1 Mixed Planting Basics

THE STRENGTH OF A MIXED PLANTING is its ability to extend the beauty of the composition from one season to the next, so that winter and spring can be as beautiful as high summer. By layering plants it is possible for one plant to, essentially, take over for another, creating varying interest in the same spot throughout the year to reflect the uniqueness of each season. The objective is to create a *succession* of *interest* from *foliage*, *form*, or *flowers*—the three F's—whose characteristics will change with the seasons.

Mixed plantings never use plants in isolation. Rather, plants are always chosen for their ability to be "good neighbors"—how well they coordinate with the color, texture, and form of others. Each plant does, however, maintain its own individual character. In successful mixed plantings there is always a balance between the plants as a grouping and each plant as a specific point of interest.

Mixing and Matching

In designing mixed plantings, the goal is to interweave a variety of plant types to get the best value and visual impact out of the available planting area over the longest period of time. We are striving to create plantings that display a wide range of textural, color, and seasonal effects that continually evolve in appearance throughout the year (see color plates, Figure 1.1). Thus, a mixed planting generally will contain an eclectic mix of vegetative and floral types assembled in varying degrees and percentages. A mixed planting might combine, for example, small trees, shrubs, evergreens, grasses, perennials, bulbs, climbers, annuals, and tropicals to maximize and extend the visual impact throughout the seasons. Clearly, no single plant type can achieve this.

But it is not just the variety of plant types that make mixed plantings so visually interesting—it is the evolution of the characteristics of the individual plants throughout their seasons of growth. So, seasonal layering of these various characteristics also can serve to extend interest throughout the season. It is the progression of time, coupled with an emphasis on the seasonality of the plantings, that provides the magic. As one plant characteristic fades, another blossoms; one plant dominates in one season, then fades into the background in the next. The challenge of creating successful mixed plantings is to first capture, then maximize, the power of that phenomenon. This challenge is what separates planting design from all other design media.

SUCCESSIONAL GROWTH

As noted above, a primary objective of mixed planting design is to ensure ongoing interest in the planting area. *Successional growth* refers to the pairing of plants in a sequence so that as one plant fades a neighbor is just entering into its prime. Timing is of the essence here: The growth sequence must be carefully programmed. And this applies not only to flowering plants but to any principle aesthetic function that is expected of a plant. Needless to say, accomplishing this would be easy if we focused on a single time of year, in particular late spring and mid- to late-summer, when most of the commonly known plants are in high bloom and everything is contributing to peak performance. But remember, the point of a successful mixed planting is to reach peak performance levels of various plants 365 days a year. To ensure the aesthetic objectives of the mixed-bed planting style are met requires a designer to have:

- Knowledge of plants and their characteristics
- An understanding of climatic conditions
- Being informed on the capabilities of the stewards of the landscape
- Grasp of the clients' objectives or goals of the project
- Horticultural awareness of existing cultural conditions
- Keen understanding of the basic principles of design and composition

Understanding the context and objective for the mixed planting in the landscape will better enable the designer to create mixed plantings that meet the requirements of all involved—least to say the plants.

Evolution of a Planting Style

EARLY MIXED-BED PRINCIPLES: WILLIAM ROBINSON

The concept of mixed plantings is not new. Some of the earliest principles on mixed-bed plantings were espoused by gardener and journalist William Robinson (1838–1935) in his book *The English Flower Garden*, first published in 1883. In it, he specified a variety of methods to combine shrubbery with perennial and ground-cover plants. Robinson suggested that mixed plantings are best created "in naturally disposed groups, never repeating the same plant along the border at intervals." He further recommended, "Do not graduate the plants in height from front to back . . . but sometimes let a bold plant come to the edge; and, on the other hand, let

a little carpet of a dwarf plant pass in here and there to the back, as to give a varied instead of a monotonous surface." His philosophies were considered revolutionary at the time, when formal interpretations of Italian and Dutch gardens were in vogue and the bedding-out of annuals was the dominant form of planting with flowers.

