

## Front-Yard Fix



Here a capacious brick walkway is lined with a profusion of roses, yuccas, euphorbias and tulip 'Douglas Bader'. (PHOTO: CLIVE NICHOLS) from Country Living Magazine

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Give your home and yard the adornment they deserve

### Front-Yard Fix

A short drive through any town or city in America will on occasion reveal an essential fact: Many of our front-yard landscapes are boring. Rows upon rows of the same bland evergreens march across our facades, with nary an interesting flower or form in sight. What's worse, many of these plantings, with their dark, lugubrious massing, hide the very homes they were meant to adorn. Whether you're interested in quickly improving the appearance of your home, increasing your property's value or merely enhancing the streetscape you see daily, there is no more effective way to go about it than replacing that dreary foundation planting and transforming your front yard into a friendly, inviting garden space. Here are some guidelines to help get you started.

### Understand Your Site

How and what you can grow will depend entirely on your site conditions, requiring a design custom-tailored to fit your yard, not simply dropped into place. For instance: What direction does the planting face? (South-facing foundation plantings are often extremely hot and dry, baked by the adjacent foundation; north-facing ones, often plunged into deep, damp shade. Each requires specialized plant material.) How much sun does the area receive, and does it receive it uniformly? (Irregularities or indentations in the facade may cast odd shadows, creating differing microclimates.) What is the condition of the soil around the foundation? (Often bad, full of construction debris and quite alkaline owing to leaching from the concrete foundation.) Are there existing plantings that you need to match? (Echoing extant plantings is one way to blend newly landscaped areas into an overall design.) All these factors and more will determine what work needs to be done and what plants will thrive where. If you are unsure how to select proper plant material for the conditions you face, consult a local nursery.

### Enhance, Not Hide

Foundation plantings are meant to complement, not conceal, your home's architecture. Unless you live in a structure that is more than three stories tall or have a large, windowless wall to cover, you should avoid species that will grow much above the sills of the first-story windows. And do believe what you read on the plant label: If it says "X will reach 15 feet tall," it will, despite how cute and compact the plant appears at the moment. Chief culprits here are full-sized trees such as spruces, firs and pines, which are commonly and inexplicably included in foundation plantings but which invariably grow quickly out of scale.

## **Avoid Row Planting**

Another common mistake one sees is shrubbery lined up in a single row across the front of a house. The result, without exception, is prosaic. Instead, plant deep beds -- 10 to 15 feet is not excessive -- placing the tallest specimens at the rear and graduating to smaller material at the front, using plants in combinations of threes, fives and sevens, with an occasional single specimen for accent. Also, don't simply run the bed straight across the front of the house, ending precisely where the structure ends. Instead, pull the contours of the foundation planting around the front to link up with beds and borders on the sides of the house and at the edges of the property.

## **Consider Your Options**

### **Avoid Exclusive Use of Evergreens**

Too often you see foundation plantings that consist entirely of evergreens -- sometimes, in the worst examples, of just a single species. The yew is the plant most often misused in this way, but rhododendrons, azaleas and pines (and other conifers) are equally abused. Instead, create a mixed planting of year-round interest that consists of deciduous material as well as evergreens. Small or dwarf cultivars of flowering specimens like spirea, roses, lilacs, weigela and viburnums are all excellent additions to the foundation planting, as are plants like paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*, for its exfoliating bark), yellowtwig dogwood (*Cornus serica*, for its bright-yellow branches in winter) or golden mock orange (*Philadelphus coronarius* 'Aureus', for its golden leaves). Avoid green monotony and choose material with attractive foliage, shape, fragrance or flower. And don't forget that foundation plantings need not consist entirely of shrubs: Annuals and perennials make excellent additions to the foundation, especially when used in masses to dress the front of taller plantings. Not only do their flowers supply a dash of color, but their yearly rise and disappearance will also add a touch of welcome variety to your garden.

## **Consider Color When Choosing Plants for Your Yard**

Here are two that provide bloom as well as foliage. The golden leaves of *Philadelphus coronarius* 'Aureus' give way in early summer to a profusion of delicate white flowers with orange-blossom scent (whence its common name, mock orange). Zones 5-8. The polyantha *Rosa* 'The Fairy' offers pink buds that open to large clusters of tiny cupped rosettes from early summer to the first hard frost. Largely untroubled by pests, 'The Fairy' is low and spreading, making it an excellent ground cover. Zones 4-9.