

Instead of winter escapes, think winterscapes!  
Take advantage of the cold to design your landscape  
with this advice from a local landscape architect.

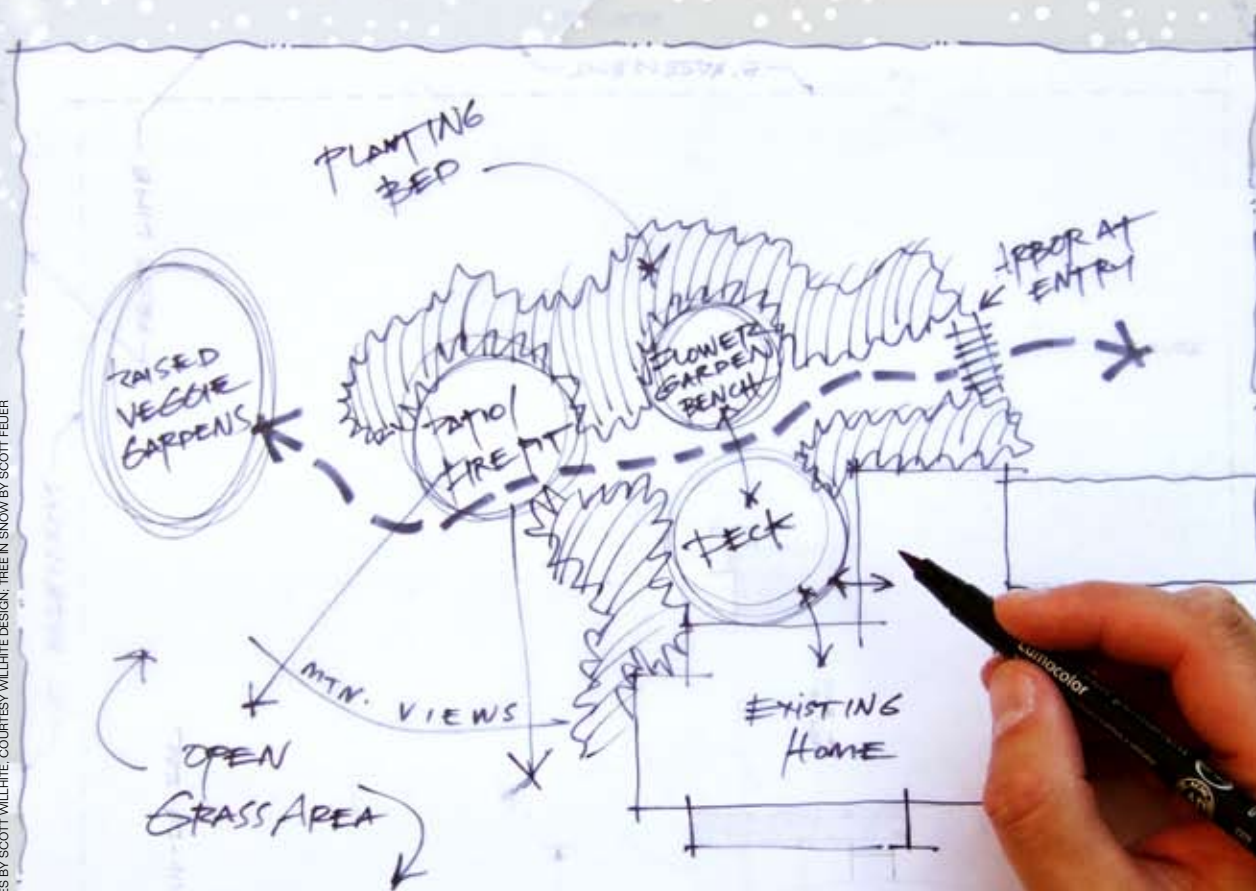
# Time for Winterscapes

By Scott Willhite

I have to admit, I do it too. I go to my favorite nursery and inevitably leave with a trunk-load of irresistible plants, only to get home and realize I have no idea where to put them.

As a landscape architect, that's the most common problem I see when people design their own landscapes. They think about plants and materials first, rather than a landscape design and how

their yard will best function for them. "Winging it" often results in a poorly functioning, difficult-to-maintain, haphazard landscape. The solution is simple: Design first.



When you first develop a landscape plan, sketch a simple, loose "bubble diagram" using circles to locate major landscape elements and outdoor rooms. The goal is to explore a number of quick concepts before getting caught up in the details.

