

Inside: Brian Van Bower on Plants and Planters

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By Brian Van Bower

# Planting Places



**G**rowing as a designer is often a matter of seeing things from fresh perspectives.

As one with roots in the pool industry, for example, I once thought first about water and about plants and softscape later (if at all). That bias isn't uncommon, of course: I know plenty of landscape architects and designers who think about plants first and only later consider water. It all has to do with our backgrounds, educations, perspectives and priorities.

But now that I (and others on similar paths) have developed the skills, knowledge base and powers of observation needed to create ever-better exterior environments, the combination of water with plants and the planters that contain them is something approached all at once, with every design element given equal weight and attention.

In my own practice, I saw a need to jump to an even higher level and, some years back, hired Andrew Kaner – a gifted designer with a master's degree in landscape architecture and now an invaluable team member. I've learned a great deal from him and appreciate (more than even he probably knows) the way he helps us integrate plant selections and planters with water in our designs.

Coming from the pool industry, I value the schooling he's given me in what plants need to thrive. As I see it, by teaching me about these basic practical and technical issues, he's opened my eyes to a new realm of aesthetic poten-

As I've become more comfortable discussing planters and their intricacies, I've made them a much more prominent part of my early discussions with clients – and that has been a revelation.

tial – one that is becoming increasingly important to our business as we move forward.

## key players

Planters in particular have been a revelation to me. Whether included as structures or as containers, these elements can soften views, direct attention, define spatial boundaries, articulate grade transitions, work as edge treatments, create reflections in water, provide seating areas, offer privacy, buffer sounds, create shade, lend color, attract birds, draw butterflies or just plain smell good.

That's quite a list, and the way you use them has everything to do with a number of factors including the setting, the watershape design, climate, budget and the clients' ideas and wishes. As I've become more comfortable discussing planters and their intricacies, I've made them a much more prominent part of my early discussions with clients – and that, too, has been a revelation.

In simply broaching a subject that never came up when I worked strictly in pools and spas, I've discovered that many of my clients have distinct, even refined ideas about planted areas. In some cases, those notions are extremely helpful; in others, they can be unrealistic – but the important point is that, for these clients, the bias toward plants is there to be addressed. And even in cases where it's clear they haven't given plants much thought, I've found that simply offering ideas about using greenery creatively tends to open their eyes to a whole, new range of aesthetic possibilities.

It's all part of being as comprehensive as possible with clients. In my case, in fact, I discuss using plants and planters in designs at the same level as other key design elements including shade structures, landscape lighting, outdoor dining



areas and fire features.

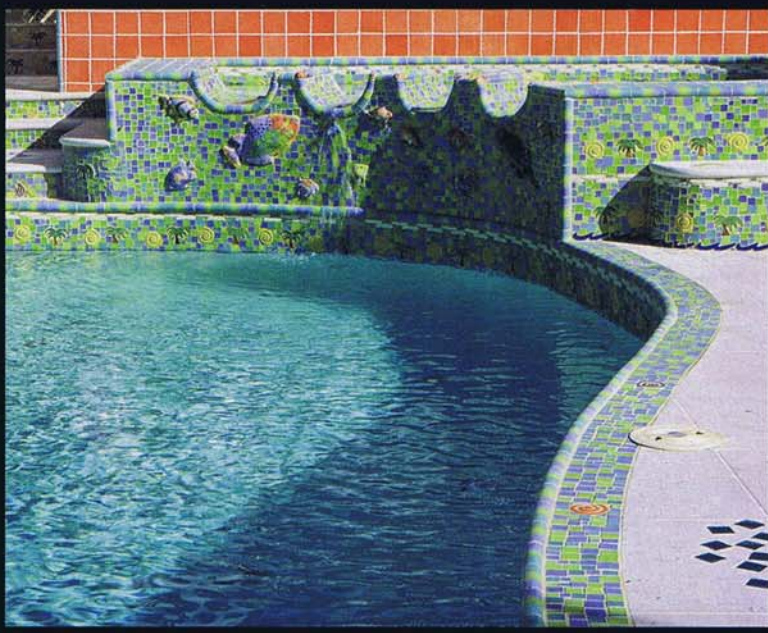
Working with Andy and as a member of project teams that often include landscape architects other than Andy, I've seen some incredibly creative planter treatments including some that are the most appealing and interesting parts of a given project.

I've recently seen planters, for example, that have been recessed inside a body of water in such a way that a water-in-transit system flows over edges and down into a planter from which trees and other tall plants seem to emerge from the surface of the water. I've also been involved in a project in which planters installed with rooftop pools have been made to serve as key architectural accents.

