

The Immersive Garden Guide

Honest Perennial Co.

By Shelley Hood



Six years ago I stood in front of a very large garden we had carved out on our farm. It was beautifully prepped. For that spot I had 4000 plants in front of me. But I didn't know what to do next because I wasn't looking to create a traditional border garden. I wanted something I could walk *through*. What I now refer to as an immersive garden.

This design guide is to help those that don't want a traditional border garden, but don't know where to start.

On that weekend I planted some things beautifully. But many things I got wrong. But I kept carving, and kept planting until 15,000 plants later I had transformed the space.

This guide is a product of me reverse engineering years of intense learning. I left that garden behind. But not the lessons. I'm here to share those with you.

You can find me at honestperennialco.com.

On Instagram I'm [@KawarthaFamilyFarm](https://www.instagram.com/KawarthaFamilyFarm) (the name Instagram has decided I'll answer to forever.)

-- *Shelley*

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Most people start plant shopping the same way. They walk into a nursery, open a catalog, or fall down an Instagram rabbit hole and start choosing plants they love. Every one is beautiful in its own way.

Then they get home and try to make it all work together.

I did this for years, with thousands of perennials across an acre of garden. I got to see the consequences of that approach at a scale that made the problems impossible to ignore.

The issue is that we often make the last decision first. We choose plants before we know what we actually need them to do in the garden.

The Problem With Traditional Garden Design Advice

Most of the advice we're given about garden design starts with plants: we're taught to think in terms of structure, spacing, and height in borders arranged front to back. The expectation is that if you choose the right plants and place them correctly, the design is complete.

I think garden design needs to start with how you want it to make you *feel*.

When you step into a garden, you don't register individual plants first. You notice whether a space feels calm or busy, light or heavy. I think of it like taking in a painting before you look at the brush strokes.

But there's something more fundamentally wrong with the advice.

The border model - plants arranged in strips along the edges with open space in the middle, makes the garden the frame. The lawn is the painting. Everything is organised to decorate the edges of space you look outward from. "Low in front, tall in the back is a stage set, not a garden."

The gardens that I remember - that stick with me, surround you. You move through them. You are inside them, not outside looking in. *They're immersive*.

That kind of garden is achievable at any scale. You don't need an acre. But you need to start, not from plants, but from how do I build a space I actually want to be in?

I will tell you how. Not from rules I inherited or passed down, but from studying my own gardens.

“

**Low in front, tall
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garden.**

Why an Immersive Garden?

The first garden I made was in a dense part of the city. Nothing like the farm that came later. Just a small front lawn and a backyard that was essentially a shaded landslide.

I started the way most people do. Tearing up sections of lawn. Putting in whatever caught my eye. But as I worked, I liked the feeling of being inside the garden rather than standing outside it looking in.

So I kept going, planting densely. I convinced my father-in-law to rip out the traditional strip of shrubs against the house and build me a small deck in its place - my vantage point. Then I filled in the remaining lawn with plants.

The space was maybe fifteen by fifteen feet. But the feeling completely changed. I could be *in* it. View it from all angles. Sit inside it, surrounded by it - not across from it.

That garden planted the bug in me that never left.

Ten years later I walked through a garden in Somerset, England, built under a train overpass on derelict land. Unlike the formal gardens I'd visited across the UK, you weren't looking at it. You were in it. Our daughter called it magical. And, it was.

By bending the frame on traditional garden advice, your garden can make you feel something beyond just pride and appreciation. That's what this guide is for.

I believe gardens should be head and heart.

This is what an immersive garden looks like in practice.

