Color harmony with bedding plants

The end result should be as a living tapestry of pleasing, harmonizing colors and forms.

by James C. Schmidt

■ To successfully design a flower bed, you must be familiar with your plant materials. Evaluate the plants on the basis of their form, contrast, texture and color. Here are some considerations to help you plant a flower bed:

Form. The form of a flower is a basic element in designing a flower bed. The three major forms are spike, round (either individual or flower clusters) and intermediate. Spike flowers should be used as accents, similar to using pyramidal evergreens in the landscape. Used excessively, they become a disturbing force that breaks up the entire composition. Using no spike flowers runs the risk of monotony. Also, keep in mind the entire form of the plant. Some plants grow narrow and upright, others are mounded, and still others are low and sprawling.

Contrast. Contrast is using opposing elements close together to produce an intense or intriguing effect. Compositions with contrast get noticed. Many of the most striking gardens contain plants that look more dissimilar than alike. You can contrast textures, darks, lights, colors, shapes, lines...any design element. Flower forms and heights offer more opportunities for contrast.

Color. This is probably the most important consideration when designing bedding plant schemes. Color expresses individual tastes; no one can tell you which colors should dominate your compositions. The most important thing is that color should please the eye. A good guide for obtaining pleasing color combinations is a color wheel similar to what an artist uses. Red, yellow and blue are primary colors; orange, green and purple are secondary colors. A warm color is always opposite a cool color on the color wheel.

Warm colors are the boldest and tend to be strong in the landscape. They can be used to create vivid color combinations. As a general rule, you should use them in sequence. If space is ample, the sequence should be smooth and gradual, such as red to orange-yellow, to yellow, to cream and finally to white. A jump from red to orange, to yellow to white is too abrupt.

Combining colors—There is no rule of thumb for how much warm or how much cool color to use. But the smaller the area, the fewer warm colors you should use. Cool colors should be used in small areas as they give the illusion of depth.

Effective combinations can be made using complementary colors (those opposite on the color wheel). Orange and blue, yellow and violet, and red and green are complementary colors. Such compositions work best when one color is allowed to dominate the display and the other is used as an accent. Be careful with contrasting color schemes, because some of the combinations can be unpleasantly jarring. As a rule, avoid putting strong colors next to each other if the planting will be viewed at close range.

Other tips—Too often too much emphasis is placed on flowers. Pairing plants with non-green leaves, diverse variegation, glossy leaves, or blue tones ties a planting together and the assortment creates a mosaic backdrop that can enhance other flowers.

Don't spot a few flowers here and a few there. Group the plants in a staggered or irregular pattern that allows the mass of one plant to overlap or drift into the adjoining group.

This technique also eliminates the spottiness typical of many flower beds. Also, limit the number of varieties. This keeps the drifts simple but bold, and the border will have a strong visual framework that shows up from a distance.

Too many small drifts make the pattern too "busy," like a patchwork quilt.

By the same token, don't use many colors of the same variety. This will also result in a patchwork look.

View your arrangements from a distance, or consider how the planting will be
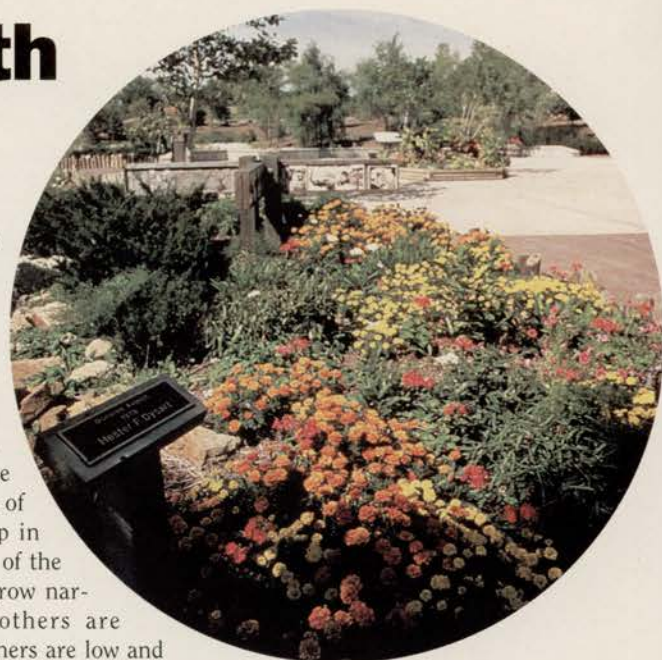
Color guide

❏ Use the darkest shades or the pure intense color at a point of principle interest.

