



# Maximum Green:

## Urban Garden Tips and Tricks from the Philadelphia Flower Show

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIKA PACKARD



Tropical plants such as orchids and tillandsia are popular for containers.

I expected my visit to the 2007 Philadelphia Flower Show, held March 4-11, to stir a familiar yearning- the lust for a few acres in which to plant and play. Certainly the Philadelphia Convention Center held its fair share of elaborate, large landscapes - the likes of which I'll never be able to recreate in a small, urban garden.

However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that tucked among the ten acres of full-height trees and vast swaths of sod were quite a few displays aimed at small-space gardening. Window boxes, container plantings, and miniscule patio mock-ups provided a treasure trove of ideas for any DC resident itching to green up their little piece of real estate.

### Space Planning

It's early April and not too late to design your new garden plan or take a look at your existing space to determine what's working and what could benefit from an overhaul. Toni Ann Flanigan, owner of Philadelphia Gardens Inc., suggested several tips for doing just that during a Flower Show lecture on urban gardening. Flanigan is the winner of Philadelphia Magazine's Best of Philly 2006 Urban Garden Designer Award.

- **Make a list of what you need, and what you want.**

If your finished garden must accommodate, for example, three garbage cans, an air conditioning unit, a grill and the family dog, keep that in mind as you plan the space. And if you see a koi pond or wall fountain in your future, it's easier to add these things later if you've left space for them in your original design.

- **Use an old artists' trick.**

Take a picture of your space, blow it up, and start sketching your ideas directly on the photo. "When you're looking at a picture, it's very different from looking in person," says Flanigan. "It draws out stuff that you wouldn't normally notice, such as a big blank wall."

- **Don't fear demolition.**

Out of fear of damaging their drainage systems, many

of her clients live with existing patios paved with worn or broken materials, says Flanigan. But it doesn't have to be that way. Flanigan encourages homeowners to resurface their gardens, and she recommends Techno-Bloc, a synthetic paving material designed to look like natural stone.

### Hardscape Ideas

A little foresight goes a long way when planning your garden's hardscape. A few tricks can help maximize your usable space and keep your garden feeling as large as possible:

- **Sink planting boxes below deck.**

Don't clutter precious small deck real estate with big planters that sit on the deck's surface. Instead, create built-in planters around the deck perimeter, and sink them so that their tops are level with the deck flooring. That way, "when you walk out, it feels like you are in a garden and not on a deck," says Flanigan.

- **Consider the garden "journey."**

Instead of plunking a patio set on a concrete pad directly behind your back door, consider placing your seating deeper into the garden, surrounded by plants. Make the few steps through the garden, "feel like an exploration," says Flanigan, to help heighten drama and psychologically extend your space. For a particularly romantic garden, consider using all white plants, which are most fragrant after dark and glow under moonlight.

- **Trim your hoses.**

A 50-foot hose just doesn't make sense when your garden may only be 12-feet deep. Measure just enough hose to reach all parts of your garden, chop off the excess, and finish the rough edge with a hose repair kit.

### Popular Plants

Texture and shape are key in a small garden, where you'll be up close and personal with your plants on a daily basis. Flower Show displays reflected this idea with a focus on unusual - and unexpected - plantings that didn't necessarily include flowers. For example, consider an entire window box of succulents or carnivorous plants. Tropical-inspired groupings were also popular, featuring orchids anchored by dwarf bananas or colocasias. Flanigan offered more ideas for urban plantings:

- **Start small.**

Planting a complete garden, even a small one, can feel daunting. If you're overwhelmed, Flanigan suggests planting a few containers before beginning your landscape. She compares designing a garden to designing a room. "You can do it one step at a time, in pieces,







Stick to a single color family for maximum impact in your containers or garden.

and still have a functioning garden,” she says. Ivy geraniums, sweet potato vines, dragon wing begonias and bright impatiens are all excellent choices for containers, she added.

• **Stick to a color theme.**

A mistake that many urban gardeners make is to include plants in a cacophony of colors. The result can overwhelm a small space. “If you can discipline yourself to a color you like and not buy one of this and one of that, you will be way ahead of the game and have a garden that looks good,” says Flanigan.

• **Hot colors are hot.**

All things orange and gold are very popular right now, says Flanigan. In addition to flowers, consider adding accents such as bird houses and ceramic planters in these colors.

• **Disguise eyesores with plants or fencing.**

In her own garden, Flanigan “jammed” tall shrubs around her unsightly grill. The plants do suffer a bit of heat damage, she says, but it’s worth it for the camouflage they provide. Also, if you’ve got something to hide, don’t underestimate the power of a short length of fence, she added.

## Surprising Accessories

The most compelling displays at the Flower Show included charming details that heightened the sense of discovery and magic in the

gardens. Tuck a small piece of sculpture or a few glass-gazing balls among your plants for an unexpected surprise. Or consider these useful - and good looking - accessories:

**Adirondack chairs:** The garden multitasker. Flanigan recommends folding Adirondack chairs for patio furniture. Their wide arms provide the perfect place to balance a drink or plate, which eliminates the need for space-gobbling cocktail tables.

**Easy water features.** Even in a tiny garden, you can find space to turn a ceramic planter into a small fountain. And by using a recirculating pump, you have a self-contained unit that doesn’t require a major plumbing job.

I came away from the Flower Show inspired to do the most with the small bit of ground I have. As you head into this year’s gardening season, experiment, have fun, and give thanks for your garden, whether it’s just a hanging basket on an apartment balcony or a few square feet between an alley and your row house.

For more information on the annual Philadelphia Flower Show, visit [www.theflower-show.com](http://www.theflower-show.com)

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Consider plants, such as these succulents, with unusual shapes and textures.



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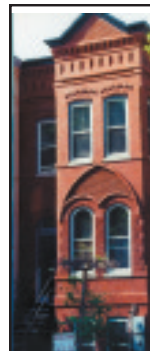
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