

THE SANCTUARY GARDEN: OVERVIEW*

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Why a Sanctuary Garden?

A well-conceived garden allows a soulful intimacy between human and Nature. This symbiotic relationship can serve to elevate the human condition by evoking the Soul's natural need in the world for *Wonder/Celebration*, *Healing/Regeneration*, and *Peace*. However, to readily access these needs in a natural environment, there must be a perceived sense of **safety**, **security** and **comfort**, i.e. the opportunity to relax, explore, reflect, and simply “be” removed from worldly issues or obligations. As wellness practitioners and gardeners, our practical and philosophical dedication to the concept of *sanctuary* — a safe haven or refuge in place and time for the bodymindspirit — has allowed us to empower the therapeutic value of the human connection with Nature via the *Sanctuary Garden*.

Basic Objectives of a Sanctuary Garden

A well-created, used, and maintained sanctuary garden will, over time, hold an increasing amount of psychological and physical energy. This is the natural outcome of a reverent Human-Nature relationship. A sanctuary garden that utilizes thoughtful and creative design elements should have these basic objectives:

1. To enhance and honor Nature with reverence
2. To allow passive observation or creative exploration
3. To invite personal reflection about life
4. To stimulate Wonder/Celebration
5. To enhance Healing/Regeneration
6. To give one the opportunity to feel at Peace

Preliminary Design Considerations

A. The Spirit of Place

Every location in nature has an elemental *spiritus mundi*. A “garden spirit” can be called to guide the creation and care of an outdoor setting such as a sanctuary garden. With humility, sensitize yourself to the potential location: visualize the garden, show gratitude, and plan to be devoted to it. Sit at the potential site at various times of the day to observe Nature: lighting, wind, sounds, creatures, etc. Get a *feel* for the place: what does it *say* to you; what *intuition* seems to speak to you about how to proceed with its design? Finally, consider a name for your sanctuary garden and create signage for it.

B. Geography of Place (boundary and location, e.g. *temenos*, to contain the *spiritus mundi*)

A real or implied boundary is key to enhancing the power of a sanctuary garden. Consider the following in the garden's design:

1. **Attunement to Place:** soil, lighting, topography, paths, mood, magic, mystery, and history — these are important to initial design considerations. In short, get to know the location!
2. **Establish Priorities:** plans for development/evolution, who is served, accessibility, and safety precautions — these must be considered in the short and long-term design.
3. **Resourcefulness:** budget, maintenance, staffing, donations of money or goods to the garden — critical to long-term success.
4. **Attractiveness of Place:** the garden's design must integrate and evaluate the ongoing success of its aesthetic appeal (use of nature), soulful appeal (effect on visitor), and wildlife habitat appeal (meeting the needs of wildlife, insects, etc.).

*Edited from **The Sanctuary Garden: How to Create a Place of Refuge in Your Yard or Garden**. Christopher Forrest McDowell and Tricia Clark-McDowell. New York: Simon & Schuster, Fireside Books, 1998.

7 Design Elements of a Sanctuary Garden

1. **Entrance and entrance threshold:** key to setting the tone, inviting exploration, and containing the garden spirit. Can be formal (gate, arch) or informal (entrance path, shrubs, etc.).
2. **Water features:** psychological, spiritual and physical effects to soothe the soul and invite reflection. Invaluable for wildlife.
3. **Color & lighting:** to elicit emotion, comfort and awe via mood, intensity and location of flowers, trees, shrubs, grasses, etc. Artful use of artificial and natural lighting for mood and safety.
4. **Sitting areas:** to enfold the visitor into the sanctuary experience by providing a place of rest for body and soul. Structures or ground must be aesthetic, comfortable, durable, and functional.
5. **Natural features:** as anchor points, including the use of rocks, wood, wind, trellises, natural fences and screens to evoke emotion. These “bones” of the garden give visual relief to vegetation.
6. **Art:** to evoke secular and spiritual connections to Nature, or between human and nature.
7. **Habitat for wildlife:** to attract diversity of animals, including beneficial insects in which to share the garden space.

Personalizing a Sanctuary Garden

The 7 Design Elements above create a foundation upon which numerous specific designs or themes can be integrated. Consider the following garden themes that take thoughtful planning and maintenance.

Garden Themes

- **The Peace Garden** — *fosters the contemplative spirit:* soothing colors, sacred art, sitting areas for solitude or to show vistas, pleasing water features (fountain and bird baths),
- **The Exuberant Garden** — *sustains the joy of life:* vibrant colors, whimsical art, bold use of natural features, strong entrance design
- **The Memory Garden** — *honors what we hold dear:* plantings and colors reflective of childhood or loved ones (living or deceased), overall pleasantness of secular/sacred art, sitting areas and use of water
- **The Convivial Garden** — *nurtures friendship, love and intimacy:* mixed use of colors, privacy benches with small tables or umbrellas, moving water, garden rooms created with screens of fencing, shrubs, etc.
- *Additional Themes:* **Moon Garden** (white flowers), **Fragrant Garden**, **Healing Herbs Garden**

Interactive Features (Opens bodymindspirit to reflection and contemplation)

- Water urns: ritually casting woes away; reflectively ladling water from one bowl to another
- Peace shrine: symbolically offering blessings for peace; creating a stupa with rock and water
- Prayer shrine: offering prayers to the wind; written on cards hung on a designated tree
- Path of wandering souls: humorizing the cycles of life; upsidetown shoes buried in ground
- Labyrinth: purposefully walking with intent
- Rock towers: rebalancing life and purpose; stones of varying sizes carefully balanced
- Nature altars: honoring the co-creative relationship between human and Nature
- Garden Art: to creatively humanize and honor Nature via secular and spiritual means
- Sitting Options: to inspire silent witnessing with awe instead of judgment; to rest or to socialize
 - A. Named benches
 - B. Special locations: scenic vistas, near pond or water, on a deck, in a courtyard, amongst flowers, watching a sunset or sunrise, near a bird feeder
- Reflection signs, cards: to interiorize the visitor during the visit. Examples: a subtle sign near a bench that says, “Breathe.” “Angel cards” at entrance, in bowl, that give an inspiring message to the taker
- Bowl of touchstones: to enhance the sacred reflective connection with the Soul.
- Windchimes & bells: announcing spirits in the wind; lower-hanging small bell(s) at entrance to garden or garden rooms invite visitor to ring them as they pass through.