

THE GARDEN

INCORPORATING THE PRINCIPLES OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN



Spring is here! We don't need a calendar to tell us; just step outside.

Spring is traditionally the season of hope and rebirth/renewal, inviting us to bear witness to the cycles of nature, indeed, of all life; as such, it can be both uplifting and invigorating, yet calming and reassuring. Communing with nature has many potential benefits – as an antidote for depression and anxiety, a break from the boredom of winter's confinement and isolation from the wider world.....

...that is, for those of us who can access these benefits! Given our various limitations from the ongoing polio battle, chances are it's not as easy as stepping outside, or more accurately, it's not always easy to step outside. We need to find other ways to access the therapeutic and psychic benefits of Nature and the wider world and make them a part of our daily lives; in this article, I've tried to demonstrate how we've done so with the help of Universal Design. [See below.]

Over our 43 years of marriage and my steadily increasing limitations, we've moved a number of times from the Midwest to the East and now the West Coast. With each move, I became increasingly aware of how to bring the world and Nature to me: it is through "The Garden": my personal space in the great outdoors.

In each successive home, my idea of The Garden has broadened and expanded, from our apartment patio garden of potted plants, to the traditional back yard garden or maybe two, to what we have now: where our entire property is "The Garden", in which there are a number of smaller and mini "gardens within the garden, aesthetically and functionally enhanced by wide interconnecting paths that invite exploration and add to the allure...and value.... of the property. These paths have increased a hundred fold my joy, interest and involvement in our yard; when I take my dog for a walk, we just go outside, taking a different "route" or lingering at different spots – no need to find a dog park.



If we examine what traditionally has been done, the difference becomes more telling: it's in the way we view, and thus, develop our homes. The house structure itself was considered to be "the home," not the land, despite

the land's value often being more than half of the purchase price. The house received priority for time, attention and dollars spent on beautifying and personalizing its interior, while the exterior got what was left, to do the minimum – landscape the front lawn and entrance, for the public view, and perhaps a back yard garden. As for the interior décor, it was seen as an important expression of self- identity, a statement of our interests, tastes, even values.



And as for accessibility, it was created for our inside world and to access the necessary areas such as the garage, and possibly a patio. But it didn't usually occur to many of us to give the same priority to the property, and thereby gain all of Nature's benefits from the world just outside our doors. Or that having visual access through the windows and doorways of the house could provide year 'round interest.

Yet this kind of investment will certainly pay dividends in enriching our lives, our health and functionality, and yes, our financial statements.

This is where Universal Design comes in handy. Its goal is to create access in the broadest sense, to the greatest number of people - of every age, stage of life, and ability - in a manner that is safe, efficient, convenient, and requires minimum physical effort.



As it applies to the garden, simply put, it means creating access to the outdoors, whether directly through physical contact or indirectly from the home's interior via the glass openings, and it means access through all of our senses, including touch, taste, smell.

So how do we put these principles into action to transform our properties into our own little worlds? We came up with three overarching objectives, giving them easier to remember catchphrases: OUTSIDE IN; 360 PLUS FIVE; and MAKE IT YOURS.



OUTSIDE IN: Bringing the outside into the home's inside means basically making the outside a part of our everyday lives, even when we can't get outside. On the other side of every window and doorway of the house,

we can create or encourage some sort of visual interest that connects us with the fauna and flora right under our noses, so to speak.



“Feed them and they will come” (to bend a movie title) applies to birds, bees, butterflies and all kinds of wildlife; there are resources that can tell you how to attract a particular species, even, with various plants. Why else would we plant several Butterfly bushes? You can add interest with birdbaths and feeders, again, specific for various birds, like hummingbirds, a true joy to observe. My father used to put nuts on the window sills of his office in the country so he could observe the squirrels, “nose to nose” he’d say, as they worked on their tasty treats.



Another part of this objective is to make ingress/egress easier, through such things as making existing thresholds level, the use of easy-open, or even automatic push-button doors, and through use of proper hardware, such as lever-type handles. We increased access by making structural changes to doors, like converting one to a Dutch-door, and one to a glass door. We also added new glass doorways, where one had been a window, enhancing visual access. We eliminated the bumpy threshold of a sliding door to the patio by changing it to double glass-paned doors. Flooding the interior with light also has the advantage of making it brighter and more cheerful.



360+FIVE refers to the 360 degrees around the property, and adding ‘plus five’ to 360= 365 days of the year, another way of saying that the entire property should be part of the “Garden”, and it should have year ‘round interest, i.e. all four seasons. In selecting plants, it’s important to consider their appearance in each season, not just the blooming one. For example, are there berries or fruit, or fall color? After their leaves drop, are there interesting branching structures (curly willow) or are the branches themselves colorful, (red twig dogwood)?

To utilize the entire property, it’s necessary to “visually improve” the less attractive things, such as the garbage cans and maintenance equipment and supplies. For the garbage, we installed a 3-sided tall white (prefab) picket fence to enclose the garbage cans along the side of the garage, planting bushes and vines along the front and sides to make the fence less conspicuous.