GERTRUDE JEKYLL AT MUNSTEAD WOOD

Similarly, Gertude Jekyll (1843–1932), who experimented at her home at Munstead Wood in England in the late 1890s, employed mixed planting techniques " . . . where the copse and garden meet." There, natural stands of birch were thinned and supported with carefully placed groups of rhododendrons, to form the backdrop for drifts of ferns, hosta, and dicentra. It was here that she began to lay the foundation for her now-famous design principles. Thin strips, irregular patches, and drifts (massings) of individual plant types characterized her plantings (see Figure 1.2). Massings were interwoven so that their "tail" disappeared as it moved into the neighboring drift. Specimen plants were located at strategic points to add an element of excitement and to serve as points of emphasis. The concept of the repetitive flow of these drifts revolutionized the philosophy of planting design. But Jekyll's predominant focus was on greater percentages of perennials—mainly to achieve desired color effects.

CHRISTOPHER LLOYD AND GREAT DIXTER

More recently, Christopher Lloyd (1921–2006) evolved a modern interpretation of mixed plantings at his home and garden, Great Dixter, in south England (see Figure 1.3). More than six decades of experimenting led to his philosophy of succession, with mixed plantings at the core. Christo, as he was affectionately called by friends, together with his head gardener, Fergus Garrett, took the high art of the mixed planting to an extreme. They believed that the secret to creating captivating and ever-changing displays is in the extensive use of hardy and tender perennials, as well as bulbs, annuals, and biennials to supplement seasonal color displays. These plants are all added to beds where more permanent anchor plants have been carefully located. As such: perennials are permitted to lean on shrubs; bulbs are planted to punch through annuals; vines are encouraged to climb small trees; tenders are placed in voids;

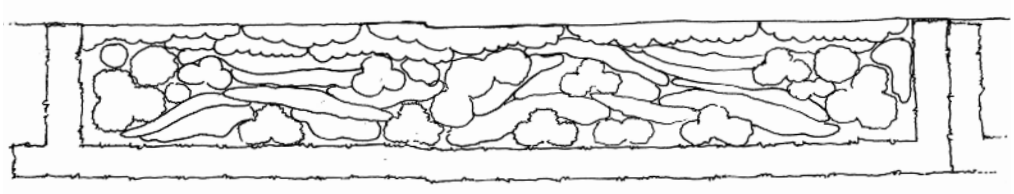

Figure 1.2. A border plan developed by Gertrude Jekyll, showing the irregular drifting of plant masses.