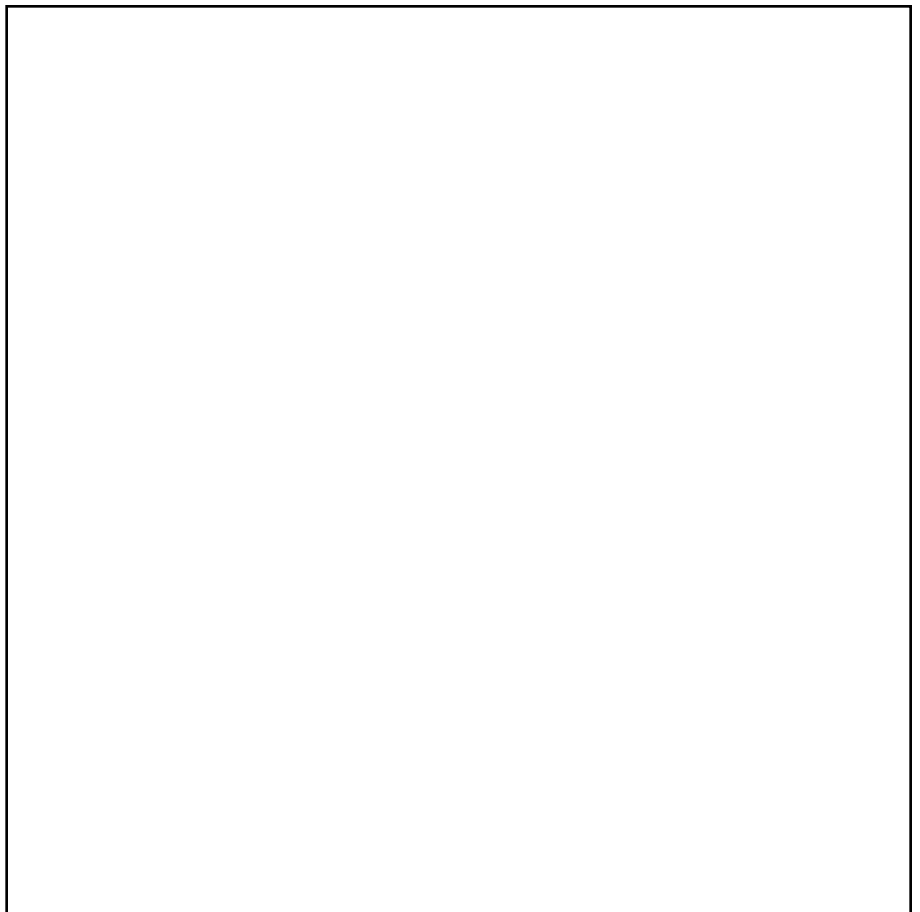
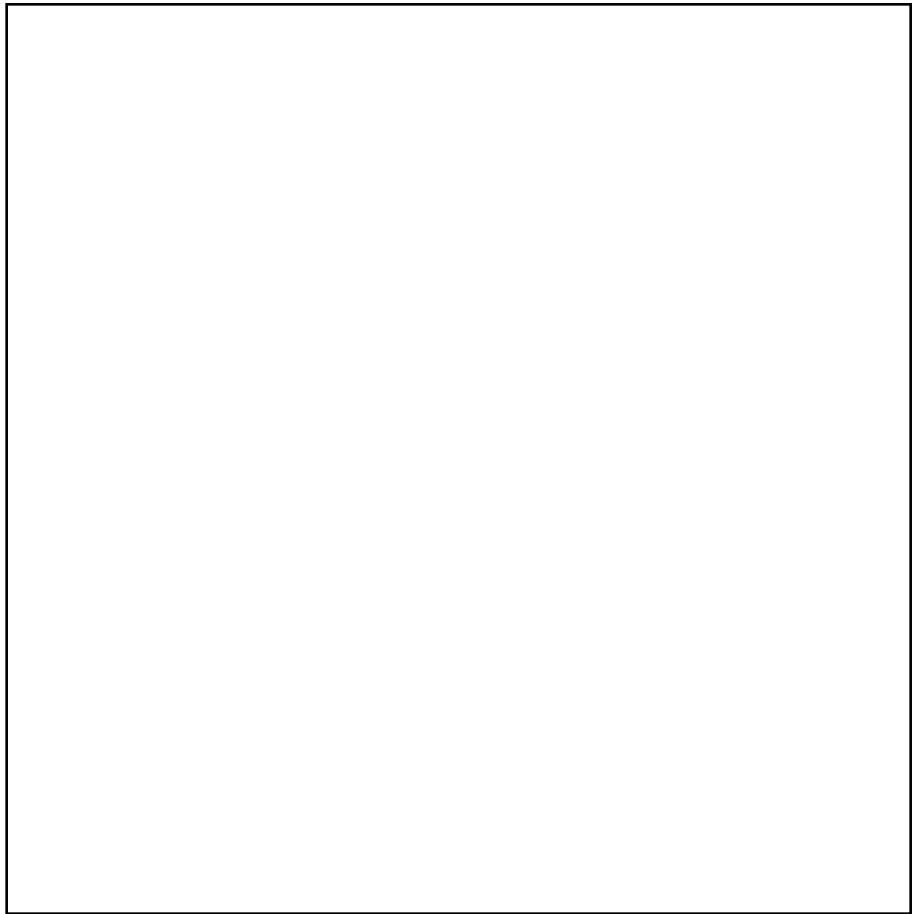
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### Get with the Program