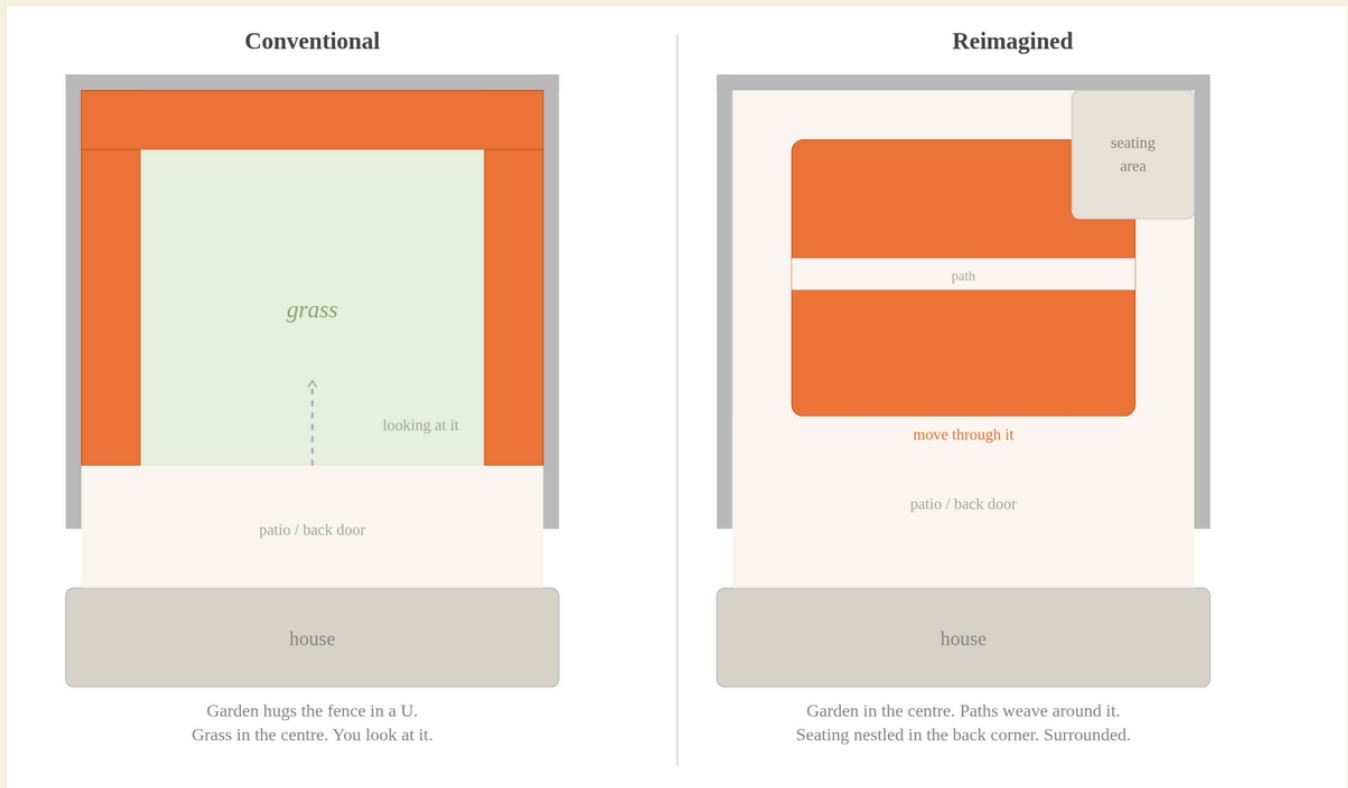
Front



The conventional front garden puts the lawn between you and the plants. You're on the street looking at a strip.

The reimagined version flips it: the garden fills the space, a path pulls you in, and seating sits against the house, screened by the planting. You arrive into it. The feeling is completely different yet the footprint is identical.

Back



The conventional backyard wraps the garden around the fence and puts grass in the middle. You stand on the patio and look at it. The reimagined version moves the garden to the centre, weaves paths around it, and tucks seating into the back corner. Now you're surrounded. The fence becomes irrelevant. The garden is the experience.

Designing Beyond Borders

The shift from border thinking to immersive thinking isn't about having a bigger garden or a bigger budget. It's about a mindset shift.

I developed this system over five years, across an acre of gardens, testing hundreds of plant varieties. It is the design half of what I learned. (If you want to go deeper on plant selection and building your own palette, I cover that in *The Honest Perennial Guide*.)

The working unit of this design process is the Design Block, connected by pathways. Not because I want you to think in blocks. Breaking an immersive garden into digestible thirty-square-foot units is how you actually build one. One block at a time, until the whole canvas holds together.

You don't need a farm. You don't need an acre. The fifteen by fifteen garden I made twenty years ago was built from the same thinking. Only the scale changes.

The Immersive Garden Framework.

Canvas. Pathways & Pauses. Design Blocks



Immersive gardens can look wild and unruly. But the ones that are emotive require planning and structure.

I learned this through ripping out plants, carving out paths, and looking at plantings that I couldn't access. The free-flowing garden of my dreams wouldn't emerge from random plantings. The key is to get the structure right first.

This guide moves through three stages. And, while I jumped around in my approach, I strongly suggest doing them in order.

The blocks are where the planting happens. But the canvas and the paths are why the garden feels the way it does when you finally sit down inside it.

1. **Canvas** - before anything goes in the ground, you define the whole space.
2. **Pathways and Pauses** - decide how you will move through it, where you will stop, and what that means for everything you plant near those paths.
3. **Design Blocks** - the working unit that makes it real. Designing thirty square feet at a time, until the whole canvas holds together.



Know Your Canvas

Large or small, get a feel for the space.

With a border the physical architecture helps define where the garden goes - like the house or fence line.

Immersive gardens don't come with those guardrails. You have to decide what the space is for before you start filling it. That's what I call the canvas.

