

BY CAROLE OTTESEN

# Quick Fixes *for*



Need to spruce up your garden on short notice? Here are some tips for creating a visitor-worthy garden when time is tight.

**R**EMEMBER months ago when you agreed to **a)** open your garden for the community garden tour; **b)** host your garden club's annual summer meeting; or **c)** hold a summer party for the neighborhood association? Then, it seemed like there was all the time in the world to get the garden ready. And now: Yikes! The garden is not at its best and you have just a week or two to bash it into shape.

Don't panic. You can do this! Basically, it's just cleaning things up, "possibly adding a little seasonal interest or some art," says Louisiana landscape architect John

Mayronne. Remember, he emphasizes, "The garden should speak for itself."

### ASSESS THE JOB

Before you gallop off in all directions, frantically clipping, raking, and trimming, step back and look critically at what is already working and what needs help. Begin your appraisal at the front of your property. It is the first thing visitors will see. Your prize Himalayan blue

**Painted a cheerful orange that harmonizes with the lilies in the foreground, this door creates a sense of welcome for garden visitors.**

poppy may be in the back garden, but in order to see it, visitors will have to make their way around from the front of the house. As you assess your property, take notes. Identify the bare spots, the bad views, and the messy beds as well as the better-looking spots, which will need only minimal effort to tidy up closer to the scheduled event. Start working on what needs the most help.

### AIM FOR A POSITIVE FIRST IMPRESSION

"The sense of arrival is heavily dependent on the combined impact of porch and front door," says California landscape

# Tired Gardens



A little pruning, edging, and a fresh layer of mulch can quickly transform a slightly overgrown garden, top, into a trim and tidy one ready to receive visitors, above.

designer and media personality Maureen "Mo" Gilmer. "The front door is the most important part of the front facade. Every decision made should be considered for its support and accent."

If the front door fades into the background, consider adding a colorful wreath or even painting it for a pop of color. De-clutter the front porch. Attractive containers of brightly colored annuals or tropicals will add a friendly touch.

If, after that, your front facade still looks dreary, determine why. Have the white porch posts gone dull gray? If so, power wash them or give them a coat of paint. If the trim has darkened due to mold, cleaning it with apple cider vinegar will soon have it looking clean and bright. Even if your visitors never go inside, a neat, clean front door and pots of colorful flowers on the front porch will make a positive first impression.

### CREATE A CLEAR AND INVITING ROUTE

As well as an aesthetically pleasing first view, the guests' positive experience has everything to do with the ease of getting to where they are going. The path you want your visitors to follow should be unambiguous. If there are any alternative routes, block them off to avoid confusion. Something attractive—a large potted plant, a lawn chair, a sculpture—blocking the way will keep your visitors from taking the wrong turn.

The path guests are to follow must also be commodious and safe. Trim back any plants that encroach upon the walkway. Secure any loose stones. Emphasize the route with repeated elements that point the way—such as clay pots of flowers. If the function is held in the evening, provide lighting. Luminarias—paper bags filled with sand and lit by candles—are a quick, attractive, and inexpensive way to delineate the route.

As you assess the path, be alert to and remove detritus abandoned by children and your own interrupted labors. Also re-

move any unattractive objects that have been left in place so long you barely notice them—such as a clay pot with a big crack that is dribbling soil, plant identification tags askew in containers or in the ground, a table that has gone rusty, a shabby bird feeder. Stow or discard these as well as any errant trowels, garden hoses, and empty pots that are lying around.

### USE FOCAL POINTS TO GUIDE VISITORS

As you work your way around to the back garden, says Gilmer, “follow a visitor in your mind, visualizing ... how they walk ... and what they feel when they get there.” A focal point in the distance—such as an arbor, a birdbath, or a piece of sculpture—invites guests to venture toward it.

Perhaps nothing says “welcome” and defines the way as clearly as a garden arbor; it will draw visitors along the path like a magnet. Once they pass under an arbor, through the gate, or arrive at the goal, they will have entered your garden room. The experience of arrival will be complete and the focus will shift to the plants.

**Right: A clear pathway, such as this one in Phyllis Gustafson’s Oregon garden, is essential for guiding a visitor’s experience. Bottom right: Focal points, such as this large blue urn, provide an observer’s eyes a place to rest while taking in the view of a busy garden.**

A focal point might also be needed to anchor an otherwise spacious, empty area such as a swath of featureless lawn. A garden bench, a table, or group of garden chairs can serve this purpose and will work even better if they are brightly colored.

### IT’S ALL IN THE DETAILS OF THE PLANTS

A garden is about plants. Examine the crowd of perennials, annuals, trees, and shrubs that make up your garden...and groom them. Alabama gardener Dean Clark advises first “remove the dead, dying, weeds, and litter.” Then, “prune back the overgrown where necessary.”

“Tip prune the shrubs crowding or stretching out from bed edges. Prune tips that hide the shrubs’ natural shapes by pruning to that shape,” says Mike Zajic, director of Mill Pond Garden in Lewes, Delaware. “Feathered edges, a discernible shape, and clean lines give a sense of serenity and calm.



