

Plant Combinations for Dummies

Dave Stockdale

Dave Stockdale is Director of the San Antonio Botanical Garden. He has traveled throughout the world photographing gardens and leading garden tours. Prior to accepting the position of Director of the San Antonio Botanical Garden, he was the education director for the University of Washington Center for Urban Horticulture at the Washington Park Arboretum. For more information about the Botanical Garden, visit www.sabot.org



Creating attractive and functional combinations of plants in your home garden is possible even for beginners. First, recognize and appreciate the beauty and differences in three distinct characteristics of your plants: **form**, **texture** and **color**.

Plant form refers to the plant's shape. Some are rounded, others are conical like a Christmas tree, some are low and wide-spreading, etc. Similarly, flowers come in a variety of shapes. Some are bell-shaped, while others are shaped like pinwheels or daisies. And of course, some are single flowers on long stems like sunflowers, while others appear together in large clusters, such as wisteria.

Texture refers not to the actual feel of the plant, but rather to the visual "feel" created by the size and spacing of the leaves on the plant. Plants like elephant ears with large leaves would be considered to have a coarse texture. Plants with smaller leaves, like nandina or Indian hawthorne, have a medium texture. Plants with tiny leaves held closely together, like a dwarf yaupon holly or cenizo, have a fine texture.

Color is the most obvious characteristic of all. We often prefer a certain plant because it has flowers that are our favorite color. Sometimes you hear people talk about hot colors and cool colors. **Hot colors**, like bright red, yellow or orange, show up more easily in our often sunny landscapes. Blue, pink and various pastel shades often appear very faint or even washed-out in our summer sun, and are referred to as **cool colors**. Remember your color wheel? Complimentary colors are located beside each other on the wheel (like green and blue) and are easy to combine together to create harmony. Contrasting colors (like green and red) are on opposite sides of the color wheel and result in more exciting visual presentations when combined. But remember to think beyond flower color when arranging trees, shrubs, ground covers, and even many perennials. Except for annual flowers which we plant seasonally, most of our landscape plants only bloom for short periods of time, so the color their foliage becomes an important player in the landscape design. As a review, when working with color combinations, basic options include a **monochromatic** color scheme (such as all orange flowers amid the green foliage); **harmonizing** color scheme (such as red, orange and yellow flowers with deep green and bronze foliage); or **contrasting** color scheme (like orange and blue flowers with green and gray foliage).

Keeping the different characteristics such as form, texture and color in mind, it is possible to create many different effects in your garden. **Formal gardens** are very balanced and regimented, so to create a formal feel you would want to combine plants with similar forms and colors, while perhaps not having a great diversity of plants in the mix. To create an **informal** feel, you would want to mix plants of different forms, textures and colors. However, avoid the "one of each" syndrome; if you select many different plants, try repeating a few of the plants in the design to create connections and continuity.

When you are planning your landscape or container garden, remember to avoid maintenance problems. If you are planting in a sunny space, make sure all the plants can survive those sunny conditions. Similarly, don't combine high water-use plants with very low water-use plants, or watering correctly becomes all most impossible.

Also, consider how plants grow and change over time. That one-foot tall shrub you plant today may be 6-feet tall and wide in 3 years, so plan your spacing accordingly. An area with just herbaceous or deciduous plants that all lose their leaves or die down in the fall may result in large blank areas during the winter months. Plan to add in winter annuals to fill in the gaps, or mix in evergreen shrubs and ground covers if you want a plant combination that will have interest year-round.

Finally, just keep experimenting. Create different combinations of plants until you find those that interest you. Adjust plant and flower forms, textures and colors to create the desired effects, and make sure the plants can survive when planted. If it doesn't look right, then remove the offending plants, give them to friends, and go shopping for something different!