



Garden Club News

Rockport Garden Club, January, 2026

"No single sort of garden suits everyone. Shut your eyes and dream of the garden you'd most love, then open your eyes and start planting. Loved gardens flourish, boring ones are hard work." —Jackie French

Winter Musings on Garden Design

Happy New Year Rockport gardeners! It was my intention to get this newsletter to you in 2025 but life got in the way. However, this is still the ideal time to cover one of the more popular topics from last year's survey: garden design. With the holidays now behind us, January is the perfect time for thinking, researching, and planning how we might design or improve on the existing design of one or more gardens on our properties.

In this newsletter, we will also touch on another requested topic: vegetable gardening, by not only discussing the design of one but by sharing some of my favorites vegetable gardening resources. As with all the prior newsletter topics this year, garden design is a huge one. There are so many directions that we could go in (e.g., basic design principles, ecological design, low maintenance design) none of which can be adequately covered in a single newsletter. So, I will touch on a few big ideas for your consideration and provide you with links to articles and videos that are what I like to call **rabbit hole resources** that is, rich resources that usually point you to others you can traverse.

I imagine that those of you who requested this topic have an existing garden that you would like to change/improve upon or an area of lawn that you would like to replace with a garden vs. undertaking the major design or redesign of your entire landscape. However, if you are considering a major renovation, I highly recommend that you hire a professional landscape designer. You may find [this article](#) from Architectural Digest informative in shopping for a designer. I especially like the list of suggested questions to ask potential candidates. Of course, I encourage you to shop local and get recommendations from friends, neighbors, and garden club members. 😊

A Gardener Is Much Better Off with a Purpose and a Plan



The first time I saw the cartoon above I laughed aloud and felt seen. For decades, my purpose as a gardener had simply been to successfully grow every plant that I bought, inherited, divided, or grew from seed. Planning was largely a matter of determining where to put each plant focusing primarily on the correct exposure or protection from wind and critters. Design came down to moving things if I didn't like the way things looked over time. **But I have come to realize that the most beautiful and bountiful gardens require a clear purpose and plan.**

Like the cartoon above captures, for years, I have planted and nurtured hundreds of trees, shrubs, flowers, herbs, and vegetables, modifying things based on observations but, honestly, with no true plan. For example, three years ago when I moved to Rockport, I found myself with a very neglected 1/2 acre of mostly lawn, on a slope, chalk full of weeds and ancient rhododendrons all growing in fairly lousy soil. Removing several (not all) the rhodies and significantly reducing the lawn and weeds was the first order of business; the rhodies blocked our front picture window and neither my husband nor I wanted to mow the lawn on a steep slope! Then in the spring, I discovered that there were numerous neglected perennials on the property which I divided and transplanted to fill in between the native shrubs I was discovering. My purposes in year one were to: nurture my discoveries and the few plants I had brought from home (as best I could until I could test and amend the soil) and to fill in all the bare space I now had. My husband also built several raised beds for veggie gardening because it was clear that the condition of the soil where I wanted a veg garden was questionable. For the last 3 years, I have had no true design plan but now is the time! Writing this article has already inspired some thoughtful planning for the year ahead.

FRAMING OUR DESIGN CONVERSATION

Enough about me. Let's now frame our general discussion of garden design around the popular decision to reduce the size of our lawns. (Note: many people are getting rid of their lawns entirely and establishing meadows or planting only natives on their property but such a large endeavor will benefit GREATLY by hiring a professional. This doesn't have to be expensive. Many designers will consult for an hourly rate.) For our discussion here, let's imagine that we are removing a 20 ft by 25 foot section of lawn with one or more of the following purposes in mind:

- A.** There is a section of your lawn that has little grass and tons of Creeping Charlie (i.e., *Glechcoma hederacea*).
- B.** You want to support the local ecosystem; you know that a garden full of native plants would be a much better use of the 500 square feet.
- C.** You want a large veggie garden where you can grow organic veggies from spring to fall.

D. You want to improve your home's curb appeal and see year-round beauty in that space which is right outside your dining room window.

