

Feng shui in outdoor living

I once asked a Buddhist monk if he believed in *feng shui*. He replied that *feng* meant “wind”, and *shui* meant “water”, so, of course, he believed in wind and water.

What is not seen is not necessarily absent. Gazing at the night sky in an open field, you might experience the overwhelming vastness of creation, but if you work in a cramped office, you are more inclined to be irritable and impatient.

Is it all a figment of your imagination, or do you believe that places can greatly influence your disposition towards life?

At heart, this is what the practice of feng shui is about – that there are invisible but powerful energy lines all around us, and depending on how we connect with them, they could benefit or hinder our lives.

By controlling how we relate to a place, we thus control our mood and feelings. For example, we control our bedroom layout to promote rest, while we design our study room for contemplation and, well, study.

Of course, controlling invisible energy by governing the surroundings is not an easy concept to grasp. This is why, feng shui, like many religions, is sprinkled with myths and fables to help explain the advanced ideas to the common man.

So, in feng shui, we have the “dragon’s breath” to signal auspicious energy, and the “black turtle” to symbolise stability. The common mistake people make, even today, is to read too literally into the metaphors.

I mean, what exactly is a jade turtle figurine supposed to do when you place it at the back of your house?

Forget about getting rich quickly with feng shui. Learn to see it as a rational idea to improve your well-being, like exercise or positive thinking, and you will begin to appreciate its effectiveness.

Feng shui and the five senses

Some of you may wonder, how is a well-designed garden able to improve your life?

If you choose to regard feng shui as the manipulation of divine powers, you will be disappointed. Designing your garden does not come with a cosmic guarantee for success in love or business, but the pleasure from seeing your beautiful front yard every day puts you in a happier mood. You not only go to work more spiritedly, but you bring home less work-related stress. That is called good feng shui – a harmonious symbiosis between you and your environment where positive energy abounds.

Today, we explore how sight, touch, sound, smell and taste play a crucial role in your garden.

Sight

Just as art schools teach you what is considered beautiful, so it is with your garden. There are certain “rules” you must heed if you want to derive maximum visual benefit.

Borders. When your garden cannot be visually distinguished from your garage, it seems disorganised. A good example is a garden fully tiled-up so you are not sure where to place your potted plants.

A garden without visual boundaries gives a feeling of uncertainty and doubt. Or one where passers-by can look right at you sitting in your garden. A boundary is not merely a wall, it also frames certain aspects and screens off unwanted sights.

Focal point. The focal point is the heart of the garden. Even if you have a well-bordered garden with unpleasant sights screened off, without a focal point, the garden lacks a soul. Focal points can be a pond or water feature, an unusual tree or even a large rock.

Shape, proportion, line & colour. These four visual elements are important in interacting with each other. If you have a 1.5m high white wall with horizontal louvres, what kind of water feature would complement it?

Or if a fish pond takes up almost half the garden space, do you think it is visually proportionate?

There are too many variables to include here, so if in doubt, get a designer to help you plan your garden.

Touch

A functional garden not only fulfils the sense of touch but space you can utilise. A garden is really an outdoor room. You view your indoor rooms with certain expectations, so why should your garden be any different? Your garden can be made for relaxation, play, entertainment or simply pleasure.

A functional garden welcomes you in, encourages you to feel it, touch it and experience it. You don't want a garden with a sign that says: "Keep off the grass". A garden that is inviting, with cosy seats and a cheerful water feature with lots of greenery, definitely radiates positive energy.

Sound

For city folks, the sound of frogs at night can be a nuisance, while the perpetual noise of traffic is curiously soothing. People like a fountain's sound of trickling water but a leaking faucet can drive one mad. What is it about sound that can alter our mood?

High pitch sounds tend to irritate, while an extremely low pitch one can unnerve. Rhythm can influence our heartbeats to synchronise with it, so a slow steady beat can be hypnotic. But imagine what jarring, erratic noises from a construction site can do to our hearts.

Good planning can ensure you derive most of the sounds you want in your garden and drown out the other noises. Lattices and plants help to block off noise. Placing a water feature against a solid wall amplifies the effect. A waterfall looks and sounds good in a resort, but in your humble home, the noise and sight will be overwhelming.

Smell and taste

In your garden, cultivating the sense of smell is more than just the absence of an unpleasant pong. Fill your garden with aromatic blooms or fragrant shrubs. At a nursery, choose the flowers you are comfortable with, as not all fragrant flowers are equally appreciated.

As for taste, you have to create your own memorable experiences. For me, nothing beats a BBQ chicken wing in the outdoors, and each time I have that in my garden, I feel like it's the beginning of good times.

When you have a garden that appeases the five senses, you have created a harmonious environment around your home.

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