On any journey, the first step is often the hardest. Designing your own landscape can be an overwhelming proposition. But it doesn’t have to be. This is the first in a series of three articles intended to help you create your dream garden. I’ll start by sharing tips on evaluating your existing landscape in a site analysis. Then you’ll learn how to make a base map, similar to a blueprint. Once you have that, you’ll be able to refer to it any time you might want to make changes to your landscape.

In the next issue I’ll lead you through style options — do you prefer formal gardens, informal or maybe something in between? And finally, I’ll help you choose the materials and plants that will fit your new garden design, and budget, best. But it all starts with a site analysis. So grab a pencil, some paper and your tape measure. Let’s get started!

### Assess what you have

Here are 10 things you’ll want to keep in mind as you make your site analysis.

- Size and shape of your lot
- Size and location of the house and all other buildings
- Location and sizes of sidewalks, paths, driveway — any permanent features you plan to keep
- Overhead and underground utility lines; in the United States contact One Call at 811 to mark your property
- Location and general sizes of doors, windows, meters, dryer vents and AC units
- Trees and shrubs you intend to keep
- North, so you know sun and shade patterns
- Desirable, as well as objectionable, views
- Drainage issues that will influence your design
- Service areas for compost, trash and recycling

### Assess your needs and the rest is easy!

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**ANALYZE YOUR SITE** Before you head outdoors, roughly sketch the shape of your lot, house, garage, driveway and deck or patio on a sheet of paper as I’ve done in the illustration at right. Any elements that’ll influence your final design need to be on there. For example, I’ve included the shape of the house, as well as placement of the driveway and sidewalks. Once you get outdoors, it’ll be much easier to simply add the measurements to your sketch.

**MEASURE EVERYTHING** If you have a friend to hold one end of the measuring tape, your job will go quickly. If not, you may need a stake to hold the end of the tape. Or check out your local tool rental store. It may have a measuring wheel that makes measuring large areas easy.

In the box “Assess what you have,” at left, I’ve listed many of the elements you need to include on your site analysis. You’ll see that lots of them are on my site analysis at right, where I’ve started to add in some of the measurements.

**TAKE A LOOK AROUND** Once you have all the utilities, measurements and locations added to your site analysis, it’s time to sit down. However, you’re not ready to rest yet. Take some time to look around.

While there’s nothing really wrong with the landscape we’re working with, it’s become outdated and bland. The vegetable garden’s important but as the back yard tree has grown, it’s become more shaded. And the compost pile isn’t much to look at. More space for shrubs and perennials would be nice, especially to improve the views from the family room windows.
Save measuring time by checking your county assessor’s Web site for your property lines and the size and shape of the house.

Include everything you plan to keep. Here that means the house, garage, driveway and sidewalks, as well as a couple of trees. I wasn’t sure about the deck, so I’ve put it on the site analysis for now.

Don’t worry about scale at this stage of the process. Your objective is to get all the measurements on one sheet of paper.

There’s a wooden deck outside the family room. For now I’ll consider keeping it, but it’s really too small for entertaining.

Before you finish, check out the views in your garden. Are there objectionable ones you want to block? For example, there’s a view from the deck area just outside the family room door that looks directly at the neighbor’s trash cans. I’ll want to block that. However, from the family room and kitchen windows, this home has a good view to the south of a lovely open space with lots of trees in the distance. I don’t want to block that one. So, to make sure I remember both of these views as I create a new design, I’ve marked them on my site analysis.

Now it’s time to go back indoors, to the drawing board, and refine your site analysis into a base map. On the next pages I’ll show you how.
Once you complete the site analysis, it’s time to refine that information into a base map, like the one below. This map needs to be in scale, so I find it’s easiest to work with graph paper and a ruler. I decided on a scale where each quarter inch equals a distance of 5 feet. So, one square equals 25 square feet.

You’re going to draw and write your ideas on the base map. Since it’s something you’ll want to save for future reference, make several photocopies and keep the original clean. Or, if you prefer, lay tracing paper over the original and draw on that. I like copies because they stand up to erasers better. Whether you use a color or black and white copier, select a dark setting so the pale grid will show.

ANY QUESTIONS? In this phase, think about what you’d like and how you’ll use the new garden. And of course, consider how much time you want to spend on maintenance. Be sure to ask other members of your family what they’d like, too. You may have to cut items later because of space or budget, but for now, dream. To help you get started, I’ve pulled together a list of possibilities in “What do you want?” at left. The checked items are the ones I want to try to include in this garden.
Dealing with unique lot shapes

**L-shaped** L-shaped lots can give you extra space, but they can also be hard to manage. Often there are narrow sideyards with paths that are used only as passageways. Here, I’ve decided to add a hard-surfaced patio screened by a tall fence for privacy.

**Pie-shaped** Tight corners are not easy to mow. Ease them into more manageable shapes with plantings. On the other hand, for the illusion of more space, leave the front yard open to blend into the neighbor’s lawn.

**No back yard** You have a tiny lot and no back yard. Everything is out front. You want to garden, but how? A small veggie garden is a good fit on the sunny corner near the kitchen. And a hideaway can easily be tucked in the narrow side yard, leaving a small spot for storage in between.

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**BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD** Now you’ve begun to figure out what you really need and what’s negotiable. Take a copy of your base map and begin to place the elements from your list where they might work best. On my early maps I tried to leave the veggie garden where it was and just spruce it up. But that corner was the furthest from the house and seemed the natural spot for a secluded hideaway. So, on the final base map at left, I put the getaway in the corner and moved the vegetable garden over.

Mark up several base map copies with ideas. You don’t need defined shapes and sizes, just circle the location. Then take your base map and walk around the garden, envisioning where the elements you want might best be located. Remember that old deck I mentioned? I’ve decided to remove it and include something larger, so I’ll mark the location. Later, I can determine how big, what style and what materials I’ll use.

It’s a good idea to set your notes aside for a day or two. Many of your best ideas may come to you when the base map isn’t staring you in the face. Write these ideas down, fit them in and tour your garden again. When you have the best fit, go back inside and, on a clean copy of your base map, sketch them in.

Not all lots are the same shape or size. What if you don’t have room for a private area away from your house? In “Dealing with unique lot shapes” at right, I’ll show you three challenging scenarios and how to deal with them.

Whew! That’s a lot to think about as you get ready to design your new garden. But arranging your landscape on paper is much easier and cheaper than having to adjust it once you start installation. In upcoming issues I’ll share tips on choosing a design style, as well as show you options for each element of your design. And finally, I’ll talk about choosing materials and plants.

— Jim Childs