If your singular purpose is A: *weed eradication* consider the following:

- [Penn State's guidance here](#) on going from lawn to garden bed in 3 easy steps, using sheet mulching as your elimination method.
- While Creeping Charlie is not easy to eliminate without the use of chemicals or lots of physical labor, as [this guidance](#) describes, it can be done using sheet mulching, patience, and vigilance. I've done it. But know that it will require 6 months' planning in advance. And while sheet mulching is best done in the fall with the goal of planting in spring, you can plan to do it this spring and plant in the fall!
- Of course, you may have no intention of planting anything in the space and are considering hardscaping options like a firepit, a stepping stone path, or a stunning arrangement of granite boulders surrounded by mulch. And if that is the case, it is still best to wait before you lay down stone, especially where perennial lawn weeds are involved. You want to be sure to suffocate them and police the edges and pull any runners that might pop up in your new firepit.
- Considering hardscaping? [This Martha Stewart blog might inspire you.](#)

If your singular purpose is B: *design a native garden*. Good for you!

- If you are willing to wait before doing any planting, your plan might start with the sheet mulching method described above or solarization [described here by Xerces](#) as their preferred method.
- Even before your elimination method is decided, start reading and watching videos on the topic of ecological design/native plant design.

There are so many great resources out there but I recommend starting with guidance from our very own RGC native plant expert/horticulturist, Carol Lundeen. I just love how Carol encourages us to get outdoors and observe what grows in our native landscapes here in Rockport. Check out [this video](#) she created and [this one too](#). Brilliant! Carol is a well qualified local resource on growing natives and supporting pollinators, offering complimentary site visits as well as native landscape design services. Be sure to also read her guidance [here](#) which addresses purpose D above.

- I also highly recommend doing a deep dive into [this overview of ecological design](#) by the National Wildlife Federation which has several useful hyperlinks on designing a native garden, and a plant finder link by zip code.
- The Native Plant Trust (formerly Garden in the Woods) hosts Carol Lundeen's current favorite native plant finder. It's a searchable database where you specify plant type, mature size, landscape use, flower color (and other horticulture values), cultivation status, tolerance to threats like wildlife and soil compaction, and more, at <https://plantfinder.nativeplanttrust.org/Plant-Search>.
- While our growing zones may differ, these [native plant templates](#) from Maryland are full of great information and plans for plants that would do well in Rockport

When it comes to option C. *Designing a vegetable garden*, there are important variables to consider well in advance (e.g., sun exposure; protection from deer, rabbits; soil quality).

- The most important variable is determining the soil quality under that lawn you removed. And even if you are planning to grow in deep raised beds, please get the soil you bring in tested. **This is especially important re: lead levels.**

- UMA has a concise and rather informative [fact sheet](#) re: planning for a vegetable garden and it discusses exactly what we've been talking about: starting a veg garden where a lawn used to be.
- The University of Maryland also has a [good checklist for planning a vegetable garden](#).
- And then there is [this video](#) (and many others on vegetable gardening from my favorite Youtube garden star: Benedict Vanheems, from Grow Veg. I have spent hours on my treadmill watching his Youtube videos. He also provides an absolutely fabulous [online garden planner](#) that I have started playing around with. Love it! And the planner can be used for designing other types of gardens.

If your singular purpose is D: *curb appeal and year round color* here are a few suggestions for your consideration.

- Review this general but solid [guidance from Penn State](#) and [this article from Better Homes and Gardens](#) about planning for year round interest.
- And make yourself a cup of tea or pour a nice glass of wine and get comfy in a favorite chair as you watch [this magical video](#) from Exquisite Gardens. It's long and it begins with gorgeous images sans audio but stick with it.
- Get your hands on some great used garden books and garden magazines (Second Glance is a great resource) and sit with that cup of tea or a glass of wine and see what inspires you. Use your cell phone camera to snap pics of designs you like and start a Pinterest board.
- Take walks around your neighborhood or the neighborhoods where curb appeal is abundant. Again, take pictures. This is still a useful exercise in the dead of winter given that your purpose is year round beauty.

Finally, while one clear purpose will make planning a lot easier, someone could have 2 or more or even all of the purposes above driving their gardening design plan. All four purposes were in mind as I began dreaming of having a *potager* (a French kitchen garden that blends edibles with ornamentals) on my property. If designing a potager appeals to you, check out [this article](#) from the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens and [this video from Grow Veg](#). I am excited to use the online garden planner I mentioned above to get my potager plan finally down on paper this year.

I hope this article has inspired you to use this winter to dream and plan the design or redesign of a garden on your property. I know that I will be reviewing a lot of this material myself over a nice cup of tea or a glass of wine this winter.