Before planting you have to decide what this space is going to be. Not just how it will look.

What spaces want to feel open. What spaces want to feel enclosed. Where does the light come from in the morning, in the evening. And where is the blasting sun?

My larger canvasses, that I originally designed as contiguous space, ended up being nine or ten blocks once I deconstructed them.

Our farm came with hundreds of old cedar fence logs that I dragged around everywhere to mock up the space. And to think about how I would move through it. You can use anything - cardboard, tarps...anything that is easily moveable and allows you to play and feel.

Over time and with experience, I now spend *more* time thinking through the canvas, not less. I have learned to think about how I would *experience* the garden. Then I narrow my plant list.

Pathways & Pauses

The white space that lets your plants breathe.



In an immersive garden there is no lawn as a vantage point. That shift to designing paths and plantings is one of the bigger mental leaps I had to make over traditional gardening advice.

And, also where I learned my most expensive lesson. I created plantings up to twenty by twenty feet and lost sight of what was in the centre. I carved out paths after the fact. It was transformative. But it was completely avoidable.

It also means deciding how you will navigate it before you decide what you are planting. And plan those openings often.

I had a long garden running alongside a pathway with no break for forty feet. People cut across it constantly, including me. If you can see the crosswalk you'll take it. Otherwise you're jaywalking.

Design Blocks ensure you create natural pathways at convenient intervals.



Decide Where You Want to Pause

Before you think about paths, find those places where you want to take the garden in.

Where would you want to sit if you could put a chair anywhere? I would literally drag a chair around as I started to lay out new garden areas. Don't just walk the space - sit in it.

These are your pause spaces. They don't need to be large. Once you know where they are, you know where the paths need to go.

Plan the Paths

There are two kinds of path and they do different jobs.

- *Stepping paths* are narrow and informal. I often used mulch or large stepping stones. They let you get close to the plants but they disappear visually from ten feet away, so from a distance you see the planting, not the path.
- *Navigation paths* move you through the space efficiently. They're wider, and connect one part of the canvas to another. And they can accommodate a wheelbarrow.

Every plant near a path has to respect the path.

I learned this a few times.

The most painful was globe thistle. It's beautiful and dramatic, and the pollinators put on a show. So, I planted it generously - including along internal stepping paths. It hurt. Literally. I then moved them to where they could be enjoyed at a distance.

Another was bee balm. I had a long entrance path into one of my larger canvases flanked on both sides by red bee balm. In flower it was spectacular. It was like a royal entrance. But, by midsummer the bee balm had swallowed the path entirely. I was tearing it out before the season was over.

Globe thistle and bee balm both have a place in an immersive garden. Just not flanking a path.

Identify Your Termination Points

The garden can't be endless so there will be natural termination points.

You should plan them, just as you do the parts of the garden that you'll be *in*. If you plan out your plantings on the way to specific end points they become part of the story, and not just a natural result of the gardens ending.

A termination point might open into a dining area, an open yard, or arrive at a group of focal plants like hollyhocks.

I had a natural termination point in a row of beautiful maples that cut across our space. When those maples were taken out by an ice storm that area no longer made sense as a destination. It forced me to rethink and reconfigure.

Your termination points don't have to be large. They can simply be a small bench where you sit for a coffee.

Design for 360 Degrees

An immersive garden has no front or back. It's a garden you will be in and meander through.

This can create a challenge for plant selection but with a few rules it's definitely achievable. Think about plants in these four categories beyond height and colour:

- **High uniformity** - mounded, consistent, no bad side, well-contained. Work well near narrow paths.
- **See-through** - Regardless of height, you can see through them and past them from multiple angles. They add to the feeling of being surrounded without making the space feel closed.
- **Anchors** - dramatic, strong profile, physical presence. They belong at destinations. Keep them away from narrow stepping paths where the relationship between body and plant is too close.
- **Wanderers** - They are doing exactly what they are supposed to do. The mistake is giving them access to a path they can consume. They belong next to wide navigation paths.

Plant Profile Examples

Category	What It Means in Practice	Examples	Where They Work Best
High Uniformity	Consistent from all sides. Holds its shape. No awkward angles	Salvia 'May Night', Echinacea 'Magnus', Sedum 'Autumn Joy'	Along narrow paths, edges, anywhere you're close to the plant
See-Through	You can see through and past them. They add height without closing the space	Verbena bonariensis (species), Culver's root, Allium	Mid-block, between paths, anywhere you want layering without density
Anchors	Strong presence. They read as a destination or focal point	Bee balm, Hollyhock, Joe Pye weed	End points, corners, or places you naturally pause. Not right beside narrow paths
Wanderers	Spread, drift, or soften edges over time	Geranium 'Rozanne', Thyme 'Magic Carpet'	Along wider paths, edges, and spaces where movement is welcome

Design Blocks

Design Your Blocks. Connect Them. Plant.