In less extreme cases, I've also been involved in projects where planters are used to define and complement a variety of watershapes by softening hardscape, articulating the boundaries of vanishing edges or providing terraced backdrops on otherwise unusable slopes. In many de-



Charles Hess Landscape Architects (Lansdale, Pa.) designed this courtyard fountain and used a slightly raised circular planter to soften the visual impression it makes.



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signs, we've taken small areas that would in the past have served little or no design function and have turned them into planters that make statements where there would otherwise have been voids.

I am particularly fascinated by the way planters can be used in defining grade changes while also providing seating areas – and by how they can be used to articu-

late retaining walls or a pool's raised bond beam and create either focal points or visual transitions. Selections of shapes and materials are factors here as well and can be used to establish harmonies with the architecture or, on a completely different tack, provide transitions from built spaces to purely natural areas of a property.

What I've learned, in a nutshell, is that

the possibilities here are truly limitless if you think about them creatively.

## integral structures

I've also come to the obvious recognition that plants and planters fit best in a design program when they are considered right from the start.

Just setting aside areas for plants isn't enough: If you do so without considering how the structures and plants contained within them will affect the design, you'll leave yourself with only a limited set of options when it comes to

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## topsoil and beyond

One of the keys with planters has to do with the surface of the planted area.

Some landscape installers mistakenly fill these structures almost to the top of the structure, which leads to problems with runoff over the edges of the planter in the course of watering or in the event of drenching rainfall. As bad, this can result in soil being washed out of the planter and into a watershape – a true maintenance nightmare.

In our plans, we call for recessing the soil surface a good three to four inches below the edge of a planter. This alleviates maintenance problems and also allows views of the edges of capstones or other presentable top treatments.

Recessing the surface also allows for treating the soil surface itself in aesthetic terms. Mulch, for example, isn't a bad idea: It can look good and helps the soil below retain moisture. These days, however, we've been tending toward stronger, more visual approaches – using various pebbles or smooth rocks, for example, or even glass materials to add a strong, aesthetic element.

In one recent project, we used a (costly!) green stone to pick up colors from other materials we'd used elsewhere in the design. We've also used the same rock material in planters that we've used to fill troughs for perimeter overflow systems, for example.

These may seem smallish details, but with some thought these elements can be used to nice effect.

—B.V.B.



a design element that can have a major influence on the way a space is seen and experienced.

In some situations, for example, raised or terraced planters can define the boundaries of a space while softening the vertical transitions. Conversely, planters flush with the surface can expand the appearance of a deck or walkway or break

up large expanses of hardscape. It all depends on the needs of the design. In a few cases, in fact, these planters need to be downplayed because they can make a small space seem even smaller.

To my mind, this is where the work of watershapers, who are often more accustomed to thinking about hardscape treatments, comes together with the expertise

of landscape professionals, who know plants and their needs. What good does it do to create a space for plants without knowing what sort of plant will be enclosed by the structure? Without that information, you can't anticipate the growth of root systems or plan for irrigation, lighting or proper drainage.

This is all too important to leave anything to chance, which is one of the reasons I've spent a lot of time getting myself up to speed on the plant side of things and yet another reason why I'm glad Andy Kaner is on our team.

In our practice, we often work in tropical or arid climes and use date palms in our landscapes, largely because this majestic species looks amazing when illuminated at night with a grazing up-light. In many other cases with other trees, we take advantage of the sculptural qualities of trunks and branches day and night in creating wonderful shadows and silhouettes.

The point is, we think about these possibilities at the start and use this aesthet-

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### an ode to urns

When talking about planters, it bears mentioning that they don't always have to be permanent structures. Indeed, we've been involved in many situations where the best design solution involves creating pedestals or deck areas that will become homes for urns, pots, vases or other movable units.

These containers can't handle anything particularly big – no date palms, for instance – but they do have the advantage of being portable and the plants they carry can easily be replaced.

Even here, however, we consider these containers from the get-go in the design process. The main issue is drainage: Water used to irrigate the pot or urn has to go somewhere. If the container is to stand in a garden area, a simple hole in the bottom might suffice. But if you're putting that same pot or urn on a pilaster at the side of a pool, say, you may need to stub up drainage and irrigation lines through the container's base as well as a conduit for lighting – all of which requires early planning.

– B.V.B.



ic impulse to unlock a host of other design possibilities and visual relationships.

We always dwell on the details, including the proximity of plants to the water (and their resulting effect on maintenance); proximity to pathways; obstruction of views (desired or otherwise); general site maintenance and the effect falling plant material might have on decking; and, certainly, the weight of the planter and the plants within it and the effects they'll have on nearby structures. (The last point can be extremely critical for rooftop planters and other above-grade structures as well as features that are related to bond beams or vanishing-edge walls.)

