SERENITY AND THE SWEET SPOT

How Jan Johnsen blends ancient and modern ways to create gardens that simply make you feel good.

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Ask Jan Johnsen to design a garden, and she’ll pull out a 100-foot tape measure from her tool kit and talk about shade patterns, drainage, and other daunting challenges of the site. She’ll also toss around terms like tranquility, interacting with nature, and music for the eye. Along with working very much as a traditional designer (she studied landscape architecture at the University of Hawai‘i), Johnsen explores the ways gardens can move people personally and emotionally. “I design a little bit on the woo-woo end of the scale,” she says.

To put it less self-deprecatingly, Johnsen creates outdoor spaces that make you feel good. For more than three decades in New York’s Hudson Valley, she has been designing tranquil, serene gardens designed for inspiration and reflection. “I have seen how light, color, and trickling waters can work together to offer respite from a busy world and make our hearts sing,” she writes in her book Heaven Is a Garden (St. Lynn’s Press, 2014). She also offers her inspired design guidance in classes, lectures, and other public events.

Johnsen calls her designs a “blend of modern and traditional practices, some that go back thousands of years.” She began the blending while growing up in the concrete jungles of Queens and Brooklyn. She recalls a fascination with plants that began while attending an art-oriented high school; her science fair project experimented with the effect of sound on plant growth. There’s been research since then showing that high-frequency sounds influence the growth of plants, she explains now. During and after college, she traveled the world soaking up horticulture and design, studying and working in Kenya, Hawaii, Japan, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and back in the Northeast. She describes the process as a “lifelong study of how our forebears interacted with nature,” immersing herself in both the variety and commonality of sensory and emotional effects of garden design across cultures. Her biggest influence occurred in Kyoto, Japan. “Breathing the cedar-scented air, stress dropped off of me,” Johnsen says. Since then she’s aimed to create serene environments to share this feeling of peace with others—and to design outdoor spaces that tap into the powers of nature.

REMEMBER THE KEYS TO GARDEN SERENITY

To design a garden for relaxation and contemplation, build around three basic elements.

Simplicity
Less is more. Simple, sweeping lines and economy of form in a garden are calming.

Sanctuary
This is the security you feel in a protected area. It’s the call of a quiet niche or the lure of a sheltered corner.

Delight
The most personal part of a design is anything that gladdens your heart: an artful accent, a fire pit, a woodland garden dotted with foamflowers and ferns.

This restful niche features a low stone wall that acts as a raised planting bed. Tall emerald green arborvitae behind enhance the secluded feel; ‘Limelight’ hydrangea, boxwoods, and roses add color.
Johnsen tries to use local material on every project; she used garden stone from this site to build the low wall and nook around the pool. Native grasses are planted behind the wall.

**TAKE INSPIRATION FROM YOUR AREA’S NATURAL FEATURES**

The highest expression of place comes when you honor the natural environs of a region. Take a cue from natural scenes. Wherever you live—in the moist Northwest, the arid high desert, the Mediterranean Pacific coast, or the lush South—try to incorporate native plants in your garden design. Combining local stones with local plants creates a harmony between garden and surroundings that is palpable.

**CELEBRATE WHAT YOU HAVE**

Highlight notable features in your garden, such as a special rock or tree. Or use the Japanese technique of borrowing scenery and incorporate a view beyond your garden. You can do this simply, by placing plants or fencing to frame a distant rooftop or a neighbor’s pine tree or crabapple. Another easy method is to keep shrubs along the property border low—you’ll capture nearby and distant views, plus your garden will appear larger.

Johnsen installed this simple rectangular pool and lined it up with the Hudson River beyond to accentuate the river view and support (rather than compete with) the landscape.
This garden’s power spot is the corner of the low stone retaining wall built into the lawn. “People like to sit on the wall, talk, and enjoy the all-encompassing view of the Hudson River,” Johnsen says. “It’s an ‘ahhhh’ moment.”

FIND YOUR GARDEN’S POWER SPOT

A site’s power spot is any place that seems more interesting than any other. It may be just a high section of lawn, a shaded corner, or a hidden rock. It’s important because it provides a way to see a piece of ground in a new way that can open up our senses or awareness.

To determine where it is, walk around. Stand quietly in different areas and feel the mood each one generates. Once you decide where the power spot is, clear around it, illuminate it, or make a small path leading to it. You can place a marker or an upright stone to signify the area. Or place a bench or a sitting rock in a power spot to establish it as a destination. A view of a stone bench in the corner of a yard, catching the morning sun, is irresistible.
FOLLOW NATURE’S PROPORTIONS

The golden proportion, represented by the Greek letter Phi, is the mathematical ratio 1:1.618 seen in natural forms. It’s found in the proportions of the human body, in the ratio between the forearm and the hand; it’s in the pattern of a sunflower’s seed head, the arrangement of petals on a rose, and in the spiral shape of a nautilus shell.

