



Drift and Detail Plantings in Garden Design

It's a quandary we face every time we plant a new bed or border. It happens every time we wander up and down the rows of perennials at our local garden center. How many of each type of plant should we use to create the most attractive design? The *drift* versus *detail* debate is sure to keep gardeners deliberating as long as there are gardens to plant and plants on garden center benches.

Gardens designed with drift plantings try to imitate natural growth habits by creating colonies of single plant varieties that appear to have occurred through self-seeding or other unaided means of propagation or planting. Effective drift plantings are most dense in the center of the mass, thinning to fewer, more widely spaced plants at the edge of the grouping. The sparseness at the perimeter leaves space for plants to mingle with perennials of a neighboring group, creating a more natural appearance.



Large beds that will be admired from a distance are ideal candidates for drift plantings. Within a large garden, masses of single plants form color blocks that can be seen from afar. Blending one group of perennials into another adds harmony and movement to the design.

The goal of detail planting is to create vignettes by combining several plant varieties in a small space. Cottage gardens are familiar examples of detail planting. They radiate charm and invite close inspection. Some of the plants in a detail planting may go unnoticed if the border is sited too far from where it will be regularly observed.

Entryways, courtyards and small gardens around decks and patios are the best places for detail plantings because visitors to the garden will experience these areas intimately. Although large areas of highly detailed designs may look busy or blotchy from a distance, masses of a single plant viewed up close may look boring or monotonous.

While garden size and location are important considerations in the drift versus detail decision, landscape design is most effective when rules of scale are followed. The physical mass of a home is large on most lots, as are mature trees. These giant forms are best complemented by drift plantings. Generous groups of single plants balance these elements of a landscape.

Drift plantings are the best approach for curb appeal. Undulating masses of groundcover and large groupings of shrubs suggest lushness and prosperity. Detail plantings close to the front door entice guests into the entrance of a home.

How many plants create a drift? If the plants are relatively large in stature, five or six plants may be enough to create a drift planting. Drifts of smaller plants may include dozens of a single variety.

In detail plantings, avoid using just one or two of a specimen, unless the plant itself is focal point material (a rose bush with in a perennial bed, for example).

When selecting plants for drift plantings, choose varieties with large flowers, long bloom times, and multi-season interest. Nothing is more discouraging than a huge patch of once pretty perennials heading toward midsummer dormancy.



Oriental poppies and old-fashioned bleeding heart fall into this category ó briefly lovely, but early to disappear. Tiny flowered plants are hard to appreciate at a distance ó their small flowers provide little contrast to their foliage, and the drift looks like a mass of green. Great perennial drift choices include ornamental grasses, coneflowers, black eyed Susan, Russian sage and repeat-blooming daylilies. They all have large flowers and multiple seasons of interest.

Edging a detailed planting with a unifying drift of a low-growing foliage plant is an excellent way to maintain continuity in a design. Try edging a mixed perennial mass with a band of lamb ears ó the repetition of that single plant variety will bring order to chaos.

Drifts of shrubs contribute structure to the landscape. These woody masses link tree canopies to the ground. Single shrub placement is a bit trickier. Unless the plant can pass as an element of a detailed planting, its location may appear awkward or accidental.

Consider the look you hope to achieve in your beds and borders, and utilize a combination of drift and detail plantings to make your landscape beautiful.



Diana Stoll is a horticulturist and the garden center manager of The Planter's Palette, 28W571 Roosevelt Rd., Winfield, IL 60190. Call 630-293-1040 ext. 2 or visit their website at www.planterspalette.com.