



A Fine Foundation

» The plantings closest to your home should play up its assets and soften its hard edges. Here's how

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTOPHER J. COHAN

A limited palette of plants—inkberry, azalea, yellow daylilies, pink astilbe, and blue hydrangea—repeated on both sides of the portico make an effective foundation planting for this symmetrical Colonial Revival. Cone-shaped yews add a formal touch at the entry; looser dogwood trees will eventually hide the house's corners.

THE IDEA IS SIMPLE: Foundation plants should enhance your home, make it more welcoming, and tie it to the surrounding landscape. Unfortunately, these house-hugging plantings frequently consist of stiff evergreen shrubs that do little for the house they adorn. Even worse, they're often sheared into something closer to green loaves of bread than to anything found in nature. Here are some ways to rethink that timeworn row of clipped evergreens.

WORK WITH THE ARCHITECTURE AND OVERALL STYLE OF YOUR HOUSE. Is your home characterized by formal symmetry, with a centered door and equal numbers of windows lined up on either side—such as on Georgians, Federals, or some Colonial Revivals? If so, you may want to consider a design that has some formal elements, with sheared shrubs accenting the entry and mirror-image plantings on each side of it. On the other hand, in-

formal, cottage-style homes and low-slung ranches look best with more casual, asymmetrical plant schemes.

In both cases, avoid competing elements that detract from the main entrance and the house in general, such as tall plantings that block views of your home, or a lone bed in the middle of an open lawn. The area around the entrance is where guests experience your landscape close up, so make this area welcoming with an interesting contrast of plant forms, flowers, and foliage colors and textures. Elsewhere on the facade, a stretch of bare wall between windows is often an invitation for a larger shrub, a small tree, or even a vine-covered trellis. Around windows, be sure not to cut off light and air with plants that will grow too high.

Tall plantings placed at the corners of the house help soften its edges and tie it into the landscape. They can also give the illusion of extending a small house, making it appear larger. Medium-size flowering trees like dogwood,

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ABOVE: Variegated wintercreeper, ferns, and grasses provide a bold foliage display; impatiens add color. **LEFT:** An exuberant mix of low-growing perennials that won't block windows as they grow. **RIGHT:** Lush beds of mophead hydrangea and shade-loving hosta flank a shaded entry.



Canadian redbud, crabapple, rose-of-Sharon, and crape myrtle all have a loose feel that suits a casual, cottage-style home. More stately traditional homes can be planted at each end with upright English oak, juniper, or groups of Leyland cypress to add a columnlike effect.

Of course, it's worth pointing out that houses that don't have raised foundations to disguise or have handsome stonework to be showcased may not need more than entrance and corner plantings. A bed of groundcover or mulch may be all that is necessary to tie the two areas together—and make maintenance and mowing easier.

2 GO FOR FOUR SEASONS OF INTEREST. Those yews smothering every other house in your neighborhood may be indestructible, but they're not much to look at. The right evergreens (see page TK for suggestions) give a foundation planting year-round structure, but incorporating deciduous shrubs and perennials provides ornamental value all year long. Choose plants with an eye to staggered bloom times from early spring to late summer, colorful fall foliage, and fruits in winter.

In addition to being too static, most foundation plantings are also too narrow, with a single row of shrubs that doesn't extend far enough out into the yard. You may be able to fix that simply by enlarging the bed and adding more plants in front. Layer them back to front from tallest to shortest, making sure none towers over the established back row.

3 CHOOSE PLANTS THAT ARE THE RIGHT SIZE AND SCALE. Not taking into account plants' size at maturity is probably the number-one mistake homeowners make. We've all seen windows curtained with overgrown evergreens that no doubt looked just fine when they were planted. Choosing shrubs of the right size will also help keep pruning to a minimum. Look for dwarf varieties that max out at 2 to 4 feet tall for under windows and other tight spots.

Above all, plan before you plant. A good place to start is by enlarging a photo of your house and tracing the outline of it on paper. Add a few key features you want to keep, such as mature trees. Then start experimenting, sketching in plants (at their full-grown size and shape) you're considering. This process will help in choreographing the layout, determining exactly how much you can incorporate, and establishing a thoughtful and economical approach to putting in foundation plantings that truly enhance your home.

Design Tips

GO FOR A MIX of evergreen and deciduous plants that provide four-season interest with staggered bloom times in spring and summer, fall foliage color, and berries or interesting forms in winter.

DON'T PLANT TOO MUCH—or too big. Choose shrubs and perennials that won't be oversized for their allotted space at maturity. You don't want green blinds covering your windows.

ADD ANNUALS the first couple of years to fill out gaps while new plants are getting established.

DON'T PLANT ONE OF EVERYTHING. Unify your design by repeating plants several times, drawing the eye across the whole bed.

GET A JUMP ON SPRING FLOWERS with blooming bulbs. Daffodils are a must for reliable early color. For a second show (and to hide spent foliage), try planting English bluebells in front of them.

