

Simple landscape design still requires thought, planning

Two things this week: some thoughts on guiding clients through design decisions and three surprising winter flowering plants you can grow.



MICHAEL SPENCER

MAKE IT GREEN

DESIGN

The recent Super Bowl commercial based on Paul Harvey's famous "So God Made A Farmer" has spawned an online response called "So God Made A Designer." The point is simple: Designers create the finer things in life.

Design demands respect for materials, which, in my own profession, includes necessary adherence to simple horticulture, a rule immediately separating professionals from dilettantes and, coincidentally, separating potential clients from also-rans.

We want a result far finer, worthy of endless immersion and viewing, a captivating object or space, manipulating the participant's happy sensibility.

An example is a small commission where a row of palm trees is to line the drive in an upscale neighborhood: exactly what species of palms is to be used?

The homeowner desires a well-crafted design that is welcoming, comfortable, stable. This is the charm, really, of very fine design.

In a different arena: Why is using an iPhone so darn appealing, for example? Jonny Ive knows: The device is empowering. A simple result at the end of a grueling design process.

And so we come to a line of palm trees. The plan specified the silver date palm. Why? Because after spending hours with the client, touring the inside of the house, talking about preferences, about art, travel, after observing mannerisms and preferences, clearly a stately palm, evocative of a clean and simple setting, was consistent with the client.

By and large I find that clients living in similar neighborhoods got there by being smart, interested and curious. Over the past few weeks, I've received photos of coconut, of royal and of foxtail, all with a simple question: What about these?

Great questions. The

coconut palm is an entirely different critter, evoking beaches, tending not to grow straight and true, with huge fronds that flop about in the breeze; it's an altogether appealing palm, but not right for this client.

Foxtail has the straight trunk, but it's small and the fronds are busy twisting about, adding interest where it is not wanted. The row is there to create a line and a mood, a sort of background wash used by watercolorists to establish a sensibility.

In the end, royal palms were chosen, a fine compromise, although the client is concerned that the trees will grow out of the viewshed. And they will, of course. But with royal palm, the trunks are so boldly challenging they will satisfy the design requirements even so.

WINTER FLOWERS

My residential clients tend to be snowbirds, and, while they want low maintenance, like all clients, they also want flowers during the residential months.

Low maintenance, of course, is an essential part of the tool kit, but is not an alter to be worshipped in every instance. Some elements, like screen plantings, or hedges, or foundation plantings, not much is visible and should not add to maintenance costs. But materials at the front door, or viewed day in and day out through a favorite window? Surely, maintenance isn't the highest criteria in this case.

Winter flowers, though, are sine non qua. Here at Peace and Plenty, the lovely yesterday, today, and tomorrow (I will call it YTT) is in bloom from early January to early March. I have made these fine critters into little patio trees, each about 8 feet tall, with the lower 4 feet or so of woody branches exposed, living a fine head about 4 inches across. The flow-



Caesalpinia pulcherrima | Dwarf Poinciana



Clerodendrum quadriloculare | Starburst

ers are white, then purple, and are long-lasting.

Earlier this year, a fine example of dwarf Poinciana (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*) planted on the Pelican Bay berm, north of Pine Ridge Road on U.S. 41 was in full, glorious bloom. This plant is typically a patio tree, achieving the size of a mature Ligustrum, or 14 to 16 inches wide by 12 to 14 inches tall, with exposed multi-trunks supporting a head covered with orange and orange/yellow flowers. This plant is quite drought-tolerant when well-established, and with some protection can be planted near the Gulf. This is a quite use-

ful, tough little tree.

And, finally, here in my neighborhood is a very fine example of the starburst (*Clerodendrum quadriloculare*), a large, coarse-textured shrub often used as a background plant. It's large and maintainable, but it wants to be 10 feet or more. The purple leaves of this beauty make it desirable, but when it blooms, nothing else in the garden matters.

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