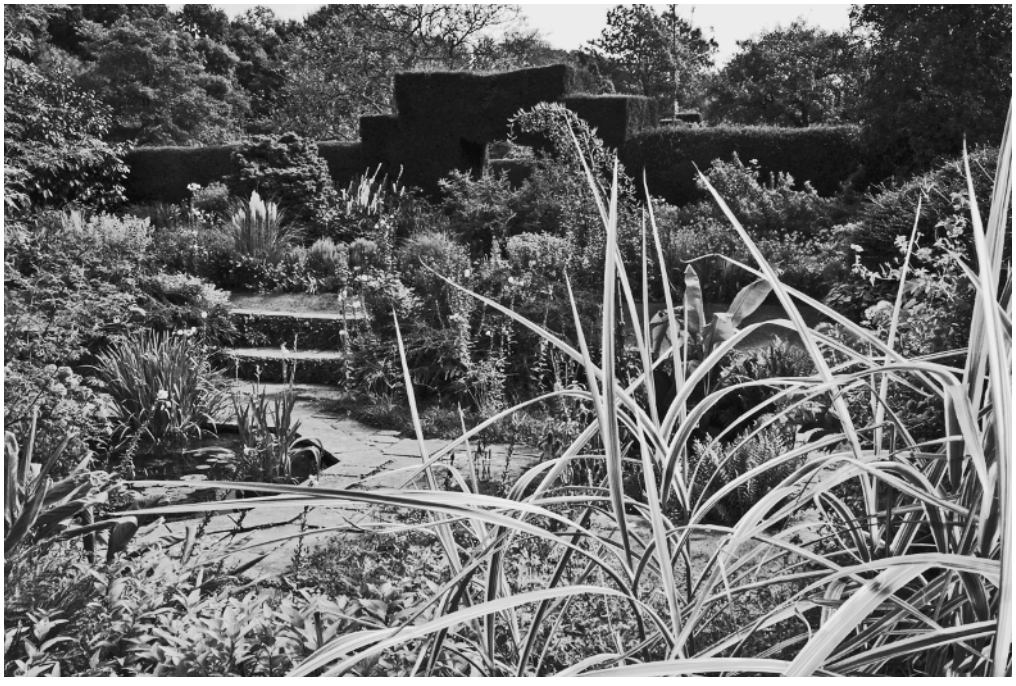

Figure 1.3
The sunken garden at Great Dixter in England illustrates the extreme in mixed-bed compositions.

tropicals are interspersed throughout; and self-seeders, selectively edited, are permitted to remain where they sprout. This is mixed planting design and gardening at its pinnacle.

At Great Dixter, mixed planting is an adjunct to good gardening. It requires careful observation over time, to meticulously scrutinize individual plants as well as collective performance. Every plant type imaginable to the modern gardener has been used liberally. The result: a revolving display of a variety of plant characteristics all year long. Christo said the objective "is to keep the show going for as long as possible, with one highlight immediately succeeded by another." The garden never looks the same. This style, of course, requires a very intensive gardening regime, backed by deep horticultural knowledge and a very high level of maintenance, which most landscape managers and gardeners do not have the time or expertise to sustain over time.

CHANTICLEER AND THE NATIONAL SCULPTURE GARDEN

Other interpretations of mixed plantings can be seen in varying degrees of complexity and with alternating percentages of plant types at Chanticleer, a public garden outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Gardener and horticulturist Dan Benarcik relies heavily on the use of tropicals and annuals in one area of the temperate climate garden (see color plates, Figures 1.4 a

and b). Seasonal plantings garner support from permanent Zone 6 plantings, which include flowering trees, small and cut-back shrubs, and perennials. The garden's framework is founded on regionally hardy plantings, but the overall composition is enhanced with tropicals, annuals, cacti, and succulents. This, too, is an intensive way of gardening.

In contrast, the plantings at the National Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., designed by the landscape architectural office of the Olin Partnership in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, use more permanent plantings that consist of massings of perennials, shrubs, and ground covers. To add focal points of interest, specimen flowering and evergreen trees are interspersed throughout. The trees, aside from the bed edges, give structure and help to form spaces. The infill mix of hardy perennials, shrubs, and ground covers represent planting types better suited for larger, more public landscapes. These generally require less maintenance than the previous garden examples illustrate. The plantings at the National Sculpture Garden illustrate that mixed plantings can be successful when only a few plant types are used in large masses. It also demonstrates that the selection of plant species, cultivars, and varieties are paramount to success, for the plants here are all superior cultivars of hardy species that have exceptional ornamental characteristics. Many have extended or longer-than-average flower periods; bold foliage, texture, or foliage color; and a variety of characteristics that change the appearance of the plant as the growing season progresses (see Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.5
A mixed composition at the National Sculpture Garden planted with large blocks of hardy species of perennials, shrubs, and trees.

Mixed-bed plantings can thus vary in their degree of complexity, from a few plant types interwoven with bold massings to a menagerie of choreographed plants. The more types of plants that compose the mix, the greater the design and horticultural skill will be required to achieve the desired successional effect. Additionally, an appropriate level of maintenance will be necessary to ensure that the design intent will be sustained over time. A mixed planting that is overly designed for the level of maintenance it will receive can rapidly deteriorate into a jumbled mess. In summary, the mix and number of plant types used must be appropriate to both the planting area and maintenance available.

