

A term that is used a lot by designers is Focal Point. What do they really mean and how do you create one?

Focal points are spots in the landscape that draw our attention, then catch and hold our interest. This concept is similar to what a fireplace does for a living room.

Focal points create impact in a landscape design plan and can be grand like a tower, large pond, or garden structure. Or they can be simple like a bench, sundial or an urn filled with plants. Plants can also serve as focal points.

A few landscaping design examples might be:

A beautiful tree with an interesting shape such as a Japanese maple or a planting bed with flowers that are special for you - such as roses, like the kind your grandmother had. The view through an arbor or the birdbath in the centre of a bed can also be considered a focal point.

One of the main goals of a good landscaping design is to direct the eye toward various focal points within the garden.

When choosing a focal point

Invest in one fantastic piece and make it the centerpiece of your yard. If you're on a budget you may be tempted to buy a smaller piece and make do. Avoid that temptation. You'll always regret it. Save your money until you can buy just the right piece you will know it when you see it.

Consider the overall architecture of your home when choosing a focal point. An old wooden wheelbarrow perfectly complements an old farmhouse, but a modern metal sculpture would not. Also consider your own interests or hobbies when choosing a focal point. For example, if you sing or play an instrument, you might try to find a musical focal point of some kind (a sculpture of a boy playing a flute, for example.)

Antique statuary is very traditional. Antiques are also, of course, very expensive. However, good quality reproductions are now being made. Classic Greek and Roman sculptures are very traditional, so if your house is formal or very old, you might want to consider one of these.

A wonderful bench or chair can also be a focal point. Concrete or iron benches add a formal look. Wood benches are usually more casual. Archways and Pergolas are a must in many gardens. Adorn them with lots of climbing plants to make a shady walkway.

Water features can be as elaborate as a waterfall and fish pond, or as small as a birdbath or fountain.

Plants can be wonderful focal points, although it may take a while for them to grow enough to make a statement. Imagine the graceful branches of a weeping willow next to a pond, a wonderful specimen plant like a weeping Japanese maple, or a shrub with

interesting branches like Harry Lauder's Walking stick. These would all be interesting even in winter.

An urn or pot holding a large potted plant can also be a good choice. Be sure it's big enough to make a statement.

Where you place your focal point is just as important as choosing the focal point. The major point to consider is from where you'll view the focal point.

Place it at the end of a straight path for a classic, formal look. As you walk down the path, your eye is drawn to it, inviting you to come closer. This is a good spot to place a bench or statuary. Frame the beginning of the path with an archway and you'll complete the picture.

An informal garden calls for curves. When a path curves out of sight, people are drawn down the path because they're curious to see what's around the corner. Reward them with a wonderful focal point that isn't seen until they turn the corner.

To keep attention within a space and away from the edges, place the focal point in the center.

Go inside your house and look out the windows you use most often. This is a great way to decide on a placement of a focal point so you can enjoy it every day, even during bad weather. I built a waterfall and fish pond on the side of my house which can be seen from the window going up the stairs inside my house. Every time I go up or down the stairs I get a glimpse of the waterfall.

Finally, consider how to frame your focal point. If it's a seating area, you might want to back it with an evergreen hedge so you feel secure that nobody will sneak up on you. Surround seating areas with fragrant plants so you can relax and enjoy the fragrance. Add an arbor to create a cozy feeling.

Surround sculptures or statuary with short plants that complement rather than overwhelm the focal point. An example - A modern bluish-gray sculpture was surrounded at the base by blue Hostas which perfectly complemented the gray color of the sculpture. Also, since Hostas are grown more for the leaves than the flowers, they didn't steal the show when they bloomed.

The exception to this is for arbors or pergolas, which should be covered with lots of wonderful climbing plants. If your focal point is a little too small, raise it to eye level by placing it on a pillar. So now you know what a focal point is and how to create one. Visit your favorite garden centre to see what you might be able to add to create that missing link.