

Living

FURNISHINGS

Once your patio or deck is built and the dust settles, it's time to add living furnishings—namely, plants. Think about the roof, sides, and ground-level spaces of your outdoor room to help you to choose well. Once you decide on the design features appropriate for your situation, you can easily fill in the right plants to do the job.

Plant choices for decks can be quite different than those for patios. The space around the underpinnings of decks is too dark to grow plants and is often unsightly. If the deck is not far above the ground, two-to-three-foot shrubs may be enough to soften the edges, frame the steps and hide the under-deck area from view, suggests Paul LaPointe of River's Edge Landscapes. "Dwarf evergreens and flowering perennials will help provide a pleasant sense of depth and balance, softening the hardscape."

A second-story deck requires more consideration. Most shrubs that are tall enough (10 to 15 feet) to form a nice hedge around the underpinnings are equally wide. Many of the nicer viburnums, butterfly bushes, lilacs and privet will grow wide and tall. If ground space is at a premium, use tall and narrow shrubs like 'Graham Blandly' boxwood, the Chinese juniper 'Robusta Green', Rose of Sharon or other upright grower. Don't choose plants that will require lots of maintenance and pruning to keep in shape. Often the best choice is wooden lattice to screen the under deck area, with annual flowering vines and clematis added to soften the hard edges.

Patios are often smaller in scale and call for a different focus. "Patio spaces are more intimate with the garden than decks are, due to height issues," says Greg Powell of Chapel Valley Landscaping. Since patios are often used for entertaining and dining, people will view the garden from seat level—the three-to-four-foot level and below will be most visible. "It is particularly important



Photograph courtesy of River's Edge Landscapes

to use plants that can be enjoyed at close range, especially those with fragrance like the 'Stargazer' or 'Casablanca' lilies, Hosta plantaginea, spicy Viburnum carlesii or daphne," Greg recommends.

A single tree in the 15-to-25 foot height range planted to the south, southwest or west can often provide adequate afternoon shade for a ground-level or first-floor deck or patio. LaPointe recommends crape myrtle and Gleditsia or honey locust. Other choices include trees with a clumping habit such as serviceberry, a great native with white flowers followed by bird-attracting berries in summer and great autumn color, or katsura, a slightly larger tree with heart-shaped blue-green leaves and a surprising fragrance of burnt sugar in the fall. Trees with beautiful peeling bark are favorites. Stewartia pseudocamellia has elegant bark, lovely mid-summer white flowers and excellent fall color, while the paperbark maple has reddish-cinnamon peeling bark. Ornamental cherries 'Hally Jolivette' and 'Mt. Fuji' have lovely bark and a nice canopy of flowers in spring.

Keep point-of-view in mind—at the three-to-four-foot level, all of these trees are beauties. Shade from their leaves is not terribly dense, but eventual spread may be significant. Cherry trees can grow to 50 feet wide over time. For a ground-level deck or patio, the tree-form Hydrangea paniculata grandiflora will not provide a ceiling, but will provide excellent visual interest throughout the year. Its fresh white flowers lean down in the later summer, then turn rosy as fall approaches, taking on a warm tan tone in the winter landscape.

Charles Owens of Fine Landscapes (moving to Sterling this summer) suggests using large pots of hardy small trees, such as Rose of Sharon standards—a plant that normally grows as a clump trained to a single trunk—if trees cannot be planted close to the patio or deck. "The idea is to have the canopy of the potted tree to be overhead to create the sense of a garden room," he says.

Remember that snow shoveled off the deck

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will likely fall on and damage woody plants below. Choosing either annuals or perennials that die back to ground level in winter will solve that problem. "Use soft textured perennials to help soften the hardscape," advises LaPointe.

Unlike other plantings, patio perennials must pass the close-up test. Euphorbia robbaie, hellebores, Ajuga 'Caitlin's Giant' or the lush A. 'Chocolate Chips' will all work well in shady areas. Try the Japanese forest grasses Hakonechloa macra (green) and H.m. 'Aureola' (variegated yellow) for a style note. Sweet woodruff, pulmonarias and the native Pachysandra procumbens will survive scrutiny. In sunniest locations, dianthus, ice plants, hardy geraniums and calamintha are standout performers all summer long with good foliage as well as flowers. Lysimachia nummularia aurea—also known as golden moneywort—will fill in all the extra spaces, its chartreuse ground-hugging leaves replacing a view of relentless mulch. Add height with tough, tall perennial performers like clematis, variegated Arundo donax, and Silphium spp. Rudbeckia "Herbstonne" and Persicaria 'firetail' will perform for months and be welcome counterpoints to the dark purple flowers of a variegated butterfly bush.

Most annuals will perform all summer once established. Sweet alyssum and zinnia angustifolia act as ground covers while many types of salvia add color and fragrance. LaPointe recommends limiting color: "The cool colors give a soothing and cooling effect to help you develop a relaxing environment. Whites, soft pinks, lavenders, purples and blues with a touch of yellow really help cool those hot summer months."

Containers are a must for a deck, as they relieve the relentlessness of wood planking. They can also highlight door and stair areas well and provide excellent focal interest. Bold colors and tropical leaves help. Bananas, cannas, gingers and elephant ears will charm and delight. Tuberose, black peppermint, basil and rosemary will add fragrance. "The joy of coming home to fragrant night-blooming plants and bog gardens full of living bug eaters is what container gardening is all about," says Karen Rexrode, plantswoman-owner of Windy Hill Plant Farm in Aldie. "The options are endless, limited only by one's imagination."

Plants will transform your construction experience to a personal, private and comfortable space. The dappled shade from your small tree and the many delights of well-chosen plants can grace your patio or deck and provide a world of interest and fascination.

—Donna Williamson 