It's also critical to consider the width of planter structures, their height relative to their intended purpose and whether or not walls of planters or their footings are to be integral components of decks or pool/spa walls, footings for overhead shade structures or even parts of exterior walls of buildings.

Continued on page 20



This raised planter is faced in rough Jamaican stone that continues all the way down to the pool floor. In this case, the feature serves both practical and aesthetic functions, housing the palms and lending great reflections to the overall scene.

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## open and closed

In considering planters in our own projects, Andy and I look at them as being from two distinct categories: *open-bottom* planters and *closed-bottom* planters. In both cases, we always consider irrigation and drainage needs as well as conduits for lighting and sound systems – all items that are best planned and specified

at the beginning of a project.

Open planters can be either raised or flush with the deck or other on-grade surfaces and work well with larger plants, trees, palms or other specimens that have big root balls and substantial potential for growth. Indeed, mature size is a key factor in designing these planters: We give larger plants plenty of room to maneu-

ver, knowing that overly confining their root systems can result in plants that don't grow to full size and may appear unhealthy or stunted.

Closed planters are more complicated because, as the term suggests, they have solid, integral bottoms of some kind. We use this approach mainly when we have no alternative, as with rooftop and some other above-grade structures, simply because they present more than their share of complexities. Unless the planter is quite large, these closed structures are often limited to smaller flowering plants, shrubs or ground covers – and, of course, irrigation and drainage become major issues.

Another big consideration is waterproofing. This is extremely important for all above-grade planters – open or closed – to prevent wicking of water through the walls and the potential that migration has to damage the structure or the finish or both. Waterproofing is also extremely important if the project involves use of reclaimed or gray water to irrigate the plants: Quite simply, you don't want non-potable water escaping to other areas and especially not into watershapes meant for bathing or supporting populations of fish.

The other obvious factor here is plant selection. That's a huge topic that reaches well beyond the confines of this discussion, but I will get into it here briefly to make a key point about how we approach this stage of the process.

As our design practice has expanded to include more and more locales and climates, we've learned that selecting indigenous plants almost always offers significant advantages. Plants that are native to a given place tend to be fully adapted to the weather, temperatures and precipitation levels they'll encounter.

Not only do these plants generally require less water, but they also need less fertilizer, pesticides and general maintenance – and tend to look right at home in a given environment because they mirror plants seen in the natural landscape.

Certainly, experienced landscape architects and designers can select plants that are *not* native to a given area if, as Stephanie Rose advised time and again in her columns, they've done their homework and determined that exotic plants

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Here, we used blue Mexican beach pebbles as mulch to add color and drama to the planters while minimizing maintenance. Also note that the planters in the foreground are balanced on the other end of the pool by a planter filled with hardy indigenous grasses.

are suited to the purpose. But with these plants typically comes a heightened need to pay close attention to both irrigation and drainage as well as maintenance – a trio of complications that tends to make us feel better and better about using indigenous species.

### keeping up appearances

If there's a half-ton gorilla in the room when you make decisions about plants, it has to be maintenance.

Thinking back to my days in pool service, I recall being dumbfounded by the plant selections some people made. In particular, I recall the nightmare of cleaning pools overhung by asparagus ferns: Those beasts would drop bazillions of rice-like pods into the pool that were almost impossible to clear away completely.

All plants will shed leaves, seeds and various types of fruit, of course, but when they're placed near water – and especially when they hang over a watershape – it's important to anticipate the mess they'll make. Also, when using a popular material such as Travertine for decking, it pays to be aware that some plants will stain and mar the appearance.

And we've all seen situations where the root systems of certain types of plants will rise up and cause major headaches, even

destroying nearby hardscape structures. You need to know to avoid many types of bamboo – often an incredibly invasive plant (however beautiful when located appropriately) – and ficus trees, which can rip decks and plumbing apart and can even assault foundations.

As for the broader and ultimate issue of selecting plants for aesthetics, that's where the true art of softscaping comes into play.

I've learned that it can be great fun, especially when I work with experts who understand the plant kingdom and make creative suggestions. From the most modest grasses to the most majestic trees, I now know from experience that the work of the watershaper can be tremendously enhanced when plants and planters are used carefully and creatively. **WS**

**Brian Van Bower** runs Aquatic Consultants, a design firm based in Miami, Fla., and is a co-founder of the Genesis 3 Design Group; dedicated to top-of-the-line performance in aquatic design and construction, this organization conducts schools for like-minded pool designers and builders. He can be reached at [bvanbower@aol.com](mailto:bvanbower@aol.com).