

Lee Estes, Master Gardener

Home gardeners love nothing so much as visiting the great public and private gardens of the world. Not only is it an enjoyable experience in itself, but we usually come away with new ideas to introduce into our own smaller horticultural endeavors. What we can't do in most cases is make our gardens actually larger. However, there are some "tricks" which at least can make them seem larger, even much larger. The key is understanding that human beings as territorial animals are constantly, if often unconsciously, seeking to associate people with specific spaces that belong to them in some way. When someone steps into your backyard for the first time one thing that they do almost instantly, using mostly visual clues, is map out its boundaries--what is your property and what is not. Humans are quite good at doing this sort of thing, almost as good as recognizing faces. But, as with faces, they can be fooled. There are several visual tricks that can make your garden seem larger than it really is.

1) The length of the main pathway is one such visual clue. Most backyards are more or less rectangular. A path that runs diagonally from one corner to another is longer than one that runs either perpendicular or parallel to the house. If you orient your garden diagonally with respect to the house, it will seem larger. It will also usually be more interesting, which has an impact on the perception of a space, too.

2) On a related point, a curving or zigzagging route between two points is longer than a straight one! Not only is a straight line shorter, it also carries the eye more quickly to a garden's boundary making that garden seem smaller.

3) Because human beings understand perspective intuitively, as a path recedes they expect it to appear to narrow. However, if a path really does narrow, people will interpret this real narrowing as leading to something farther away. A narrowing path seems longer making the whole area it covers seem bigger.

4) Most of our yards or gardens are bounded by fences or walls, which are very big clues as to their size. But walls and fences can be hidden by vegetation. If its boundaries are carefully obscured with multiple layers of plant material of various heights, even a very small garden can be made to feel very big. The mind wonders what might lie beyond the plants--more garden, perhaps?

5) Paths which disappear around corners of buildings or into masses of vegetation also beg the question of "more garden," leaving the question of size at least temporarily unresolved and providing a motivation for further exploration.

6) Though boundary fences and walls, and what lies beyond, can be hidden completely, by planting more selectively a gardener can "borrow" views beyond his or her property. Trees

especially lend themselves to being borrowed. In a well planted garden it is often difficult to tell if a tree, a large bush or even a man-made structure of some sort, belongs in your garden or in a neighbor's.

7) It is also possible to lure the eye away from the boundary fence or wall. One or more carefully placed "focal points"--striking plants, trees, a water feature, *objets d'art*—can hold a viewers interest inside the garden. An interesting space seems a larger one.

8) More generally, a garden that cannot be taken in all at once, that needs to be explored to be fully understood, will seem larger. Though somewhat counterintuitive, this is why the division of even a small garden into several "rooms" often makes it feel bigger.

9) Also counter-intuitively, a few large plants or drifts will make a garden feel bigger than many smaller ones. Small plants seem to equal small places, big plants bigger places.

10) Color influences how we interpret distances. Colors at the red end of the spectrum, including oranges, yellows and bright pinks, appear to be approaching the viewer and thus as closer, while those at the blue/violet end appear to be moving away and thus are seen as farther away. A set of blue garden furniture sited at the far end of a garden will make the whole garden seem longer while red furniture will do the opposite.

11) Finally, there are the "deceive the eye" techniques of *trompe-l'oeil* and mirrors. In both methods, a gardener seeks to suggest by reflected or painted images the existence of additional garden spaces and thus a larger garden. However, both techniques, while relatively inexpensive, are not easy to deploy effectively to increase a sense of space. They are usually viewed simply as a type of garden art and are judged accordingly.