Our unspoken familiarity with this ratio has led to our building structures and art with it and tends to instill a sense of harmony in outdoor spaces that contain it. For example, a rectangular space with the short and long sides in the proportion of Phi—say, 12 by 19.4 feet—just feels right. This is called the golden rectangle, and if you look closely you can see golden rectangles in many paintings (Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa) and buildings (the Parthenon). Terraces and landings built in the shape of a golden rectangle and bordered with plant beds in the Phi proportion are immediately appealing.

“I’ve been incorporating grass steps in my landscapes ever since I first saw them at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., in the early 1970s,” Johnsen says. The landing areas have natural proportions at 5 feet by 8 feet.

CREATE MUSIC FOR THE EYE

In nature we also find graceful arcs: in flower petals, pine cones, leaves, seashells. Eighteenth-century English landscape designer Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown referred to these curves as the “sinuous line of Grace.” Johnsen calls it music for the eye. Curving walks and steps impart a lyrical, unhurried quality. An undulating walk imitates a meandering stream. A rounded plant bed reaches out to embrace a lawn. To establish the lines for an even, sweeping curve, use a radius and a tape measure (not a hose). Simply hold the end of the tape measure in place with a stick or screwdriver and make consistent, even curves by forming a radius and indicating it with marking paint.

Stone steps were built into the slope of this steep grassy hill. “The protruding rounded steps help connect the upper landscape to the hillside,” Johnsen says. There’s a cadence to the thin grass and stone steps that radiate from the walkway.
ADD COLORS YOU LOVE
A landscape awash in color catches our eye, sends visual cues to birds, insects, and animals, and affects us all with intensity and contrast. The entire natural world reacts to the language of color. Be sure to include in your garden the colors you personally like.

If you’d like some outer guidance, you can borrow from some colorful cultural associations. Red is the color of excitement and power. Orange radiates fun. Yellow is the happy color. Green, the pervasive color of nature, is the “master color” of peace and renewal and is the most restful color to the eye. Blue is a widely popular color. Purple connotes higher wisdom and is associated with originality. White is the pure color of light and serenity. Of course, the personal meaning you find in any hue may be very different. Use your taste above all.

These are what I consider my go-to plants for each color:
Red
- Poppies, begonias, scarlet salvia
Orange
- Asclepias tuberosa (butterfly weed), daylilies, marigolds, ‘Bengal Tiger’ canna
Yellow
Green
- Lady’s mantle, Viburnum ‘Pragense’, oakleaf hydrangea, ferns, boxwood, moss, pines
Blue
Purple
- Ilac, Verbena bonariensis, Salvia ‘Caradonna’, rhododendron, ‘Jackmanii’ clematis
White

“Color brings personality to the garden and is one of the primary factors that affects how a garden feels,” Johnsen says. Here, the large blooms of ‘Jackmanii’ clematis are trained over a white arbor and gate. Bringing color up to eye level—or better yet, above it—has a greater impact on the space.
"I love soil," Johnsen says. She uses various organic amendments in the soil when planting, and she uses organic fertilizers containing kelp as well as mycorrhizal fungi. Healthy soil absorbs more moisture and works in concert with plant roots to create an ideal environment for optimal growth.

**IT'S ALL ABOUT THE SOIL**
The life of the soil makes all the difference to a garden. Good soil is filled with millions of organisms that breathe life into the land. Although we pay little attention to this microscopic world, it is worth noting that, as mycologist Paul Stamets, in his book *Mycelium Running*, tells us, “there are more species of fungi, bacteria, and protozoa in a single scoop of soil than there are species of plants and vertebrate animals in all of North America.” Soil is the garden’s source of tranquility, the substrata of all the life there. Look upon it as nature’s heart.

So do not scrimp on soil preparation. Be sure to incorporate aged compost, leaves, worm castings, or whatever is appropriate for your area to enrich the life in the soil. Apply compost tea and maybe plant some deep-rooted plants such as comfrey and nettles, which mine the deeper layers of subsoil for valuable minerals.

![The branches of a weeping blue Atlas cedar cascade over a rough stone wall. The cedar's long branches contrast with the stone's shape, while the tree's delicate needles contrast with the stone's ruggedness.](image)

**CONTRAST AND BALANCE PLANTINGS**
Plants can be the ultimate delight of a garden. Make sure there is a balance of fine and bold, dark and light, soft and hard. The contrasts enliven a garden and provide the balance that we all can sense and enjoy.

For example, the delicate beauty of a spreading threadleaf Japanese maple is highlighted when it’s contrasted against a low-lying stone or hanging over a wall. Similarly, the rigid blades of iris, yucca, or aloe come to life when surrounded by softer foliage.