

Outdoors with Jon George

Spruse up for Spring

With Cottage Garden Style
By Jon George

Tired of boring hedges and endless mowing? Take on a new approach to your Florida landscape this year with low maintenance color leading the way. The English Cottage Garden Style harkens back to a bygone era of small but densely planted garden areas that were easily accessible from the front entry path or garden gate. This Cottage style garden in Southwest Gainesville features the best of the old and the new varieties with hybrid salvias, angelonias and geraniums sharing space with time-trusted rudbeckias, azaleas and abelias. Generous plantings like these will discourage weed growth and reward you with a tapestry of color.



Favorite Cottage Plants for Florida

Certain plants conjure up an image of the cottage garden style. A vine-covered trellis conveys a romantic notion of a place of a place that time forgot. A fragrant rose on a picket fence makes us remember grandma's garden and a simpler time where vegetables were proudly tended and cut flowers were gathered for the Sunday dinner table. After traveling and living in many parts of the world, I returned to Gainesville and found many people giving up on gardening. North Florida experiences a range of temperatures that send a lot of plants packing! Many tropical plants that grow in Orlando will not survive our winter freezes. Conversely, many Northern plants like peonies and tulips sadly do not make it here because of our heat and humidity. The challenge began in earnest to find Florida friendly plants that would thrive in our climate without a lot of fuss. The University of Florida Trial Gardens at one point offered a wealth of new plants that were both superior bloomers and often more disease resistant than older introductions. Kanapaha Botanical Gardens here in Gainesville cultivates an ever-changing kaleidoscope of plants suited for North Florida. Also, plant devotees Alan and Ellen Shappiro of Grandiflora Grown plants have been a constant resource for plant knowledge for our area, native and otherwise. The cottage garden style is informal and profuse. Select plants that bloom at different intervals during the year, like this re-blooming daylily paired with Black-Eyed Susans (above). Stagger plant groupings for a natural effect and layer similar plants together according to height for a transition that is easy on the eyes.

How it all Began

True cottage garden style began in the Middle Ages as individual land ownership fostered the building of cottages and small family farms. The first cottage gardens were peasant gardens, typically a small stone house with a flourish of herbs and vegetables just within reach of the kitchen for cooking. Later, flowering plants were added and allowed to re-seed. Formality was saved for the gentry and their large manor gardens of clipped borders. In the cottage garden, the luxury of a mixed border was allowed, with plants happily winding together.



Beyond Boxwood

Structural elements in the cottage garden style need to remain strong in order to provide contrast with the less than formal plantings. A coordinated landscape design with a layout of paths, trellises and pergolas provides a necessary backdrop for flowering and fruiting trees, shrubs and perennials. An example in the Duck Pond neighborhood here in Gainesville (right): Stone edging was brought in to build a retaining wall and define a new Centipede lawn. Curvilinear lines replaced a 1950's sidewalk and a new perennial border was added to the streetscape with plantings like this Penstemon 'Dark Tower' (featured left).



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