What is a Design Block?

It can be overwhelming to design a large space as a whole. I needed a way to break it down.

I had ideas but I started really working through them when my husband built me a series of raised beds in different dimensions. I could fill them, stand in them, feel them as a whole away from the pressure of the larger garden. That's where the Block came from.

I landed on roughly thirty square feet as the workable unit. Whether that's a 3x10, a 4x7-ish, a 5x6, round or square, that's the area I work with as a unit. For those of us who aren't great at spatial awareness, think suburban walk-in closet.

Thirty square feet is digestible. Small enough to be taken in at once by the eye and allow the right spacing for paths, and large enough for plants to tell a story.

If thirty square feet is all you have, that single block is your garden. You can still create 360 degree flow around it and make it feel immersive.

If you're working with a larger canvas, this is simply where you begin.

The block itself is purely conceptual. It's a design tool to help you build in manageable pieces. Once you remove the imaginary boundary, it should simply read as garden. While I used raised beds in the early days to quickly test different sizes and combinations, your finished blocks should never *look* like blocks.

The plants will naturally soften the edges until the divisions disappear.

How to Design With Blocks

I design every block the same way. I think of it as a funnel and my plant choices come out the bottom. Five filters, in order.

1. Vibe - what job is this block doing in the canvas?
2. Variables - there are three: height, colour, and number of varieties.
3. Plant Set Mix - decide the right balance of Workhorses, Staples and Divas for this specific spot.
4. Plants - by the time you get here most of the work is done. Your vibe, variables and plant set mix have narrowed the field.
5. Placement - how each plant is used within the block based on its natural character. The same plant placed differently can make a garden feel whole or completely disjointed.

1. Vibe

Vibe is how you define the job for each block inside the canvas.

For example, my very first garden planting was a simple planting of Coneflower 'White Swan' and Deschampsia grass. It was a windy spot and it grew in beautifully. That one corner of the whole space had a vibe. It was flowing and beautiful in it's muted palette. It had its own personality that I loved.

But sometimes a block has a more practical role. I had an area where I wanted to restrict sight lines but see customers. That one decision shaped everything for that area: plant height, plant type, placement. I wanted it to feel private but welcoming.

Even if you can't relate to 'vibe' find different ways to get to the same result: what do I want this space to do; to say; to feel like.

In my case, I was pleasantly surprised by the result of my otherwise simple planting. But there were other examples where my unplanned spaces didn't have the same emotional pull, or distinct personality.

So, this is another area where I learned to spend more time. I did a lot of ripping out of spaces that were intellectually correct but had no soul.

Whether pragmatic or emotional, be explicit about the Vibe for each block.

2. Variables

Every Block needs an anchor. Something that holds it together visually while everything else does its job.

The variables you're working with are colour, height, and number of varieties. I hold firm on not adding more than five varieties to a block, leaving me to play with height and colour.

A Block with mixed heights can work beautifully if the colour palette is consistent. A Block that plays across a colour range works if the heights are similar. What doesn't work is varying everything at once. That's not a coherent garden. That's a plant collection.

Pick your variable. Filter your palette.

3. Plant Set Mix

Before we talk about the right mix, it helps to understand the system behind it. Plant Sets categorize how plants behave over time - their seasonal presence and their resilience over time. There are three.

Workhorses

Workhorses are the backbone.

They bloom for a long stretch, and return reliably so they build your garden over time.

If your Workhorses are right, the garden holds together even when everything else comes and goes.

Staples

Staples share many of the qualities of Workhorses, but their bloom window is shorter.

Over a season, they come and go. That's what makes them useful.

Lupines in late spring, columbines in early summer, liatris in mid-summer. You place them knowing exactly when they'll show up and when they'll fade.

Divas

Divas are closer to decor. They're often heavily bred, sometimes with little ecological value, but they can look incredible. While they may bloom for months, what makes them a diva is how they fade over time. These aren't lasting perennials.

Getting the Mix Right

Like a great dish, getting the mix of ingredients right is as important as picking the right ones. I can select different combinations from my own 80-plant palette and achieve very different results based on the mix.

There is no *right* mix but it's really worth understanding the implications. I had so many customers that were disappointed when their garden disappeared, without realizing they had planted a garden full of Divas. They were never meant to last.

- A spring garden full of early bloomers might be the right for a spot you want to celebrate the end of winter, even if it goes quiet by July. That's a valid Staple-heavy Block if it's in the right place.
- A Diva-heavy Block at the front of the house, the first thing you see when you pull into the driveway, might be worth refreshing every few years for the impact it delivers while it lasts.
- A wilder spot at the back of the property, that you wander through occasionally can be a great place for a Workhorse- centric garden. Plant it well once and let it do its thing.