PHOTOS: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) SAXON HOLT; MARK TURNER (2)

Great (Often Overlooked) Foundation Plants



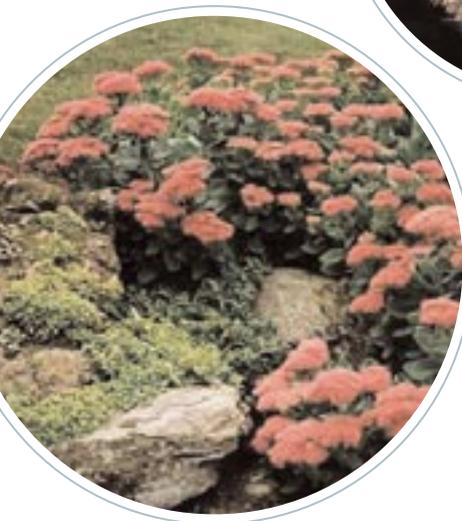
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EVERGREEN SHRUBS

Reconsider stiff, short-needled evergreens in favor of these hardy ornamentals.

Andromeda (*Pieris japonica*) Tiers of narrow, glossy green leaves with shoots that bear clusters of drooping white flowers. Can grow up to 12 feet tall. Partial shade; hardy to 0° F. ▶ 1

'Blue Girl' holly (*Ilex meserveae*) Glossy purple-green foliage and red berries in fall; grows 7 to 10 feet tall. Responds well to heavy pruning or shearing into formal cones perfect to flank a formal entry. Partial to full shade; hardy to -10° F.

Inkberry (*Ilex glabra*) Deer-resistant shrub with fine, glossy, dark green foliage like boxwood, and black berries in fall. Grows from 6 to 10 feet tall; 'Compacta' variety to 4 feet tall. Sun to partial shade; hardy to -10° F.

Korean boxwood (*Buxus microphylla* 'Koreana') Faster-growing than English box; great to quickly create formal accents or edging. Compact and low-growing, reaching 2 feet tall. Full sun to partial shade; hardy to -0° F.

Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) Leathery, dark green oval leaves and large clusters of bowl-shaped pink, white, or red flowers in late spring. A slow grower that can reach 10 feet tall. Partial shade, moist soil; hardy to -10° F. ▶ 2

SUMMER-FLOWERING SHRUBS

Azalea and rhododendron provide reliable spring color; adding later-flowering shrubs will extend the show.

'Betty Prior' rose (*Rosa* 'Betty Prior') and 'Knock Out' rose (*Rosa* 'Knock Out') Compact pink and red roses that flower all summer, are pest- and disease-resistant, and adaptable. Can be maintained as nicely shaped shrubs 3 to 4 feet tall. Prefer sun but do well in partial shade; hardy to -20° F.

'Endless Summer' hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Bailmer') This mophead blooms repeatedly on new and old wood, eliminating any guesswork on how to prune hydrangeas to encourage flowers. Grows to 5 feet tall; Sun to partial shade; hardy to -20° F.

Summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*) Trouble-free native with oval-shaped green leaves and fluffy spikes of white flowers in mid to late summer. 'Sixteen Candles' variety is a butterfly and hummingbird magnet that grows 3 to 4 feet tall and is perfect for foundations and massing. 'Ruby Spice' grows up to 8 feet tall, with deep-pink flowers. Both have foliage that turns yellow/orange in fall. Sun to partial shade, moist soil; hardy to -30° F. ▶ 3

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PERENNIALS AND ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

All these varieties provide a long season of color. Some also have winter interest, especially covered in ice or snow.

'Autumn Joy' sedum (*Sedum* 'Autumn Joy') Best four-season perennial around. Looks great in full bloom with large clusters of tiny rose-colored flowers in late summer to early fall. Faded flower heads can be left all winter. Once cut back, fleshy green leaves are quick to add color and structure to plant beds in early spring. Grows to 2 feet tall. Full sun; hardy to -30° F. ▶ 4

'Stella de Oro' daylily (*Hemerocallis* 'Stella de Oro') Among the longest-blooming daylilies. Clip dead flowers to get more bright yellow flowers all summer. I especially like the 'Black-Eyed' variety. Grows to 2 feet tall. Full sun to partial shade; hardy to -30° F.

Catmint (*Nepeta* spp.) A great summer-to-fall bloomer. Spikes of fuzzy gray leaves with tiny lavender-blue flowers. Provides a similar look to lavender but much more reliable. 'Six Hills Giant' grows 3 to 4 feet tall. 'Walker's Low' is a medium-size mounder that grows 18 inches tall and works well massed. Full sun; hardy to -20° F.

Coneflower (*Echinacea* spp.) This hardy perennial provides a bouquet of long-lasting pink, purple, or white flowers on long, stiff stems in mid to late summer. Grows 3 to 4 feet tall. Full sun; hardy to -20° F. ▶ 5

'Karl Foerster' grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster') My favorite ornamental grass for upright formality. Boasts arching, glossy dark green foliage 3 to 5 feet tall. In June, the upright stems bear pinkish-bronze flower heads that gradually change to golden tan. Full sun; hardy to -10° F.

Chinese rose fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides*) Try this grass as an accent in less formal gardens. Grows to 3 feet tall with plumelike soft pink flower clusters from July through September, when bright green leaves turn yellow and showy seed heads form. Full sun; hardy to 0° F.

'Zagreb' coreopsis (*Coreopsis verticillata* 'Zagreb') Brilliant yellow, daisylike flowers all summer. A compact variety for use in formal or casual plantings. Drought tolerant; grows 12 inches tall. Full sun; hardy to -20° F.