



ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

A blend of medium and fine textures, including *Salvia officinalis* 'Berggarten', *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Golf Ball', *Coreopsis verticillata* 'Zagreb', and two alliums (*Allium christophii* and *Allium sphaerocephalum*).

Texture in the Garden

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JANINE ANDERSON

Texture in the garden is rather like art: It can be hard to explain or define, but we recognize it when we see it. And why is garden texture tricky to describe? Most likely because it's created by a complex blend of factors—the dynamics of light, foliage variation, distance from the viewer, and more.

What Is Texture?

Put simply, texture is the surface quality of an object. Most often, texture in the garden is experienced visually. Variation in light, shadow and color on smooth and unsmooth surfaces generates gradations of texture. Differences in the size, shape (regular or irregular) and surfaces (shiny or dull) of individual leaves also play a large role.

The arrangement of leaves on branch stems contributes to our interpretation of texture, as does the density of the branches and the general growth habit of each plant.

How we perceive texture also depends on how near or distant we are from it. For instance, up close, a small-needled conifer seems finely textured—but step back, and the needles coalesce into a solid, coarsely textured form.

Texture changes with the seasons—as plants leaf out, produce flowers, set fruit, and disperse seeds. Deciduous trees drop leaves, and entirely new textures emerge as branches and bark become visible. Some plants become more prominent in winter, while others seem to disappear into the background.



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Coarsely textured tree peony (*Paeonia suffruticosa* ‘Hai Huang’), underplanted with finely textured fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Little Bunny’) and a groundcover of woolly thyme (*Thymus pseudolanuginosus*).

BOTTOM

Finely textured Tasmanian tree fern (*Dicksonia antarctica*), Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra* ‘All Gold’), and coarsely textured × *Fatsyhedera lizei* ‘Aureo Maculata’ contribute to the textural drama of this planting.



Fine texture also may result when flowers or fruits break up the regular pattern of the leaves. Movement can also interrupt a regular pattern. For example, ornamental grasses provide a finer texture when swaying in a breeze than they do when still.

Examples of finely textured plants include ferns, grasses, boxwoods (such as *Buxus sempervirens*), and other small-leaved plants like *Azara microphylla*, *Prostanthera cuneata*, and some varieties of *Pittosporum tenuifolium* (such as ‘Golf Ball’). A lawn creates a finely textured, sensual surface beneath our feet.

Coarsely textured plants are bold (many gardeners say “bold” instead of “coarse”), highly visible, and hard to ignore. Many tropical plants have coarse textures: They have large leaves; thick, massive branches; and loose growth habits (you can see through them).

Coarsely textured plants are the first plants you notice when you enter a garden, and they impart strength and stability to a design. In a large space, coarsely textured plants can make an area seem smaller and more intimate. However, it pays to use coarsely textured plants in moderation; otherwise, they can be overwhelming or lose impact.

Coarsely textured plants are associated with less formal landscapes. Examples include many hydrangeas, magnolias, catalpas, hostas, gunnera and fatsia.

Between fine and coarse texture is medium texture, where leaf size and branches are neither small nor large, and the plant’s silhouette is tighter than that of more coarsely textured

Categories of Texture

Visual textures are usually categorized as fine, medium or coarse.

Finely textured plants often have many small leaves, flowers and branches. They reflect many small patches of light and shadow, and by doing so can make a space feel larger. They tend to recede into the background and showcase bolder-textured plants.

Finely textured plants create more of a sense of enclosure than do coarsely textured plants. They can feel, look, and even act like a wall. That said, they can also add dimension to a solid partition: A vine growing on a concrete wall texturizes the wall and adds depth to a garden.

Plants with leaves that are compound (see *Sorbus commixta*, page 6), dissected, lobed, variegated, ridged or shiny are usually considered finely textured. So, too, are plants with leaves regularly spaced along their stems or with foliage that has contrasting light undersides.



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Coarsely textured *Hydrangea aspera* var. *sargentiana* against a backdrop of finely textured *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Marjory Channon' and *Clematis recta* 'Purpurea'.

BOTTOM

Dense, dark, finely textured evergreen barberry (*Berberis buxifolia* 'Nana') creates a backdrop for coarsely textured Jerusalem sage (*Phlomis russeliana*).



flora. Examples include *Viburnum tinus* 'Spring Bouquet', *Arbutus unedo* and *Pieris japonica*.

Texture and Tactility

Texture in the garden can also be interpreted literally—that is, by the way something feels. We know from experience that lamb's ear (*Stachys byzantina*) is soft and smooth (like a lamb's ear), and we can experience the sensory pleasure it provides without even touching it. Fuzzy, stiff, prickly, rough, smooth and soft are some of the adjectives that describe the tactile nature of a plant's texture.

Interesting textural plants that encourage the sense of touch are an important component of sensory gardens designed for people with visual impairments.

What Does Texture Do?

When selecting plants, think about visual texture, and it will help you increase the aesthetic appeal of your garden. Texture can be used to create both unity and variety in your design, and to enhance the color palette. As discussed, it can also make a small garden seem larger or a large garden feel cozier.

Unlike with color, which can captivate even when the palette is monochromatic, a landscape filled with similarly textured plants generally is not very exciting. Contrasting textures add drama to a garden.

How much drama to add? That's usually a matter of personal taste. Too much textural contrast may make your garden seem too busy, and some designers recommend ratios of finely-textured to coarsely textured plants in a bed. But I recommend that you experiment to find a balance that works for you. ∞

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Acknowledgements

I would like to credit Polly Hankin, my landscape design instructor in the Horticulture Program at Edmonds Community College. Thanks to Polly's stellar instruction, my class notes are still relevant 18 years later!