

THE GARDEN

Incorporating the Principles of Universal Design

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Spring is here! Spring is traditionally the season of renewal, inviting us to bear witness to the cycles of nature. Communing with nature is 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.

Over our 43 years of marriage and my steadily increasing limitations, we've moved a number of times. With each move, I became increasingly aware of how to bring the world and nature to me, through my personal space in the great outdoors – The Garden.

We've done so with the help of Universal Design. 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, directly, or indirectly from the home's interior via the glass openings. It means access through all of our senses, including touch, taste and smell.

We came up with three overarching objectives, giving them easier to remember catchphrases: OUTSIDE IN; 360+ FIVE; and MAKE IT YOURS.

OUTSIDE IN: Bringing the outside into the home's inside means 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.

Why else would we plant several butterfly bushes? You can add interest with birdbaths and feeders specific for various birds, like hummingbirds, a true joy

to observe. My father used to put nuts on the window sills of his office 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 automatic push-button doors, and through use of proper hardware, such as lever-type handles. We increased access by making structural changes to doors, converting one to a Dutch-door and another 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 glass-paned double doors. Flooding the interior with light has the advantage of making it brighter and more cheerful. In sum, to bring the outside in, work from the inside out ... going through the house and planning the view from each window and door.

360+ FIVE refers to the 360 degrees around the property, and adding 'plus five' to 360 = 365 days of the year. It is another way of saying that the entire property should be part of The Garden, and it should have year-

For more advice from Susan and photographic examples of universal design in gardening, visit www.post-polio.org/edu/pphnews/PPH25-2garden.pdf. Members may contact PHI for a copy.



“The Principles of Universal Design and their guidelines were developed by a working group of architects, product 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.”

round interest. In selecting plants, it is important to consider their appearance in each season, not just the blooming one. Are there berries or fruit or fall color? After the 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 garbage cans and maintenance equipment and supplies. To enclose the garbage, we installed a three-sided tall picket fence along the garage, and planted bushes and vines along the front and sides to make the fence less conspicuous.

MAKE IT YOURS: Simply put, personalize your property. Let your imagination come alive and make it uniquely yours, just as you do inside. As you examine 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 a significant person or place? A favorite fragrance – jasmine, lily, gardenia? What about a little vegetable/herb garden – either in pots or in ground?

Container gardens are perhaps the most versatile and convenient for people with disabilities, as they offer endless variety in terms of size, height, grouping and location. 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 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.

Remember, these plants all must have the same general requirements for light, water and nutrition!



PLANT SELECTION and PLACEMENT:

Given our limitations, it's important to avoid plants that are temperamental or 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.

One way to start is by choosing plants highly recommended by professionals in your area; these will get you proven winners. However, if you'd like your garden to be unique, try some unusual or rare species. Or be adventurous by trying plants from other countries with similar climates. You can easily find them on the various websites.

Indeed, we have plants from every continent on the globe, except the two polar extremes, including the Mediterranean, South Africa, Australia,

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England, Portugal, Mexico, Brazil, Spain, Indonesia, Japan, Bolivia, etc.

Regardless of the kinds of plants you choose, it makes sense to select 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, staking – or those that are unruly or messy due to their dropping leaves or sap. Definitely avoid plants labeled as aggressive or invasive, plants that take over the garden, crowding out all the others, and are impossible to kill!

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.

Remember this: Our property is our own personal stake in the great outdoors, a worthy investment to plan and create in such a way to bring joy, satisfaction and inspiration throughout the year and years; it will be an enduring contribution to our communities, serving as the legacy we leave for others, even beyond our lifetimes.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The home that people create today will survive them by many years. There’s no ADA or other federal mandate to require built-in flexibility or visitability. (See box.)

The significance of this is that every year in the US alone, many thousands more of these inaccessible properties become a permanent part of the landscape, adding to the already huge inventory of inaccessible homes, thus perpetuating inaccessibility for future generations. 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?* ▲

“**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 visitability 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 *Visitability: 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.

Photos by Bob Wigand