The Theory Behind Mixed Plantings: The Role of Dynamism and Diversity

Too often, mass expanses of monotonous ground covers or evergreens are used unimaginatively in the landscape; when sheared by untrained gardeners they become nothing more than dreary colonies of junipers, forsythia, or azaleas. In such compositions, typically "fallback" plants have been selected—those most durable and most commonly known to the less experienced or knowledgeable designer—generally due to the misconception that plants with special or unique seasonal characteristics are difficult to grow or maintain.

Though it is true that many plants fit into the category of high-maintenance—requiring deadheading, cutting back, pruning, dividing, etc.—there are just as many plants whose unique attributes need minimal horticultural attention. Certainly, the level of maintenance that will be available for a particular landscape must be a consideration when choosing which plant types to use and the extent of planting for each type. This should not be an excuse, however, to limit the use of a *diverse* range of available plants. It is possible, even when using masses of evergreen and deciduous plants, to vary the aesthetic by adding herbaceous plants and providing accent with ornamental grasses and spring and summer-flowering bulbs. These plants will add a softer, more colorful, and seasonal dimension to an otherwise uninteresting composition.

The ephemeral qualities of plants should serve as the philosophical pretext behind the mixed plantings we design. Designers should cultivate and capitalize on an appreciation for each plant as it progresses through its life stages during the seasons. In short, we must strive to capture and present the best in each plant. Understanding how a plant evolves over time, both as an individual and in relation to other plants, is critical component to succeeding at succession. This can only be accomplished by the judicious selection of superior plants to support, complement, and emphasize one another as they progress from one season to the

next. Trees, shrubs, climbers, ground covers, perennials, grasses, bulbs, tropicals, and annuals all can be combined at different levels to create rich and interesting mixed plantings. It is plant diversity working in a cohesive manner that contributes to a beautiful and memorable experience in the mixed planting composition.

It is also essential to take advantage of the *dynamism* of plants. They change color, texture, opaqueness, and overall character, often within one season's growth. The crux of good planting design lies in the ability to work with this aspect and exploit it to the fullest. It is these dynamic qualities that enable us to create the aesthetic we are looking for. But we must pay particular attention to the growth of plants—specifically, how they develop, change, and evolve over time.

Of course, the dynamism of plants also makes them more challenging to use effectively, whether because of the brevity of the blossom on one, for example, or the dramatic alteration in appearance of another over the course of the season. As designers, we must be concerned not only with how plants will appear and function at their peak, but also the role they will play throughout the remainder of the year; we must learn how to choose, place, and overlap plants based on seasonal attributes. These are some of the issues we will explore throughout the course of the book.

Our goal is to properly design a mixed planting so that it provides a strikingly different appearance as plants emerge, leaf out, bloom, transition into fall, and lie dormant in winter. We must choose and place each plant to have a particular effect—whether en masse or as individual specimens—based on their ability to play an appropriate role in a particular season or series of seasons. It may be a plant's shape or the berries it produces, or its seed heads, bark, flowers, leaf color or texture, or fall color or winter interest that dictates how we place each plant within the overall composition to function as part of a collective scene or to provide accent as an individual or group of individuals. In summary, proper mixed plantings should provide:

Visual interest The planting composition should be engaging and hold the attention of the observer. The variation of the plants' height, depth, texture, and color are combined to stimulate the senses. Care must be taken not overwhelm, to create a menagerie of individuals. Rather, a core framework must be established to "hold plantings," such as theme plants or massings of evergreens. These massings should then be intertwined with a variety of plant types to become a living tapestry of textures and colors.

Seasonal variety Plantings should vary in appearance over time and change with the seasons. Continually evolving sequences of floral and foliar events should take place one after the other. This need not require vast numbers of individual changes, but rather a continual evolution of change through the year.

Support to neighboring plants All plants have a "downtime," so it is essential to have a basic framework to serve as a backdrop or setting against which adjacent plantings can "rise and fall," to display their best seasonal attributes throughout the growing season. Careful placement of "friendly neighbors" will either complement other plants during their bloom time or will take over for them as they fade.

