



Shawnee County Extension Master Gardeners

Back Yard Demonstration Garden

Landscaping on a Slope

When considering landscaping your yard, a slope or hillside can be intimidating. Slopes can be difficult to walk and work on. The soil is usually thin and/or rocky. Steep hillsides also come with the risk of having soil and water run off and down the slope.

Hillsides do have advantages over a flat landscape especially when it comes to view. Layering of plants is more interesting and is almost guaranteed on a sloped surface. The change in rise also allows plantings to be showcased in an interesting way. Smaller plants get a closer look when viewed at eye level. Low, spreading plants create a sense of movement as they tumble downhill. Trees planted at the base of a hill, and viewed from higher ground, put you in the treetops.

The purpose of the Back Yard Garden is to demonstrate how to use various concepts to turn a slope—be it back yard, front yard, wherever—into an inviting, usable space. With some creative ideas, good planning, and hard work, a sloped garden can have a lot to offer.

Evaluating the Site

An evaluation of the site will help identify both the positive and negative aspects of the location. Taking pictures of the slope as it exists and documenting existing trees, plants, drainage issues and other characteristics will aid in planning the garden. Consider utility boxes or other structures that cannot be easily moved. Information regarding sunlight and shade, soil conditions, and access to water will be helpful in selecting plants for the garden.

Planning

Consider the purpose for the garden. Will you use it for relaxing, a place to entertain or dine, or just a view that you will enjoy every day from your house? Will it have a formal design or a more informal look? Will there be extensive stonework or water features? Will it incorporate any structures such as a deck or a private retreat area? Draw your plan incorporating anything from the site evaluation that will be kept.

Will you do the work yourself or will you contract it out? Cost and expertise will be factors in deciding whether to DIY or hire a contractor. Be sure you check to see if permits are required if you are considering any retaining walls, decks or other structures.

Maximizing a Sloped Space

Terracing: A slope presents several challenges, including soil erosion and lack of usable gardening space. Terracing resembles a wide staircase and allows you to have several level gardening beds on the hill. On a gentle slope, it may be feasible to create wide steps for planting without the need for retaining walls. The soil on a slope will usually need to be heavily amended prior to planting. Terraces allow for the flat areas to be amended creating planting pockets of good soil.

Retaining Walls: On a steeper slope, it will be necessary to build retaining walls to hold the soil in place. Retaining walls can create planting areas wide enough to work in and to hold the plants of your choice. There are many choices of materials for retaining walls. Stone walls provide a durable, attractive structure, while timbers achieve a more rustic style. The chosen material should look good with the style of house and coordinate with your other backyard garden ideas. In the Back Yard Garden, the west side has a more formal look because uniform stone blocks were used to build the retaining walls. The east side of the garden utilizes irregular, flat, stacked stones creating a more informal look.

Water Features: A sloped area provides ample opportunities for water features because of the natural tendency of water to flow downhill. Waterfalls, ponds, or streams are likely choices. There is a drainage pipe to handle runoff in the middle of the Back Yard Garden that cannot be removed. We have built a dry stream bed to carry the water from the pipe and inserted a drain to carry off most of the water to the side of the garden. A simple stream bed may be a DIY project, while more complicated waterfalls or a pond system may require professional assistance.

Plant Selection: Sun exposure, soil conditions, access to water and the degree of slope will have to be considered in selecting plants for your sloped garden. Plant selection will also depend on the size of area to be planted. Assess the planting site and determine what you want, considering plant character such as flowers, foliage height, color, or texture. A mixed planting of ornamental grasses, ground covers, shrubs, and trees, is the best strategy for slope stabilization and year-around interest. Then fill in with your favorite perennials and annuals for bright spots throughout the growing season. In the Back Yard Garden, we have utilized both shade and sun-loving plants. The trees, an Ivory Silk lilac tree and a Royal Raindrops crabapple tree, are both trees recommended for Kansas. We are also using native plants where feasible, and those that attract pollinators. If a watering system will not be installed in the garden, consider plants that are more drought tolerant.

References:

Purdue University-Indiana Yard and Garden. "Plants for Steep Slopes" by Rosie Lerner.

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