also weed (rip-tear) and rake with your hands, all the stuff jammed up against the back fence or wall. And yank out the grass and weeds that are coming up through shrubs. Rake or brush the accumulated dead leaves off of the shrubs,

especially the conifers, and shake or rake out dead leaves that have accumulated inside shrubs.

On to the giant patch of mostly annual weeds that remains in the middle. Tiptoe in and snip out the blackberries and delete the dandelions. Their ugly yellow faces say “weed patch!” Same with lawns. Spend your limited time pulling out the intermittent clumps of grass that are growing among the other weeds and invasives in the big area. Yank out any strands—like wild blackberry, sneaky vines, and bits of bulb foliage (especially white stuff).

After that, the area will read as a natural area, not a neglected, weed-infested, lazy woman's garden. The visitor's eye will pass right over it and go straight to the charming bird bath at the end of the clean and tidy path.

Weak Spots

Identify the weak visual points of the garden—the slouching compost pile covered in Herb Robert, the neighbor's chain-link fence, the view to the dead car next door—and get rid of them. Screening is the horticultural equivalent of sweeping dirt under the rug. This can be done with the following shoddy construction technique, which I have developed myself. I use a lot of the wicker fencing (actually rolls of willow fencing), green fence post stakes, fence wire, and zip ties. Pound in the stakes about every 6 feet or so, attach the wire fencing with zip ties, then rollout the wicker fence and zip tie it on the sturdier wire fence. Take the extra time necessary to make the fence slats

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stand perfectly vertical and parallel to each other. It makes a big difference.

The Final Walk

Finally, you walk through the yard like someone who has never been there before and ask yourself what tugs the eye, detracting from the pleasant overall effect. Then fix that. I have been known to re-stack and dust a wood pile and beat a dog-hair infested welcome mat. I even keep a can of camouflage spray paint in my truck's toolbox to disguise the white plastic PVC pipe of raised sprinkler heads and utility boxes.

If you can't hide it or disguise it, whatever it is, try to move the viewer's eye to somewhere else by adding a new focal point—such as that birdbath, or maybe one of those big, nice pots of flowers that you've been wanting buy. When you set it on the ground, or even in a bed, take the time to make it perfectly level too.

If the garden is yours, pour yourself a cocktail, sit down, and wait for them to arrive. But promise yourself that you will do more thorough job in the future, never letting the garden get this far out of hand again!