Whether you're a landscape do-it-yourselfer or you choose to hire a landscape designer, the first step is to develop a program, which is a list of all the functions/activities you'd like to include in your yard. Don't think about materials at this point—just activities. A few typical activities are gardening, cooking, entertaining, kids' play and relaxation.



After you've sketched a bubble diagram, get more specific about plantings, furnishings and spatial requirements. This detailed landscape plan divides a yard into a variety of outdoor rooms, including a deck with an outdoor kitchen and dining and seating areas, a stone garden path with a bench and water feature, a stone patio with a fire pit, and raised vegetable gardens.





## LANDSCAPE TIPS

Here are five things to consider when designing a landscape:

1. Create a list of desired activities and functions for your landscape.
2. Plan different outdoor rooms for your landscape.
3. Draw a simple bubble diagram that uses circles to locate outdoor rooms, landscape elements and planting beds. Later, draw up a specific plan with final details.
4. Use large plants, walls, gates, arbors and fireplaces to help define your outdoor rooms.
5. Create a decent budget for outdoor furnishings, pots and lighting in your landscape.

—Scott Willhite

**Not your average pool deck, this poolside retreat is broken up into several small sitting areas with lush plantings and subtle landscape lighting. Native plants and local red sandstone tie this pool comfortably into its mountain setting.**

Now take it a step further and dream big—after all, you're just brainstorming at this point. How about a meditation or yoga spot next to a trickling fountain? Why not add a climbing wall or basketball court? If clients come to your home, how about an engaging outdoor meeting space? What about a bar or outdoor kitchen? Maybe include a grotto, a fire pit or even an outdoor theater or a doggy play area.

Be creative, and ask your family what they'd like in their own dream yard. You'll be surprised at how many activities can happen in a yard beyond gardening and barbecues.

### Space: The Overlooked Frontier

The next step is to lay out your space. This is where I see the most missed opportunities for people's yards. Homeowners are often reluctant to divide their yard into separate spaces, but this makes for exciting landscapes. Imagine walking onto your stone patio, taking a few steps down to a small terrace with a water fountain, and passing through a vine-covered arbor to a French country garden. Sounds nice, and it isn't that difficult to accomplish.

Start by laying out your yard as if you were designing your house. Consider how many "outdoor rooms" you'll need and





Even the smallest yards can include a variety of landscape elements and outdoor activities. This enclosed courtyard accommodates cooking, dining and relaxation, as well as potted plants and a fireplace for its focal point.

what their functions will be. Ask yourself how big the rooms need to be. How do the rooms relate to each other? And how do you move from room to room? Begin with a loose bubble diagram to determine each room's general location. This simple sketch uses circles to identify each activity or space on your site without getting into detail. After completing your diagram, you can get more specific about each room.

The idea of breaking up your yard into different rooms can be intimidating, but the results are much more interesting. I always encourage clients to add a few unique spaces within their yard—anything from a small, quiet courtyard for reading to a family fun zone with a pool and waterfall for cliff diving. It's nice to



Small spaces are great for creating intimate courtyards for entertaining and relaxation. In this space, potted plants, a water feature, decorative lighting and plush furniture help soften the stone and stucco surfaces.





