



Virginia Green Industry Council

For Immediate Use

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A Sense of Humor Increases Gardening Enjoyment

Ever wonder what might have happened if Groucho Marx had designed your garden? You can bet a banana peel the results would have been delightful, not dreary. All kidding aside, it's easy to get stuck in a gardening rut. That's why Kirk Brown, a garden writer and business manager of Garden Design Inc., in Allentown, Pennsylvania, likes to add whimsy to landscapes-his own and those of clients. He shared some light-hearted ideas with the American Nursery and Landscape Association (ANLA).

Attitude is Everything

"I view humor in the grander sense of the word, that of expanding enjoyment," Brown says, adding, "Most people don't see landscapes as extensions of livable areas." According to Brown, thinking beyond the literal walls of a house to the "green walls" of the landscape builds a deeper connection to gardening and nature.

Brown helps clients connect to their gardens by discovering their passions and reflecting that in the landscape. "This keeps them interested in their gardens over a lifetime, not just a season," he explains.

The best comedians are masters of improvisation. An inventive spirit is useful in gardening, too. "People shouldn't be afraid to experiment," Brown states. Seen this way, gardens become a venue for creativity.

Playful Plants

Unique plant material is a natural way to make gardens livelier. Shapes, colors, and textures can contrast with one another in surprising, yet attractive ways. Kirk Brown plants a bed of red, white, and blue flowers that burst into color by Independence Day. "This is fun, not plantsmanship, but it connects my kids to our garden."

Some plant names reveal amusing aspects. The 'Sentimental Blue' balloon flower begins as a ball before popping into a flower. Lamb's ears are a favorite in perennial borders-kids love to touch the fuzzy, silvery-green leaves.

Sunflowers can't be beat for sunny-faced happiness. Perennial hibiscus, especially 'Lady' or 'Lord Baltimore,' boast cheerful, ten-inch blooms that brighten any yard. Surprise is an important ingredient of humor, so consider hellebores. They bloom all winter in most climates, lending a quizzical, yet pleasant appearance in the winter landscape.

The creative use of plants up, over, and through structures is another trick in the gardener's repertoire. Brown's own garden contains a thought-provoking pun-woolly thyme growing over a stone staircase. "This 'river of thyme' is a play on words. It carries the message that gardens are timeless," he explains. A far cry from pink flamingoes? No one ever said humor couldn't be profound.

Offbeat Objects

Anyone who gardens knows that unusual elements make outdoor spaces intriguing. The variety of interesting and amusing garden accents has never been greater. Why not have fun while you're filling bird feeders? Kirk Brown's children enjoy the task, especially when it's time to refill a feeder shaped like a man's head. "The seed goes in the top of the man's head. He's sticking his tongue out--birds perch there and eat seed," Brown explains. Another innovative feeder is homemade. "We made plaster casts of our children's hands. While the casts were hardening, I stuck iron rebar in them. We stick these in the ground and have birds eating out of our hands, so to speak," Brown quips.

Many garden centers sell stones with a simple word or saying etched on them. "Words give an added dimension to gardens," Brown comments. Theme gardens based on favorite books relating to gardening also personalize the landscape. The possibilities run as deep as literature-think of Shakespeare's plant references, or light-hearted Beatrix Potter and Alice in Wonderland characters.

Sundials and reflecting globes lend mystery and history to gardens. "Reflective globes or 'witching balls' originated in the Puritan

era. These were clear glass balls that were thought to harness evil spirits," Brown explains. In a modern garden, Brown has seen these used to wonderful effect. "The balls were arranged in a circle, at hour points. Supported on black rods, they appeared to float mystically above a mixed perennial border."

Small water features are an easy way to include playful sound and movement. Pumps can be installed in barrels, cans, or pots. With a splashing fountain in place, can frog sculptures be far behind?

Entertaining Hardscapes

As a garden designer, Brown sees many creative interpretations of hardscapes. In one commercial setting, patio space was laid out in a checkerboard design and large chess pieces were provided. It became a child friendly space that encouraged involvement. "This was simply a matter of laying a pattern instead of one solid color. It didn't cost extra and was a totally useful space;" Brown says.

Another time, a GARDEN DESIGN client hankered after a Southwestern theme garden. A hardscape "Indian carpet" laid out in a Navajo design contributed to the desert feel. Another client had a Roman mosaic hardscape installed in their classically themed garden.

Don't forget larger structural elements like gazebos, pergolas, and arbor either. Planted with climbing roses, they create a fairy tale setting in your own backyard.

By keeping your wit and imagination alive, outdoor spaces reflect your personality just as much as your home's interior.

Go to our consumer website for additional gardening information at www.VirginiaGardening.com

The Virginia Green Industry Council is the voice of the horticulture industry in the Commonwealth and is dedicated to enhancing the beauty of the state's environment, the well-being of our citizens, improving our state's economy, and improving the health and wellness for everyone in Virginia. The Council is made up of providers and consumers of horticultural products and services. The Council works to provide public and industry education, environmental guidelines and other information that will keep Virginia green and growing. For more information, visit www.viriniagreen.org. 540-382-0943 FAX: 540-382-2716 E-mail: info@viriniagreen.org

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