Throughout the course of this book we will examine how a variety of plants can be combined to create interesting effects throughout the seasons, and how levels of different plant types and varieties can be accommodated without sacrificing durability.

Making the Most of the Mix

Creating mixed plantings is a sophisticated form of planting design that, as stated previously, requires both a comprehensive understanding of design and thorough knowledge of plants. To be successful at this form of design, we must keep in mind that, with few exceptions, plants have a number of seasonal attributes, not just one brief period of "show," and that the exceptions should be reserved to function as structural plants for the composition.

Using plants with multiple seasons of interest also enables us to maximize the square footage of bed space we have to work with, which is very important to creating a successful mixed planting. When we select plants with multiple attributes, we can extend the period of visual excitement. The plants we choose must have a sustained length of performance, so we must leave behind plants that normally bloom for a seven- to ten-day period in favor of new and improved cultivars that bloom for fourteen- to twenty-day periods. We must also be sure to include in the composition plants that have beautiful flowers, bold and colorful foliage, strong form, and attractive seed heads or berries.

But choosing plants that look good is only the beginning. Behind any good design is solid horticulture, meaning that the plants look and are as healthy. That requires meeting the plants' cultural requirement for soil composition, moisture, and nutrient content. While it is not uncommon to modify some of these conditions, over the long term the plants will be better served if the existing conditions form the basis for the selection of plants.

Although we have been talking a lot about choosing the right plants in a mixed planting design, it is in fact the last step in the design process and will be detailed in later chapters. In preparation, we first need to delve into the other functions of plants, beyond creating beauty for ornamental value or art's sake.

The Role of Plant Functionality in Design

Many, perhaps most, of the functions that plants serve have a practical purpose as well as an aesthetic one. For example, some serve as physical barriers to control pedestrian traffic, or to minimize glare and screen objectionable views; others help to prevent soil erosion. In short, plants play a functional role in the landscape to improve our environment and to protect and support the functions of nature.

When designed well, a planting composition is an expression of the function and the needs of both the site and the users. Depending on whether the site is in a natural setting, on private property, in an intensively used landscape, or in an urban center, the uses will vary from site to site and client to client, and may include domestic activities, play, work, study or contemplation, and active or passive recreation. One thing they have in common: All require a functional and aesthetic environment that responds to the individual site and accommodates the purpose. It must provide, among other elements, the right amount of open space for the intended use, the right microclimate (e.g., shade or sun), and the right aesthetic character.

As designers, we must train our eyes and minds to view all landscapes pragmatically; from this vantage point, we will see that most landscapes are poorly designed and even more poorly maintained. Too often, planting design is done by nonprofessionals, whose love for plants may be genuine but whose understanding of design and knowledge of horticulture are sorely lacking. That is why we see plants located where they will grow too large for the space they occupy and crowd sidewalks or hide buildings, or plants that block or interfere with attractive views, block critical sight lines, or break up areas of usable space. Ultimately the plants in these instances become disfigured, unattractive, and a nuisance—and lead to increased maintenance costs or are a safety hazard.

Mixed Planting Bed Functions

The most successful use of plants comes when we, as designers, fully understand both the artistic and the functional value that plants can add to the project. This comes from asking questions such as:

- Do we fully understand the habitat where the plants will be placed?
- How will people use and participate in the landscape?
- What will be the planting and construction process?

- What level of maintenance can and will be provided? Are the assigned stewards capable of effectively maintaining the plantings?

These questions should make clear that mixed planting beds are part of a comprehensively planned landscape; they are not, generally, stand-alone features. Typically, this principle is not emphasized strongly enough, frequently designers and gardeners think that design is only about plant combinations. The form that a mixed planting bed can take will be as variable as the plants available to fill it. Likewise, the function will vary, depending on the role it plays in the overall landscape.