## PLANTS FOR OUTDOOR ROOMS

The following plants help define outdoor rooms:

- ✿ Vertical evergreen shrubs, such as Ames juniper (*Juniperus chinensis* 'Ames'), grow up to 3-feet wide by 8-to-10-feet high and are perfect for creating an evergreen wall. They're also particularly useful for narrow planting areas.
- ✿ Tall hedge buckthorn (*Rhamnus frangula* 'Columnaris') is a great option if you're looking for a deciduous vertical shrub. This shrub grows up to 3-to-4-feet wide by 10-to-12-feet high and has attractive, dark-green glossy leaves.
- ✿ Autumn blaze maple (*Acer x freemanii* 'Autumn Blaze') is a fantastic tree to plant next to patios, and anywhere a nice shade canopy is desired. Available in both single- and multi-stem forms, it provides brilliant red fall color and is a relatively fast grower.
- ✿ Boxwood (*Buxus* spp.) are often used for hedges and topiary, and are perfect for formal gardens and outdoor living spaces. They're available in a variety of sizes and shapes, and have finely textured green foliage. Boxwood requires moderate watering and needs to be protected from hot summer sun and cold winter winds.
- ✿ For a more native look, try Saskatoon serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*). This hardy, large shrub with yellow-to-red fall color and a nice, multi-stem form is great for natural-looking shrub borders.
- ✿ For an Asian look, use a mixture of ornamental evergreens. Many local nurseries now stock a fantastic variety of these sculptural plants. Growers regularly introduce new varieties, from twisted and contorted pines to weeping spruces in dwarf and compact forms.

—Scott Willhite



**Top:** Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*), moonbeam coreopsis (*Coreopsis verticillata* 'Moonbeam') and blue fescue (*Festuca glauca*) combine nicely on this sandstone retaining wall that helps define an outdoor room.

**Bottom:** This large grassy area, used for events and entertaining, was broken up into several distinct spaces by terracing the land with low stone walls and steps, and incorporating native and nonnative ornamental garden beds.

have a big, open grassy area, particularly if you have children. But consider reducing its size and including other special rooms in your landscape. Not only will you increase your yard's functionality, you'll reduce water use.

When designing your rooms, think about factors like sun and shade for sitting areas. In Colorado, it's a good idea to provide both, since the weather varies greatly. Don't forget to plan for outdoor furniture and pots, leaving plenty of circulation space around them. It's important to size each room according to its function and number of potential users. Yards with steep slopes are a separate challenge, but they provide unique opportunities to create rooms through terraces.

Always plan for drainage and utilities that run through your yard. Locate utilities





**This deck was made more functional by adding an outdoor kitchen and bench seating. A simple color palette and a few accessories make this an enjoyable outdoor living and entertainment space.**



**A playhouse with a white picket fence, vegetable garden and sandbox creates a fun focal point for this family backyard.**

for free by calling the Utility Notification Center of Colorado; just dial 811.

### Let the Fun Begin

Finally, the fun part! Now that you have a plan, it's safe to select plants, materials, furniture, pots and lighting. While you don't need to have every plant located and labeled, it's a good idea to at least have a general idea of where plantings will go.

Start with trees, selecting species that support your plan spatially. Always take into consideration a tree's mature size, as well as its water and light requirements. Then work your way down in size of plant material—go from trees and shrubs to annuals and perennials, and finally ground covers.

Select larger plants that help define your rooms, then smaller plants for color and texture. Remember, plant selections that help define rooms are equally—and sometimes more—important than colors or textures.

Selecting hardscape materials is particularly daunting, because there's a lot to choose from and prices vary widely. I suggest sticking to a fairly limited palette. Avoid mixing too many styles and colors

of stone, brick, tile, etc. I often use one of two schemes: monochromatic, where all materials are fairly close in color with a little variation in lightness, darkness and texture; or one main base color that contrasts with one or two accent colors. Keeping it simple is always a good idea.

But don't skimp when it comes to furniture, pots and lighting. These landscape elements bring a space to life. Nice planted pots and furniture can spice up even the worst landscapes. I've seen incredibly expensive landscapes that ran out of budget for these items and the resulting spaces were sterile and uninviting. So pay attention to those details.

For plant junkies like me, who think winter in Colorado is three months too long, you can escape the cold by taking this time to design your landscape. That way, when you head to nurseries in spring, you'll know exactly what to look for and where to plant it. 🏡

*Scott Willhite, ASLA/IRLA, owns Willhite Design ([willhitedesign.com](http://willhitedesign.com)) in Boulder, and has designed landscapes in Colorado, China, the Middle East and Mexico for more than 20 years.*

PHOTOS BY SCOTT WILLHITE. COURTESY WILLHITE DESIGN