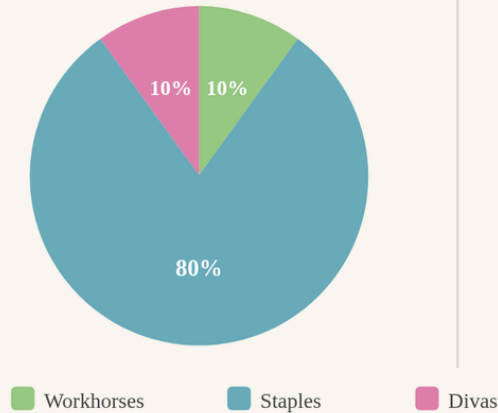
- **Heavy on Staples** means you give you a lot of variation over the season but it also requires careful planning to stagger the limited bloom windows.

Staple dominant

10% Workhorses / 80% Staples / 10% Divas

A garden full of interest and surprise across the season.

Needs planning to manage the transitions.



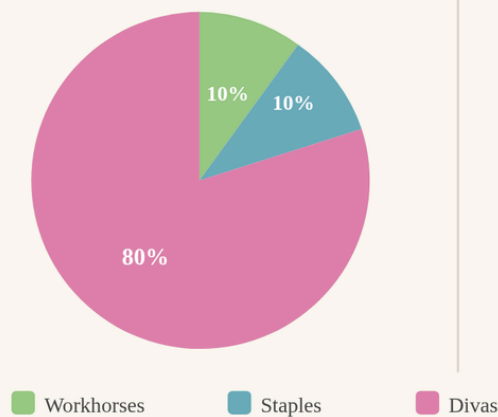
- **10% Workhorses**
Very little backbone. Gaps between flushes will be visible.
- **80% Staples**
Interesting and ever-changing. Each one comes and goes on its own schedule.
- **10% Divas**
A small indulgence. Enjoy them while they last.

- **High on Divas** can give you a dramatic show but may not last over time.

Diva dominant

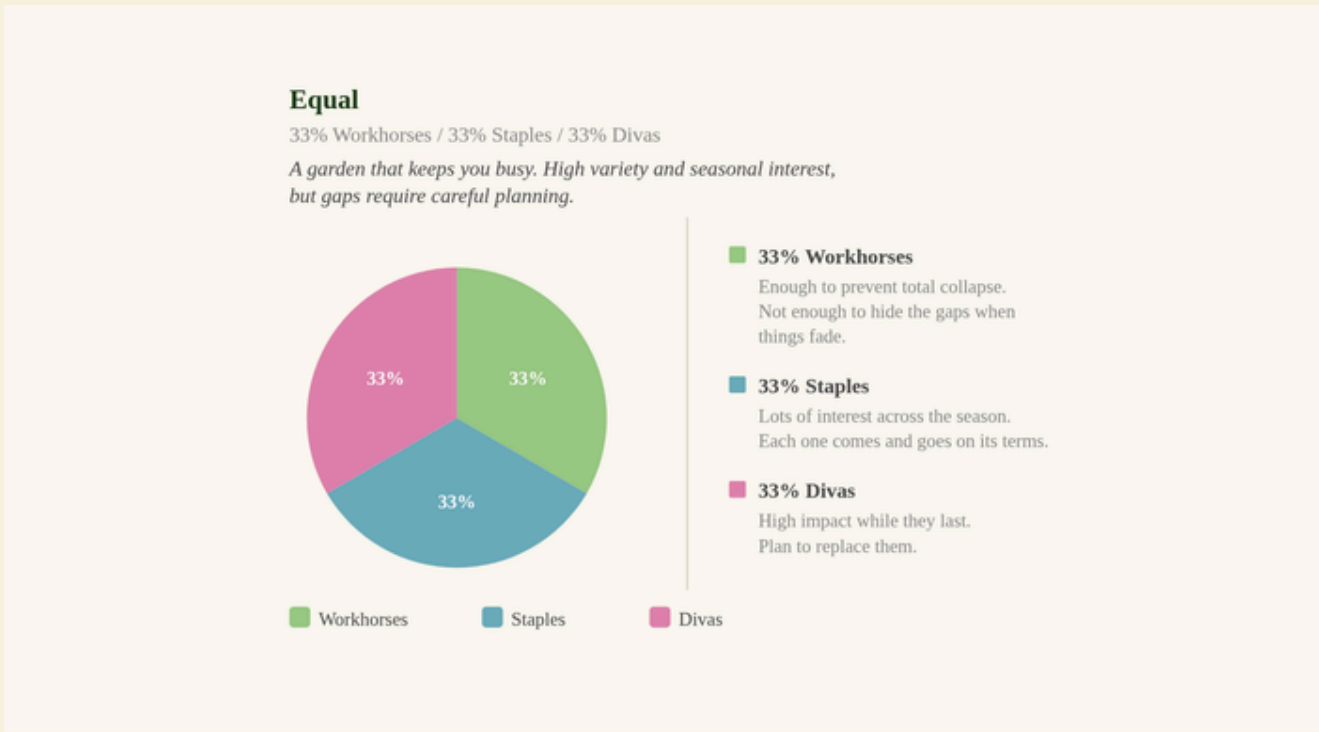
10% Workhorses / 10% Staples / 80% Divas