The intensity of the plantings within the particular mixed bed will depend on the purpose of the bed and the level of maintenance available to maintain it. For example, a mixed planting designed as a focal point in an overall garden composition will have significantly more varieties of plant types, texture, and color than would, say, a mixed planting intended as a backdrop for a sculpture. A rule of thumb is that the more impact a bed will need to make in the garden or landscape, the more diverse the plantings within the bed should be.

By understanding the possible roles mixed planting compositions can serve in the overall landscape, we will learn to use plants to their fullest potential. The purpose of plants, whether used individually or in groups, falls into three categories: *architectural*, *aesthetic*, or *functional*.

Here are some of the ways mixed plantings can be used to carry out those purposes:

As an artistic composition Here the designer or gardener can express his or her creativity through the use of plants. Beds created as an artistic composition are usually located in high-visibility zones or impact areas within an overall landscape or specific garden setting set aside for this purpose (see color plates, Figure 1.6). Located in a garden compartment or room these intensively gardened areas are created for the sole purpose of artistic expression; they are meant to be visual showpieces. Generally, they are labors of love and are intended to be intensively gardened—modified and refined over time.

As focal points These are small areas or zones located in the larger landscape at special points of interest. They are specifically designed to be an attraction as a point in space or to highlight an element or object—a piece of sculpture, an entrance to a building or special garden area—or to be an element itself. Focal points tend to be highlights of a garden or landscape and are generally more intensively planted with a greater variety of plant types than surrounding areas (see color plates, Figures 1.7 a and b).

For spatial organization This is a fundamental principle used to create enclosure in the landscape. Mixed plantings can be used as a form of garden "architecture" to create outdoor "rooms." Walls, ceilings, and floors can all be created by the judicious use of plant material.

The creation of space in this way is dependent on the actual or implied enclosure, and can be accomplished by modifying the vertical, overhead, or ground planes. Plants can be used to imply spatial definition through variations in height and material types (e.g., tree canopies, low vs. high shrubs, etc.). Plus, bed edges can suggest limits of space that can be further reinforced by the plantings contained within them (see color plates, Figure 1.8).

As buffer plantings Buffer plantings create, define, and screen edges. Visual barriers or buffer plantings can be created to screen objectionable views or direct the viewer toward a more desirable "framed" view. As such, buffer plantings are designed to accomplish functional objectives in an overall planting scheme. But a buffer's functional use can also become an aesthetic amenity by using a variety of plant materials with various colors, textures, and shapes (see color plates, Figure 1.9).

As backdrop plantings Used as a backdrop, plantings provide a visual foil between two areas to create a setting for an object or to stage a space for a foreground use of special interest. For this purpose, plants should be selected to minimize the potential visual competition between the foreground, the point of emphasis, and the background. Thus, the background mixed planting should have a relatively even color and texture and a minimal variety of plant types (see Figure 1.10).

Mixed Planting Bed Types

The size, shape, location, and purpose of a mixed planting bed is one of the first things you must consider when you are planning a garden or landscape. It is here where all of the plantings will be located. In most instances, however, the beds are not just places to put plants; they also perform a variety of functions that give shape and character to an overall landscape. We will discuss bed layout principles more in Chapter 6, page 125.

In addition to understanding the artistic and functional value of plants in a mixed-bed setting, we, as designers, need to familiarize ourselves with the roles of various mixed planting bed types, so that we may put them to their best use. These types include: borders, landscape beds, feature beds, islands, and edge or screen beds, which are discussed in turn.

BORDERS

Traditionally one of the most common types of mixed bed, borders were first popularized in England in the late twentieth century and they continue to be a favorite form today. Border beds tend to be rectangular and usually follow the lines of a hedge or a wall. The depth of the

Figure 1.10
This low mixed planting provides a backdrop for the sculpture at the National Sculpture Garden.

bed is consistent along the entire length and can range from between three to twelve feet, though the exact measure will be based on the space available and the intent of the overall design.

