



COTTAGE GARDENS: FOLLOW THESE TIPS FOR EASY STYLE

No cottage? No problem. Gardening pros show you how to get the look

July 6, 2012 – Think cottage gardens are only for English people with thatched roofs and all the time in the world for work-intensive, old-fashioned landscapes?

Think again, say gardening experts: By learning the basics of this carefree style and using plants that thrive in your area, cottage gardens can be the easiest to maintain.

1. Go informal

“The English or cottage garden is a style that conjures up a flower-filled landscape bursting with color,” says Jane Schwartz Gates, of Gates & Croft Horticultural Design in Santa Clarita, California. The definition of the style, she admits, can be somewhat confusing: “Some see it as the romantic style of an informal garden, some as the more formal country manor, specifically Victorian, and so on ...”

While there *is* a more formal style of cottage gardening, Gates says it’s best for large estates that require geometric patterns and other ways to plan and control the use of bigger spaces. The more formal version also calls for more spending and maintenance. “The informal style, for my design purposes, is more flowing, natural and less symmetrical,” she says. “It reflects the cozy feel of an 18th or 19th century home garden: white picket fences, curvaceous wrought iron, meandering paths and lots of color.”

2. Start with design

“The key to cottage garden design is to not make it look designed.” says Anthony Tesselaar, cofounder and president of Tesselaar Plants. Yet there *are* design elements characteristic of cottage style: “The look is exuberant and unrestrained. Avoid straight lines, tight shapes or patterns. Use a riot of colors: don’t stick to one palette. Let plants wander where they will, letting them intermingle with each other.” Also, says Tesselaar, use fragrant plants to add another sense to the experience. And let Mother Nature play a role, with flowers that self-seed and grow back in unexpected places.

Other traditional cottage garden staples, says Gates, are winding paths, be they cobblestone or lawn, and architectural features like archways and picket fences.

Even if you don't have a cottage, says Gates, you can work to blend your home into a cottage-style landscape. "Look at the house and surrounding views to see how the theme can be integrated smoothly," she says. Cottage-style elements of your house, for instance, can be amplified in the garden: A contemporary home with stone veneer could overlook a cottage garden with rocks and boulders. White exterior trim might amplify the cottagey look of white window boxes, trellises or sections of picket fence. And a winding path from the driveway to your front door could help amp up the storybook look.

3. Choose easy-care plants

"Cottage gardens got their start in the late 15th century as edible and ornamental plots around small, humble cottages featuring plants that grew well in England's cool, wet climate," says Anthony Tesselaar, president and cofounder of Tesselaar Plants.

Such plants, he says, included foxglove, hollyhocks, irises, daisies, hydrangeas, roses, peonies, hostas, lupins, violas, pansies, phlox, Johnny jump-ups, primrose, delphinium, wisteria, snapdragons, bachelor's buttons, columbine and bleeding heart: "But if these romantic, old-fashioned favorites don't grow well in your area, it's important to pick low-maintenance plants that thrive where you live."

In Gates' hot, dry climate, she uses water-wise, heat-tolerant favorites that can take poor soil, like Jerusalem sage, guara, Flower Carpet groundcover roses, cosmos, agapanthus (the Storm series, the only one used at the Dallas Arboretum, is especially drought-tolerant), Festival Burgundy cordyline, 'May Night' sage, coreopsis, penstemon and Jupiter's Beard. Instead of the rolling lawns associated with the cottage garden style, she may also substitute permeable paving – perhaps cobblestones, to stick to the theme.

"We can garden year-round, so we use classic cottage garden plants like dianthus, alliums and rosemary," says Frank Hyman, owner of Cottage Garden Landscaping in Durham, North Carolina. "But the winters are mild enough that we can punch up things with big-leaf plants like brugmansia and hibiscus moscheutos. So we can also do the 'Tropical Cottage Garden' look if we want."

"I always say I do cottage garden style with Oklahoma-loving plants," says Red Dirt Ramblings blogger Dee Nash, who lives in Guthrie, Oklahoma. "I use cannas in it, too. I'm just trying to get the blowsy look. Instead of foxglove, I would plant a salvia or sage."

Kathy Muscato's cottage garden in precipitation-heavy Rochester, NY is stuffed with ferns, variegated hostas and lush, dense groundcovers. With all her rain and shade, she also grows plants that resist fungal disease like carpet roses and fragrant Volcano phlox.

4. Delve into details

Now that you've got your plants in place, Gates says it's time for cottage garden décor: "Think English street lamps, birdbaths, benches and outdoor fabrics in a Victorian floral print. Small areas can be defined with a little old-fashioned fence or even a row of window flower boxes."

Add a comfy bench or fun swing, and surround it with frolicking roses or fragrant herbs. "Always create a focal point – maybe a seating area or a fountain – then build your landscape around it," says Gates. "Size doesn't need to be a factor to create your own three-dimensional painting of a peaceful cottage garden."

5. Think 'garden shabby chic'

Gates also suggests repurposing well-worn items and materials, for a cozy, homey look that's full of character: Brick or concrete slabs for paths or retaining walls (creeping plants could tumble over the edge), an old-fashioned sink for a whimsical fountain or vintage metal seating for conversation areas.

Tesselaar recommends pieces like old wheelbarrows, a worn wicker chair, a rusted wire egg basket or old metal bucket: "Such features lend an aged, authentic, whimsical look, as well as a sense of stability and permanence."

6. Don't forget the containers

"Containers are a convenient, inexpensive way to add interest to any garden, particularly if you're interested in cottage garden style," says Tesselaar. He gets the look easily by using carpet roses, which are full-figured and romantic, yet drought-tolerant and compact, in a 'cottagey' container like an old washtub or whiskey barrel or one made of hypertufa.

"With containers, you can also easily add a splash of color here and there and be able to move it around the garden to change things up," says Tesselaar. "It's the cottage garden way – ignore the rules, play around and have fun."

Fact sheets

[Flower Carpet roses](#)

[Next Generation Flower Carpet roses](#)

[Volcano phlox](#)

[Storm series of agapanthus](#)

[Festival Burgundy cordyline](#)

[Tropicanna cannas](#)

Hi-res images

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[Cottage garden plantings with purple Volcano phlox, other traditional favorites](#)

[Cottage garden plants for hot, dry climates: carpet roses, coreopsis, etc.](#)

[Cottage garden details: containers, winding stone path, white picket fence](#)

[Cottage Garden details: birdbath, bench with curvy, wrought-iron legs, carpet roses](#)

[The tropical cottage garden look, with Tropicanna cannas, sundrops, etc.](#)

[Bending the rules: cottage gardens can take on a formal air or incorporate tropical plants](#)

About Tesselaar

Tesselaar Plants searches the world and introduces new plants for the home garden, landscape, home décor and gift markets. Tesselaar undertakes extensive research and development of its varieties and, once they're selected for introduction, provides marketing and promotional support through its grower and retail network. Tesselaar carefully selects licensed growers and purposefully keeps its portfolio of plants small, resulting in consistently high-quality, dramatic, prolific plants that are eco-friendly and very easy to grow. The Tesselaar philosophy is to introduce exceptional plants while "making gardening easy" for everyone, so it makes its products as widely available as possible. Tesselaar believes the more gardeners there are, the better it is for everyone.

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Editor's note: Other images of cottage garden style are available via the [Image Library](#) (starts on [page 5](#)) on Tesselaar's online [Newsroom](#).

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