A garden that looks incredible for a while. Many Divas are heavily bred for looks, not longevity. Plan to replace them.

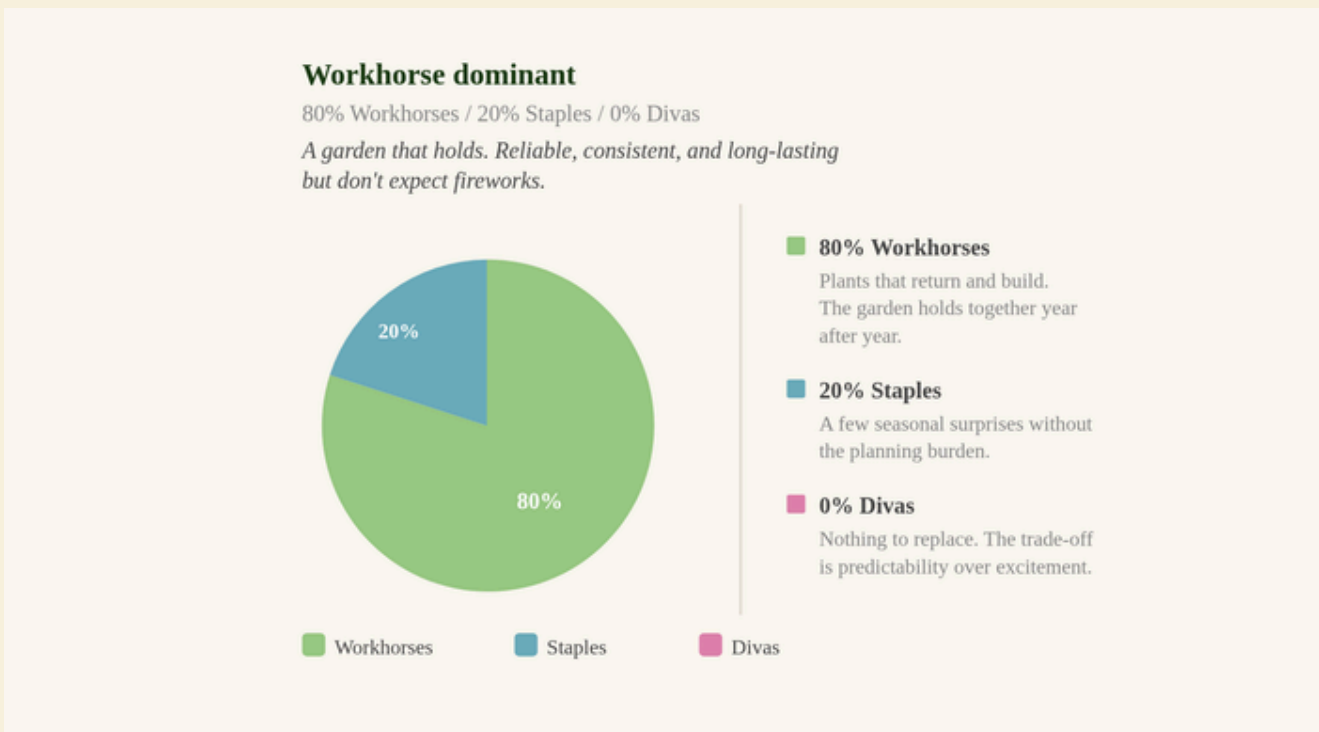


- **10% Workhorses**
Almost no backbone. The garden won't hold together over time.
- **10% Staples**
Very little to carry across the season.
- **80% Divas**
High impact. But most won't last beyond year two or three. This garden needs constant reinvestment.

- **In equal parts**, you get a bit of everything - you will have some gaps over time, will have to plan for the timing blooms while enjoying variation.



- **High on Workhorses**, you're not getting big bang flowers. Your garden will be more predictable than flashy.



4. Plants

By the time you get here, most of the work is done.

- Your Vibe defined the space.
- Your Variables set the constraints
- Your Plant Set Mix told you what you're building.