Narrower borders limit the amount of planting types due to the restriction of allowable planting depth. Therefore, predominantly small shrubs, smaller perennials, small grasses, ground covers, bulbs, and small annual plants are appropriate for narrow borders. As the depth of the border increases so, too, does the possibility for greater variety in the plantings and, consequently, a more diverse effect. Additional types of plant materials can be added. The greater the depth of the border, the greater height can be achieved, as the two are generally related to one another.

Border plantings are linear elements, and as such will generally lead the eye to a terminal point, even when the plantings within the overall composition are highly varied. By their very nature, linear plantings have a somewhat specialized and narrow purpose within a design. A border, as the name implies, is best suited for edges or long narrow planting areas, such as space perimeters, foundation bases, walls, fences, or hedges. In these areas, a border provides a transition between the horizontal and vertical planes and functions best when the movement desired is from one end of the garden to the other. The pace at which the observer traverses the space will depend on the intensity of the border plantings; for example, a very

intense array will slow the pace by providing an array of colors, textures, and visual depth and height, to maintain interest (see color plates, Figure 1.11).

LANDSCAPE BEDS

Landscape beds, considered the general "workhorse" planting element, are the most commonly found in our landscapes and gardens. They are used to create spaces, soften architecture, direct movement either visually or physically, emphasize, or contain. Their design objectives are both functional and aesthetic. Landscape beds also can provide links to various site elements, effectively tying the garden or landscape together. They are planted to provide general enhancement of routes of passage through space. Sequential opening or closing, and increasing or decreasing the height, density, and width of the planting, can add richness to a landscape. Very flexible design elements, landscape beds can be effective as foundation plantings or as part of a larger garden plan; they can provide edge definition or buffering, or simply provide spaces for ornamental plantings (see color plates, Figure 1.12).

FEATURE BEDS

Historically, feature beds were component parts of larger specialized gardens, usually located within a framework of architecture (e.g., walls, courtyards, building massings), or central to spaces or "rooms" created by other landscape beds. These beds are generally focal points in a particular type of garden and so are often themed with a certain color or planting style. Feature beds can be both island plantings or linked to backdrop planting beds, which usually form the structure or framework of a particular garden. Feature bed plantings are usually dominant to the surrounding plantings (see color plates, Figure 1.13).

ISLANDS

Islands are freestanding beds that are either surrounded by lawn or hard-paved surfaces. There are no backdrops to island plantings, making them visible from all sides. Islands are often used to break up larger expanses of lawn, creating smaller areas of interest. Island plantings can link disparate elements of a landscape, such as irregularly located groupings of existing trees, or associate architectural elements such as outbuildings or structures together.

Island beds should be developed with consideration to the scale of the larger landscape. The size of the island should be in proportion to its surroundings. Care must be also given to the size and type of the plants chosen for use inside the island. The overall size of the island bed itself will dictate the criteria for the selection of the plants. The shape of islands can vary, but should follow the style or theme of the surrounding bed types (see color plates, Figure

1.14). Organic shapes tend to work best in larger gardens or open spaces, while formal geometric shapes function best in smaller spaces or those contained by a larger formal shape (see color plates, Figure 1.15).

EDGE OR SCREEN BEDS

Edge or screen beds are those that buffer landscape and garden areas from adjacent properties or garden areas that are considered unattractive in a viewshed, or are otherwise undesirable. Created for utilitarian purposes, screen beds provide a welcome opportunity to create visual excitement in what are normally rows of dreary evergreen plantings. Edge plantings can also create architectural spaces within a garden.

The extent to which these beds are developed into mixed plantings depends on the intended use of and objective for the space where they will be planted. Care should be exercised not to create a too-highly ornamented planting at the edges and distract from the main focal point of the garden. Thus, the level or amount of planting types will need to be minimized so that the purpose of the space is not overridden by the edge. That said, there are situations where the edge of a property will need definition. Screen beds in such cases offer an opportunity to incorporate mixed plantings as a method of presenting variety and generating excitement. This makes for a much more interesting planting than one comprising only evergreens, trees, and shrubs (see color plates, Figure 1.9).