❏ Never place two reds close together.

❏ Never use two strong colors together except for blue and yellow.

❏ Pastels are easy to blend but they lack vitality and won't show up from a distance. Dark colors won't show up either.

❏ Blue and white flowers are good colors to emphasize the color of other flowers. Using white as a contract color deepens and strengthens the color(s) next to it.

❏ In general, avoid using bi-colors. Flowers in solid colors will usually produce a more sophisticated look and are easier to work with. It takes time to become aware of the subtleties of flower color and to become familiar with varieties that can supply the tints and shades you want. Although there's no substitute for experience when it comes to combining colors, your own taste will always be your best guide. Don't be afraid to experiment.

Eye-catching combinations

- Purple or violet petunias/yellow marigolds
- Lavender petunias/blue salvia/clear yellow French marigolds/dusty miller
- Blue salvia/Cosmos suphureus
- Red salvia/white petunias
- Deep purple petunias/bright white fibrous begonias
- A rainbow of impatiens, one color fading into the next
- Pink fibrous begonias/dusty miller
- Red or salmon geraniums/dusty miller
- Yellow marigolds/purple alyssum
- Mixed blue, pink and white petunias/white sweet alyssum
- Cleome/white and pink petunias

seen. If it is most likely to be viewed up close by pedestrians, then an intricate pattern may be right. The same design may be "lost" by people driving by at 40 mph.

When viewed as an entire design, it should stimulate—by using warm and contrasting colors—or appear restful and soothing—by using cool, harmonious colors.

Remember that you need a large mass of cool color to catch the eye, and a smaller mass of a hot color.

There is no limit to the size of the beds. Truth is, they don't need to be large to be effective. Rely on the interplay of colors and shapes rather than the expanse of the display.

—James C. Schmidt is with the Department of Horticulture, University of Illinois.

The value of trees in your landscapes

by James E. Guyette,
Contributing Editor

■ Retaining existing trees at a construction site can bring added value to a developer's plans. But a builder may not be immediately aware of that opportunity—and mostly it's up to landscape managers and tree care operators to point out the advantages.

"Most people don't have the expertise to approach developers to convince them to spend money on saving trees," says Randy Christian, an arborist and landscape designer at JTO in Mentor, Ohio.

"It's really an inconsequential amount of money" involved, says Christian. The extra cost of saving trees, he says, often amounts to only one percent of a project's total budget. Yet having trees on a property can increase its selling value by dollar figures ranging from 10 percent to close to 30 percent, depending on location.

According to the National Association of Home Builders, developers and builders can get a premium of $3,000 to $15,000 per lot, depending on the type of trees involved and whether there are other wooded lots in the area.

And it's much cheaper to keep existing trees than to purchase new ones for planting as a site. "The more trees you save, the fewer you have to buy," Christian observes.

When talking trees to a developer, "image is the best selling point," says Christian. "They'd better have something to bring people in." Public acceptance of this type of curb appeal continues to increase, and developers can see that reflected in money figures.

"Once the developer sees the benefits, the others [engineers and others on the project's planning staff] will be included," says Christian. "You have to get the subcontractors involved, too.

An educated tree care operator is best suited to point out why it's important to save existing trees. "The developers are not aware of the services we can supply," Christian says.

Tree care operators can handle everything from mulching, fertilization and watering to supervising protection techniques during construction. This can mean long-range benefits for the savvy developer.

"It's a huge advantage when a developer can take a client through a development he did eight or 10 years ago and the trees are still standing," Christian explains. "Then he [or she] can take them through

Existing trees can make a development look much sharper.

another [competing] development where the trees are all dead or dying."

When sizing up a potential wooded site for a developer, it's important to see the big picture, according to Christian. "I'm not a tree-hugger. I don't try to save every tree. In a particular situation, you may save one tree, but mostly you want to save groups of trees. I try to get involved before the engineering is done, and get the engineer to walk the site with me."