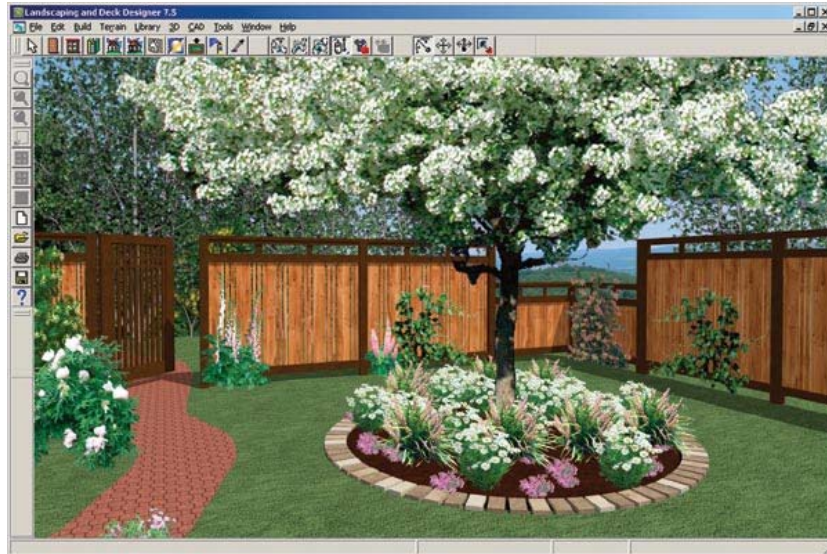


The Trowel and the Mouse



Pixelated Planting Images from "Better Homes and Gardens Landscaping and Deck Designer," depict various combinations of plants.

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IN designing gardens, I have always relied on trial and error, impulse buying, book and magazine research, and consultations with fellow gardeners.

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But the nagging need to fix up a naked swatch of ground between my house and my neighbor's house sent me out to consider the possibilities in landscaping with technology.

There are hundreds of computerized programs for gardening and landscape design, some of them free on the Web. I started with a basic one: "Better Homes and Gardens Landscaping and Deck Designer," version 7.0. It is \$49.99 at [amazon.com](#). An [Amazon](#) spokesman, Sean Sundwall, said it is their best seller in the category of gardening and landscape software.

Since the Better Homes and Gardens magazine has been around for decades, the choice seemed as solid as a rotary phone, appropriate for a technophobe like me. The software includes a vast array of outdoor design tools, including a selection of more than 1,500 plants, hundreds of options for furniture, swimming pools and lighting, complete perennial beds created by the magazine, sprinkler designs, custom pathways and project cost estimating.

Perhaps the most useful feature of the program is that the design is visible in three dimensions.

If you hire a landscaper, the odds are good that he or she will be using a computer program to help with the decision-making. Landscape professionals rely on computer programs "100 percent," most often choosing Rhinoceros or Maya, according to Mark Thomann, design director at Balmori Associates, a Manhattan-based landscape architecture firm.

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"The computer enables us to very quickly present and test ideas in 3-D and animation," Mr. Thomann said. "With a computer, you can show how seasons change a landscape, how someone moves through a space, show a small piece of a project, look at it in the day and in the night."

Technical fumbling aside, gardening by computer can be kind of fun.

Moving a rhododendron and tucking in tulips can feel a little like a grown-up version of playing with Colorforms, in which pictures are made with reusable plastic stickers. Of course, computerized gardening is also practical, a way to view plant and tree selections without first having to pay for them.

I set about figuring out how to deal with the mournful expanse by my house, empty but for some thorny weeds and tufts of yellowed grass borders. It measures about 50 feet long by 12 feet wide. Since the house doesn't factor into this project, I created some boxy shapes to represent the structure.

I began by pulling down a list of evergreens on the screen and choosing my favorite: *Buxus sempervirens*, or common boxwood. These gumdrop-shaped, leathery-leaved shrubs can grow 20 feet tall and as wide. I chose four to anchor the rectangle, promising to prune to keep them pudgy rather than gargantuan.

For height, I chose an American holly. As an additional tall screen, I selected the pyramid-shaped arborvitae. I chose two *Kalmia latifolia* or mountain laurels, because it is the state flower in Connecticut, where I live. I also added a pair of rhododendrons for their giant, exotic blossoms.

For splotches of color, I selected a couple of *Pyracantha coccineas*, which promise a russet blaze. Since moving the plants took only a click of a mouse, I did multiple arrangements before settling on a design that created soft, undulating lines of multi-hued greens sparked with red.

Just as I check off more plants than I intend to buy when leafing through catalogues, I went overboard with the software. After I created the privacy screen, I installed a copper beech smack in the middle of the front yard. There it stood in the plan, fully grown, a beckoning spot for a picnic. Then I began clicking the mouse to dot borders along the house with more bulbs than I would ever have the wrist strength to plant, and created mounds of color in the largest perennial bed on the south side of the house.

Although a computer can't replace the emotional impulse in gardening — the one that causes me to buy more buddleia than I need because its weepy branches lure butterflies, or crowd beds with pansies because their open, cheery faces remind me of my daughter — the design program allowed me to proceed with confidence. For one, it provided a spatial template for a job too large and expensive to trust to trial and error.

The program also educated me on the heights and growing conditions of plants under consideration. It is an organized approach, far better than reading the plant tag when standing in the broiling sun of the garden shop while scribbling in a notebook.

Indeed, my new landscape might have been settling in to its first summer had my neighbor not discovered the need to remove an underground oil tank. At the moment, a backhoe on the adjacent property shadows my intended new garden. The good news is, I have a plan in hand for fall.