Cultural and Maintenance Considerations as Part of the Design Process

Before we can begin to design a mixed planting, it is critical to understand the level of horticultural care that the composition will require as a whole, as well as from an individual species and plant variety viewpoint. Simply put, the success or failure of the entire composition depends on it. Proper plant selection and plant maintenance begin with in-depth knowledge of a site's cultural conditions.

Soil types and mechanical composition (sand, silt, clay percentage), mineral and nutrient content, soil moisture, and exposure to sun and wind are all horticultural factors that will affect plant performance. Deep and fertile soils afford endless design opportunities for a wide range of plants, whereas infertile soils (usually light and thin) lose moisture and nutrients quickly, making for a very challenging growing environment. Sandy soils lose water quickly, while clayey soils hold on to water for long periods. Exposure to sun and shade will further

narrow the selection of plants. Fortunately for designers, the types of plants that can be used in each of these distinct conditions have been well documented.

Once we understand the cultural aspect of planting design, we can then turn our attention to the composition of planting types. The composition will, in part, determine the level of maintenance required. Generally speaking, the more plant types we include the greater the maintenance level and skill required. As stated previously, evergreens, shrubs, and ground covers are the most common planting types used for simple mixed-bed plantings because they typically require little maintenance. By selecting such durable plant types our designs will need the least amount of upkeep and have the best chance of success. Add more plant types to the mix (perennials, grasses, annuals, etc.) and the equation becomes more complex, thus increasing the effort and skill required to maintain such plantings. Another complicating factor is that within any one set of plant types are select groups of species and cultivars that are more durable than others. For example, the iris, daylily, and peony are all perennials that have proven to be quite durable. These plants return year after year with little care. Among durable shrubs that require little attention once they have established are, for example, the juniper, fothergilla, and clethera.

Clearly, the composition of our plantings—the amount of plant types (shrubs, perennials, grasses, etc.) as well as specific species and cultivars within each plant type—is strongly correlated to the level of attention and care the mixed planting will receive. For inexperienced gardeners or for those unable to ensure a high level of care, the general guideline is to minimize the diversity of the planting types and to choose durable and relatively carefree plants. Conversely, when the desire, knowledge, and resources all are available to provide the care required to maintain a mixed planting, the design possibilities are limited only by our imaginations.

The point here is, being aware of the species of plants within each category that require low, moderate, and high levels of maintenance will aid in your ability to properly select the plants that match the level of skill and attention required to sustain your mixed planting design over time. We will discuss the various types of maintenance that may be necessary in Chapter 9, page 237.

Moving on with the Planting Design Process

William R. Nelson, Professor Emeritus of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, said of the planting design process in his book *Planting Design: A Manual of Theory and Practice* (1985), "Planting design is a sequence of steps a designer

must fully understand and be able to apply in any landscape setting. The process involves a purposeful integration of specific principles with orderly procedures to assure satisfying results. The successful integration of principles with procedures distinguishes one planting design as an art form from another that is haphazard, disorganized, and confused."

Planting design is fundamentally an analytical process, one that requires us to be both objective (when we will use our training and knowledge) and subjective (when we will be informed by our life experiences, natural artistic inclinations, and skills of observation). Making decisions during the planting design process is as much about feeling as it is about knowing; we will need to learn to switch between the right side of the brain and the left side.

Every process, especially those that rely heavily on the interpretation of design principles and application of creative thought, is open to modification. The design process described in this book for developing mixed planting designs is very linear and organized, but once mastered it can be altered and adjusted to suit the individual designer and project. This is normal for most creative processes. The key words here are "once mastered." Initially, it is best to follow the design process as described, as closely as possible. Only after you gain experience should you begin to deviate from it. In most cases, as you gain confidence in your abilities, the process will evolve naturally to serve as a general guide or direction for you to follow. In the next chapter, we begin the process by learning more about the concept of succession.