Another target was the lawn paraphernalia, which we hid in a “pocket of plantings” we created in the rear corner of yard, using mostly evergreen tall and bushy shrubs plus bougainvillea vines. We installed them, densely spaced, in a somewhat semi-circular line, extending out from and about 5 feet in front of existing landscaping, creating a pocket, with the entrance less visible around the back side, into which we placed all our junky supplies. There were other ways to accomplish the same end, perhaps with a trellis, or other architectural structure, but this was a “naturalistic” way that appealed to us

A word about evergreens: it’s hard to beat these for year ‘round pleasure, and they come in virtually every form: trees, low spreading shrubs, tall or full bushes, vines, groundcovers. Then there are the succulents, bromeliads and cactus plants that never drop their leaves, problematic at times since any injury to the leaf produces a permanent scar, just like human skin.

For plant shopping, keep in mind that most of the mass merchandisers, like Home Depot, Target, etc., carry the most popular....and therefore common.... plants. If you take the time to browse through the smaller, even specialty, nurseries, and/or research the internet, you should be able to find many more interesting varieties of the common plants, if you’d like. Another thing to consider is that if you need a tree but you have a shrub, or vice versa, you can change the form by a change in pruning technique.

MAKE IT YOURS. Simply put: personalize your property. Let your imagination come alive and make it uniquely yours, just like you do inside. As you go through your yard, think of what feelings you want to evoke. Do you want to memorialize someone or something? Is there a piece of sculpture or memento that someone gave you? A special flower or plant that reminds you of someone or someplace? A favorite fragrance – jasmine, lily, gardenia, tuberose? What about a little vegetable/herb garden – either in pots or in ground?

Trellises can provide beauty and structure for not only ornamental plants, but for tomatoes and others; they can also camouflage a part of the house structure that’s unattractive or too plain. Trellises can be found in a variety of materials, or homemade or improvised. We stuck a branch of curly willow into the ground so it can serve as a living stake for our sweet peas, and other flowering plants. (It will apparently root and grow, and therefore will likely need to be relocated at a later date!) Another nice option is an antique gate that can serve as a trellis/stake, or announce the entrance to a garden area or a path.

Color themed gardens can be very effective. For an area that’s easily observed in the evening, an all- white blooming garden shows up beautifully. There are always rose gardens, of course, with thousands to choose. You can create a mini-orchard for fruit and landscaping by grouping some fruit trees.

Lighting can be very effective in creating drama and in extending the enjoyment of the garden into the evening hours. For example, for drama, you can’t beat up-lights for trees and shrubs. Other types include tree lanterns, patio/deck lighting, and low voltage, sensor -activated lights to illuminate

driveways and paths. Lighting is not only a visually pleasing element, it can aid in function, safety, and can prolong the hours spent outdoors.

Container gardens are perhaps the most versatile and the most convenient for people with disabilities, as they offer endless variety in terms of size, height, grouping and location, and they can be easily changed or moved without disturbing anything else in the landscape that’s dependent on it to fill some purpose. In fact, they can be used to add “landscaping” to an area that has no soil, such as we did along a long barren wall on our patio,

that wasn't deep enough for seating. We grouped a bunch of oversized pots, putting a small tree in one. That wall is now one of the most interesting, indeed, spectacular spots on our patio.



In terms of construction, there are some guidelines. Generally, the pot should have three aspects that complement one another: a strong upward vertical line, a fuller, softer middle section, extending horizontally beyond the imaginary side margins, and a downward vertical line spilling over and down the sides. This is only one way, but it might serve as a starting point from which you can create your own experiments; the expense in time and money is usually modest, changes are easy, as is starting over.

When I go past the containers in our yard, I have some fun imagining the larger ones as little cities with high rises, or villages or different ethnic neighborhoods; where ground cover equals lawns. In constructing container gardens, select plants with a variety of textures and complementary colors. Succulents have proven to be real winners, and can be combined with bromeliads, cacti, and deciduous plants, including small trees. Kalanchoes are one of my favorites for container arrangements with their waxy, thick leaves and long-lasting blooms. Note: *Remember that these plants all must have the same requirements for light, water and nutrition!*

If possible, it's highly desirable to have different seating locations, for example, some secluded, and someplace "public", some in sun, some in shade. More importantly, with limitations on how long and how far we're able to walk, it's almost a must to have resting spots at various distances from the house.

Consider, too, the various views, near and far – and how they can be enhanced visually from both inside and outside the house. Scenic vistas can be highlighted by the placement of new plants, or the selective pruning of existing ones to frame and thereby call attention to, these views. Speaking of selective pruning, something I learned recently is that it's the secret behind the transformation from one form into another. Say you have a perfectly fine shrub, but it's located in a spot that really calls for a tree. All you need to do is utilize the correct pruning technique, and voila, you have your tree; what's more, it's free!