When growth goes every which way, it hides the basic shape and looks visually weedy.”

Rampant growth can also obscure your garden’s ornamental assets. Remove rambunctious foliage around a small, choice, low-growing shrub. Make sure the beautiful bark of a crape myrtle is clearly visible. Removing excess branches and foliage allows what is left to develop properly and far more attractively.

Do “weed the pavements” and remove “any large conspicuous weeds,” advises Zajic. And “straighten the line or smooth the curve of the bed edges.” People “read” a space by its edges—especially those along driveways and paths and between beds and lawn.

With time, grass and weeds will creep into the space between garden beds and lawn, blurring the edge. Reestablishing

a hedge of green-and-yellow variegated hollies? Add yellow annuals. Will the pink hydrangeas be in bloom? Add something else with pink flowers. A single color scheme repeated throughout the garden will have enormous impact by creating a sense of harmony.

In the same vein, Zajic cautions against combining “too many different flowers, colors, or shapes,” because that



An arbor like this one, draped in clematis blossoms, serves as a focal point and defines a garden “room” on the other side.

If there is time, replace bloomed-out, overgrown annuals with neat new candidates. If not, deadhead as much as you can. Attention to detail, Clark observes, “makes all the difference.”

### SMOOTH EDGES FOR INSTANT LIFT

Especially when time is short and the clean-up seems overwhelming, look to the edges. “Don’t bother weeding the insides of beds,” says Zajic. If you can’t find the time to clean out the entire bed, tidy the first foot or two where the bed meets driveway, path, or lawn.

a crisp, clean edge—whether straight or sinuous—will provide instant punch. Use a straight shovel to dig a shallow “V” shaped trench starting on the lawn side and doubling back on the bed side. The shadow the trench throws will further delineate between lawn and bed.

### UNIFY A SPACE WITH REPEATED COLOR

Perhaps the quickest and easiest way to unify a garden is with color. Augment the color of a dominant plant or plants already growing in the garden. Is there

can contribute to a garden that is “hectic looking” and overstimulating for visitors.

If other elements in your garden—such as chairs, tables, or containers—add a disruptive rather than a unifying note to your color scheme, either stow them or bring them into line with new paint. Automotive shops can powder-coat iron outdoor furniture in just about any color. Or you can spray paint it yourself. Further enhance the color scheme of the furniture with matching accessories such as pillows and tablecloths.

TOP: MARK TURNER. BOTTOM: CAROLE OTTESEN

JERRY PAVIA

## THE FINAL TOUCH UP

■ **A few days before the event** Spray any new weeds that have popped up with a five-percent vinegar solution. Refresh mulch. Position furniture for the best visual effect; this may have nothing to do with how you usually use it.

■ **A day or so before the event** “Water the garden to restore turgor and sheen,” says Mike Zajic, director of Mill Pond Garden in Lewes, Delaware. Mow the lawn. Rake up noticeable grass clippings.

■ **The morning of the event** Deadhead flowering plants in containers and in the garden. Make sure paths are free of any debris. Wipe garden furniture clean.

Walk through the garden and “pull off conspicuous dead plant parts or yellow leaves,” says Zajic. “Pick up debris like branches and pine cones.”

■ **Last minute** Sweep any final litter under the shrubs. Sit back and enjoy your visitor-worthy garden. —C.O.

## WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, DIVERT ATTENTION OR CAMOUFLAGE

A bed full of plants that have already bloomed lacks interest and can look messy. A focal point such as a handsome container or a piece of sculpture will draw attention away from post-bloom plants. Zajic likes “one big, abundantly potted plant that has a complementary fit to the garden and some eye-catching impact. Large scale is better than smaller.”

Is there a bare spot in a prominent bed? No time to plant? The easiest thing to do is camouflage. Cut a bouquet of fresh greens and lay it over the bare ground. No one will be the wiser and the spot will blend with all of the other greens in the garden. It will “read” as planted.

If there are distracting objects that cannot be budged—a heavy garden implement or containers of plants too numerous to put into the ground before the event—create a tableau by arranging them as artistically as possible. Or hide them by placing a screen or piece of furniture there.

## DO A FINAL TOUCH UP

When you’ve finished the major cleaning, pruning, edging, camouflaging, and decorating, you are ready for a final



**Repetition of color—such as the yellow in the peonies and the chairs in Gail Gee’s Maryland garden, top—creates unity. Eye-catching plants in containers can be moved where needed for accent. Teresa Scholly and John Holt designed this arrangement, above, for a brick patio.**

touch up (see sidebar, above left). Start a day or more before and repeat on the morning of the event.

Signing up to host a garden tour or party may be a daunting undertaking, but it has a huge upside. The best thing about being motivated to groom a garden for an event is that, afterward, you can

bask in a fabulous garden for the rest of the summer! Who knows? You might even be tempted to host events on a regular basis.

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