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Do You Suffer From CHAD?

by Dorothy M. Downing, UC Master Gardener

I love plants. I love reading about them and looking at pictures of them. I love planting and growing them, and I love talking about them. When I see a plant that captures my attention, I buy it, even if I don't have a specific place in my garden for it. Meanwhile, that plant may sit on my front porch for a month, waiting for that perfect spot to turn up.

My passion for plants borders on a mania. If I see a plant I like in someone's garden, I will ask for a cutting. I will buy, beg and borrow plants, PLANTS, PLANTS. My husband thinks I'm possessed and threatens to throw away the garden catalogues that regularly show up.

Does any of this sound familiar to you? Has your garden become something of a slightly haphazard collection of fantastic horticultural this and that's you once thought you couldn't live without? If so, you too, may suffer from CHAD, or Compulsive Horticultural Acquisition Disorder. You have an empty expanse of dirt begging to be planted and you buy, BUY, BUY. CHAD wastes lots of time and effort as you repeatedly move plants into ever "better" locations in the hopes of finding the "right" spot. You waste money as you continuously buy more plants, garden art or pots only to find them useless, out of place or dead before you can plant them.

Overcoming CHAD is difficult. It requires self control. It requires seeing the big picture. It requires taking all this plant acquisition fever and channeling that energy into planning your garden. It requires a garden design to force some order and structure on the chaotic and frenzied practice of selecting plants for your garden. Here is a "12 step program" that may help you overcome CHAD.

A garden is much more than a collection of plants. It is the expression of your ideas and your life; who you are and what you do. Plants, ironically, are an obstacle during the beginning stages of designing. So, hard as it may seem, try to forget the plants a little while. Instead, think about the spaces and what you want your garden to contain. Garden design involves conscious decisions and intent. You must have a strong vision of your design in order to make the garden a success. But remember, there are no fixed rules in designing a garden. This is your garden, it needs to make you happy, and when it doesn't, you can change it.

Start with finding out what you like. Grab a friend or two and get out and visit some gardens to see what might thrive in your garden. Visit your neighbors' gardens, botanical gardens, and public gardens. Visit Mill Creek Trailways in Visalia for an amazing demonstration garden of native plants. Need more ideas? Attend classes given by Master Gardeners, read a magazine or a book.

Think about how you move through your garden's spaces and what you do or want to do in the spaces. What do you want to see, smell, and feel in the entry area? Think about how you use your garden. What sort of activity will occur in the sitting area? Where do you entertain? Where do the children play? Where do the pets eat, sleep and exercise? Do you need space for a vegetable garden? Do you want a water feature?

Define your garden with hardscape and structures. Consider flagstone paths, cobblestone walkways, edged planting beds, picket fences, and arbors. All of this structure helps to form your garden's foundation. The backbone of your garden comes next. Trees, evergreens and shrubs help to define areas, add color, smells and texture. Engage the senses. Consider contrasting textures in leaf shapes, bark on trees, running water, sweet fragrance, eye catching color.

Create a focal point to draw and direct the eye. Every garden, no matter what its size, benefits from a focal point. Without a main feature, your eye flits from plant to plant, section to section, without zeroing in to examine and appreciate the harmony of the garden. A focal point can be created by yard art, a shed, a collection of bird houses, an arbor or a weeping tree.

There is harmony or unity when the parts of the garden work together as a whole. Harmony can be accomplished by using a limited color palette, repetition of plants, colors or structures and a clear focal point. Themes gardens like white gardens, chocolate gardens, hummingbird gardens and cottage gardens all have built in unity.

Once you have a simple garden plan, you can start collecting what you love, whether it is a stunning plant or an antique watering can. Be flexible; let the design evolve. Since gardening is a living art form, it is constantly changing. Gardens get better over time, with plants filling in, mingling and becoming lusher. And now that you have a garden design, you will be less tempted to buy that irresistible plant on impulse because you know that it just doesn't belong in your garden. And you will have overcome CHAD.

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