SOME THOUGHTS ON PLANT SELECTION and PLACEMENT

Given our limitations, it's important to avoid choosing plants that are temperamental, or will require too much maintenance. With thousands to choose from, and so many resources available to help navigate through them, finding the right ones is pretty straightforward. And there are maintenance techniques that can make them easier as well.

Start out by choosing those highly recommended by professionals in your area, and in your climate zone. If you want to be a bit adventurous, you might try choosing plants from other parts of the world, but making sure they're in the same or similar climate zones.

But beyond that, it makes sense to choose plants that have advantages such as low water needs, or are drought tolerant, insect or disease resistant. (For hand watering, as in containers, make sure the water source is handy; if possible, install multiple water spigots around the house perimeter.) Avoid plants that need lots of attention – trimming or pruning, dead heading, make messes with their dropping leaves or sap, are unruly and need staking.

Definitely avoid plants labeled as aggressive or invasive, plants that take over the garden, crowding out all the others, and are impossible to kill!

Again, having variety in leaf textures and colors, sizes and shapes make gardens much more interesting, allowing us to include plants that we might not think of as traditionally beautiful, but when used in the proper combinations with others, you might find you like them after all.

Remember to balance the fast growers with slow growers (and usually the faster they grow the shorter their life span. This way you can even out the expense of mature plants by putting younger ones where they won't show up as much. This way you'll have some larger, mature plants to carry you over until the younger little ones catch up. One red flag: these fast growing plants might also need constant trimming, which would be a negative if we're trying to reduce maintenance.

Mulching is a terrific way to reduce maintenance; in fact, it's my number one recommendation. Many use mulch for its appearance, but if it's used at a depth of at least 3" - which sound excessive, it will pay for itself with demonstrably reduced maintenance, by: virtually eliminating weeds, keeping moisture in the ground, adding nutrients to the soil as it decomposes, and helping prevent insects and disease.

Needless to say, for us it's very important to find ways to ease the burdens of watering; sprinkling systems are worth the expense if budget permits; think of them as a necessary medical expense. Remember, too, that new plants require a great deal more water than when they're established.

While creating our own gardens requires a good deal of research and planning up front, we found that making one overall "Grand Plan" allowed us to bite off one piece at a time, as budget and time allowed. Good planning up front will help pay for itself by eliminating costly mistakes, keeping us focused on our goals to avoid impulsive temptations, not to mention the joy and fascination it will bring all through the year and years beyond, even beyond our lifetime for others who come behind.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The home that people create today will survive them by many years, several generations. There's no ADA or other legality to require even built-in flexibility, or visitability (see below). In fact, one important goal of Universal Design has been allow people to age in place rather than be forced to leave their homes at the onset of a disability.

The significance of this is that every year in the U.S. alone, many thousands more of these inaccessible structures become a permanent part of the landscape, adding to the already huge inventory of inaccessible houses, thus perpetuating inaccessibility for our future generations, and these structures will dictate who may and may not be able to live in them, long after their original owners are gone.

Can you begin to sense the mandate appearing before us? Look at it this way: If we don't take on this mandate by doing our part to build fully accessible homes and properties, *who on earth will?*

When we create the fullest, broadest access for our homes, we've performed a service not only for ourselves, but for our communities: it allows us to be not only more active and contributing members of our communities, but we've provided an example for others to follow. Even more significantly, we've also performed a service for future generations who will come behind us, who will feel welcome here regardless of any limitations, not left

out to reinvent the wheel of accessibility, again. And with our individual successes, over the years, one home at a time, we will create accessible communities. My friends, this is indeed, no small feat.

Additional information ...

Universal Design

“The Principles of Universal Design and their guidelines were developed by a working group of architects, products designers, engineers, and environmental design researchers as part of a project coordinated by the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University. The seven Principles that describe characteristics that make designs universally usable are: Equitable Use; Flexibility in Use; Simple and Intuitive Use; Perceptible Information; Tolerance for Error; Low Physical Effort; Size and Space for Approach and Use.”

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Another idea for an inset: Visitability, an ordinance that has passed in Georgia and several other states, that mandates that new private single-family homes be constructed with one level entrance somewhere in the home, a bathroom (minimally half bath) and path to it on the first floor, and something else.....I can look it up.

Visitability

"Visitability" has been a growing trend nationwide for the past ten years. The term refers to single-family housing designed in such a way that it can be lived in or visited by people with disabilities. A house is visitable when it meets three basic requirements:

- at least one no-step entrance
- doors and hallways wide enough to navigate through
- a bathroom on the first floor big enough to get into in a wheelchair, and close the door.

"When someone builds a home, they're not just building it for themselves -- that home's going to be around for 100 years," Concrete Change founder Eleanor Smith told The New York Times.

"These things hurt nobody -- and they help a lot of other people."

"The visit-ability movement is based on the conviction that inclusion of basic architectural access features in all new homes is a civil and human right and improves livability for all," according to [Visit-ability: an Approach to Universal Design in Housing](#), a publication by the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Universal Design at The State University of New York, University at Buffalo.