Now you're just matching plants to the job.

If you're working from our palette at honestperennial.com, you can use the filters to get there. Filter by Plant Set to match your mix. Filter by height to stay within your variable. Filter by bloom time to make sure the Block has colour when you want it.

The list gets short fast.

If you're working beyond our palette, talk to your nursery. Ask about bloom time, longevity, and how the plant behaves over time. The number one disappointment I hear from gardeners is that their 'perennials' don't return, so do your research.

5. Placement

Some plants are meant to stand alone and some play best with others. Knowing which are which can be the difference between 'stunning' and 'nice'.

- **Solos** stand on their own. Some large grasses can stand on their own like a fountain or focal point in the middle of a planting. They're distinctive enough to carry the eye without repeating.
- **Solo Repeaters** work best when they appear again and again across a space. Each plant keeps its own shape, but repetition holds it all together. Catmint is a good example. When I see five catmints planted side by side I see a row of plants. When I see them amongst shorter grasses or offset against bold bloomers, they can anchor a space.
- **Groups** are plants that are happiest growing together, forming a single visual unit. Their structure disappears into the whole.
- A **Mass** is when a group expands far enough it becomes a mass. Some plants melt together completely when massed. Geranium 'Rozanne' is one. Creeping thyme is another.

Many mounded plants don't melt together at all. They almost always work better as solos or repeaters than as groups.

Where I see gardens go wrong is when grouping is applied as a blind rule. I had so many customers say to me "I'm supposed to buy three right?" It depends. Foxgloves or delphiniums don't work as repeated solos. They're screaming to be grouped together. Others are actually best on their own.

Placement Examples

Your garden, your rules. These placement guidelines are based on my experience with these plants and the aesthetic that works for me.

Plant	Placement
Big Bluestem	Solo
Catmint	Solo Repeater
Russian Sage	Solo Repeater
Jupiter's Beard	Solo Repeater
Coneflower	Group
Salvia May Night	Group
Rudbeckia	Group
Foxglove	Group
Delphinium	Group
Geranium Rozanne	Mass
Creeping thyme	Mass

When a Block Fails

A Block fails when you walk past it repeatedly and something nags. The space just doesn't hold together, or pull you in.

- **Too much variety.** More than five plant types in a thirty-square-foot Block can be too much for the eye to take in. Nothing repeats enough to create a flow.
- **Mismatched height.** A few plants rising significantly above the rest that aren't see-through verticals. The Block stops reading as a unified space.
- **Wrong placement.** A plant that wants to be grouped is scattered as a repeater. Foxglove or delphinium don't work as repeated solos. They're screaming to be grouped together.

Connecting Blocks



Once you design your blocks, the question is how those blocks work together.

Just as too many plants crammed inside a single block can start to feel like a plant collection rather than a garden, distinct blocks that don't speak to one another can read as a series of disconnected mini-gardens.

I had a hundred foot entrance defaulting to Karl Foerster grass, coneflowers and verbena. It started to feel sterile. It was too much the same.

That was my lesson in the difference between repeating and connecting. Two neighbouring blocks don't need to be identical. They need to speak to each other.

Connections can happen in a number of ways:

The key to all of it is restraint. Change one variable at a time.

- **Block repetition** is the most straightforward approach. Some blocks can be repeated two or three times separated only by stepping paths.
- **Block variation** is how you create connection. Carry one or two plants into the next block and change up the others. Those repeated plants create the bridge and the new ones create interest.
- **Height continuity** works even when the varieties change completely. If you keep blocks within the same height family the eye can travel across the canvas without interruption.
- **Colour** can also connect where plant varieties don't. A similar palette running through different blocks ties them together.

Other Design Considerations

Use height to pull you through.

Keep height relatively consistent within each block. Then use the positioning of whole blocks to create depth and movement: place a taller or larger block behind or further along from a medium-height one. It's a gentle invitation that draws you forward without breaking the comfort of each individual block.

Stagger the paths.

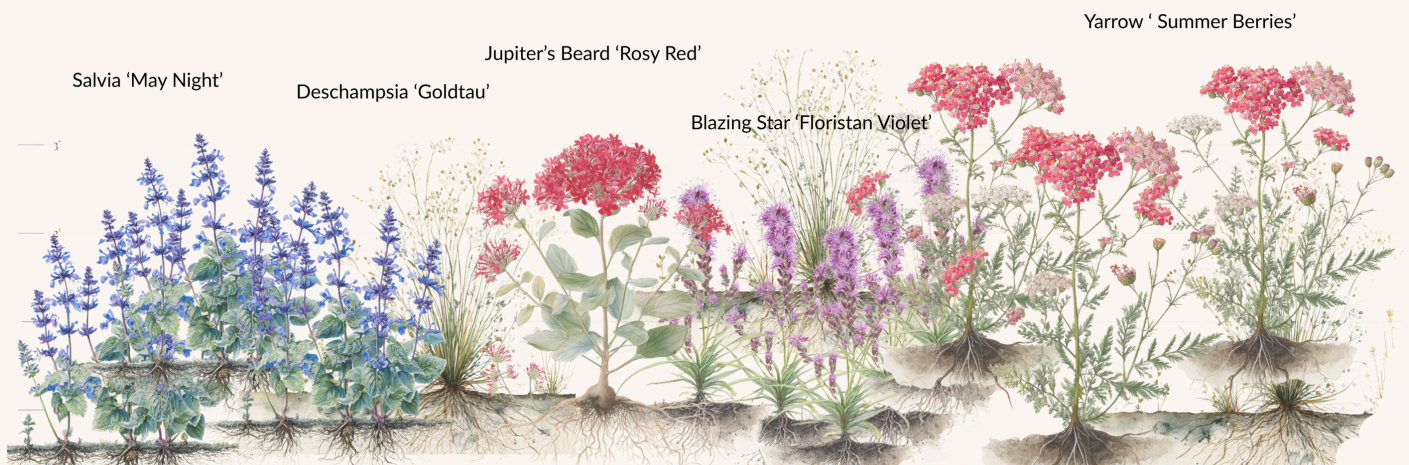
Offset the gaps and openings between blocks so the paths meander gently rather than running in straight, predictable lines. This small shift keeps the planting feeling generous and enveloping. When you look up from the path you always see plants, never long corridors of pathway. You always have a place to walk, but the garden stays the constant surround.

Whether connecting two blocks or fifty, if the structure is right, the blocks dissolve and the garden becomes one immersive experience.

Connecting Block Plan

This plan shows multiple blocks in a 20x20 garden space. Some blocks repeat completely, others repeat with variation and completely new blocks signify a shift in vibe and mood.





Connecting Example

See this example from the Jewel Garden. The original block has Yarrow 'Summer Berries' and Blazing Star Floristan Violet.

SWAP 1
Sedum 'Autumn Joy'

SWAP 2
Coneflower Magnus



The Block beside it reads continuously, but the Coneflower 'Magnus' and the Sedum 'Autumn Joy' change things up while the rest remain the same for continuity.

Final Notes

Budget: Size Matters

Plants grow. You do not have to buy your garden at its final size on day one.
We always recommend small but if you want immediate colour this table illustrates the overall impact.

	1 Block · 30 sq ft	6 Blocks · 20×20	Large Canvas
Plants	15	90	150+
Small 2" · \$5	\$75	\$450	\$750+
1 Gallon · \$14	\$210	\$1,260	\$2,100+
Big Bloomer · \$25	\$375	\$2,250	\$4,500+

Start with one block. A completed block teaches you more about your space than any plan can.

Make Your Garden Your Own

My approach has never been to tell you what to plant. It's to give you the tools to understand the tradeoffs you're making, and to explain why things don't always behave the way you expect.

That's what this guide is meant to do. To give you a way to think about your garden in terms of space, structure, and how plants actually behave over time.

Your garden is your own.

There are no good plants or bad plants. Only informed choices. Through my own experience of navigating in the dark, through conversations with customers who couldn't explain what was happening in their gardens, and those who gave up when perennials didn't live up to their promise, I built these systems to help you navigate. Not to judge.

What I do hope is that you end up somewhere you actually want to be. Not a garden you look at from the back door. Somewhere you walk into, wander through, and sit inside.

Start with one block. Let it teach you something. Then build from there.

Keep experimenting. Mix things up. The garden you build from your own decisions is the one you'll actually love.

-- *Shelley*

You have the system now. The next step is putting it to work.

Jewel Garden Block

\$20 CAD

I've created a ready-to-plant Garden Block using my exact 80-plant palette. This is a complete 30-square-foot planting that has been designed, tested, and mapped out so you know exactly what goes where, how it evolves through the seasons, and what to expect over the next five years. You get the plant list, the layout, the seasonal arc, the 5-year plant-set view, and the maintenance notes.

Custom Garden Blocks

\$100 CAD

Not every garden fits a ready-made plan. If you have specific conditions, a specific feeling you're after, or just want something built for your space, I'll put together three block scenarios based on your answers. Each one designed the same way - honest about the trade-offs, specific about the plants.

The Honest Perennial Guide

\$25 CAD

If you want to go deeper on the plants themselves, The Honest Perennial Guide walks through all 80 varieties with honest assessments of how they actually behave in a real garden. The full picture on plant behaviour, longevity, and the thinking that landed them in my palette.

Not a catalog or textbook. Just my observations.



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