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Corporate gardening tips, available to go

by Marty Ross/Universal Press Syndicate
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Take tips from a fast-food restaurant -- plant shrubs and remember that sweeps of one color have more impact than a mix.

The next time you're idling in a drive-through lane, waiting to pick up a burger, take a look around for some gardening ideas. Corporate landscaping can offer a lot of useful tips to go with your lunch.

Local ordinances often require businesses to plant trees, shrubs and flowers outside their establishments, and the best businesses give this obligation considerable thought. Just as a good-looking front yard enhances a house and makes a statement about the family living there, cheerful flowers and well-maintained landscaping around a gas station, hamburger stand or corporate campus let customers and passers-by know that the business wants to be a good neighbor.

"It all starts with the outside," says Don Wetherby, vice president for engineering at Wendy's. "We know good landscaping speaks volumes about the inside of a store, and for potential customers, it might tip the scale" when they're deciding where to take their business.

Up to 70 percent of sales at Wendy's are from the drive-through lanes, Wetherby says, and customers in a burger line should have something



attractive to look at while they wait. Healthy, hardy shrubs are the backbone of such landscaping, but pretty flowers also catch the customer's roving eye. If you see an idea that you like, go ahead and try it at home.

"Plagiarizing is the finest form of landscaping," says Jimmy Turner, director of horticulture research at the Dallas Arboretum. Turner applies his discerning designer's eye to landscapes whether he's driving 65 mph on the highway or waiting for a traffic light or a bite to eat. He's always looking for ideas.

Bright colors are irresistible, Turner says.

"From Mary Kay to Frito-Lay, one of the best-selling colors for corporate landscapes is screaming yellow," he says. "If you plant lavender out there, people won't notice."

Turner likes to see flashy yellow, orange and other traffic-stopping colors set off by trees and shrubs. A restaurant might plant a low hedge of evergreens, for example, with some ornamental grasses chosen for their subtle color and interesting foliage texture, and then a vigorous band of eye-popping color.

Evergreen background plantings show off flower color particularly well and give the corporate landscape structure and substance through the seasons, Turner says. The idea works well at home, too. A garden with nicely planted evergreen shrubbery will never look rundown.

Junipers might be used as a backdrop plant; boxwood, yews or hollies serve the same purpose. Ornamental grasses add a lively touch. Annual flowers planted against a strong background of evergreens are almost like the pillows on a sofa -- they're there to provide splashes of color, to reflect the season or just to hit a cheerful note.

Corporate landscaping tends to rely on annuals to capture the spirit of the changing seasons. Pansies, which are so tough and good-looking, are typical in winter, Turner says. Then come tulips in spring, lantanas and other heat-tolerant plants in the summer and chrysanthemums in the fall.

Turner admires choices that take the style and color of the building behind them into consideration. If the building is red, bronze or copper, pink flowers just don't look right, he says. White doesn't work very well in bright sun, either. It's too glaring. Red is often too dark.

"You need to put it with something else to make it pop out," he says.

Sometimes businesses really aren't trying to make tasteful choices. They want you to notice them, so they plant head-turning combinations like purple and orange flowers, or tropical cannas and elephant's ears.

"Bright colors and funky combinations slap you in the face," Turner says. "I call those 65 mph colors."

The Dallas Arboretum gives special "flame-proof" awards for long-blooming annuals tough enough to take the area's relentless summer heat, even in the steamiest parking-lot planting.

'New Gold' lantana is one of Turner's favorites, and so are the zinnias in the 'Profusion' series. The new zinnia maritima 'Solcito' from Simply Beautiful is very strong.

"If you have heat and sun and drought, it's the plant for you," he says. He also likes 'Fanfare' impatiens, which thrive in full sun as long as they get plenty of water.

Corporate landscaping is by no means all good. Half-hearted plantings and puny or dying shrubs make a bad impression. Turner also can't abide fake flowers in planter boxes outside businesses, shade plants withering in full sun, and pruning jobs that reveal great skill with a chain saw but no sense for what nature intended.

"You see Japanese maples pruned into lollipops," he says. "What were they thinking?"

"My absolute pet peeve is colored mulch," Turner says. It steals attention from the rest of the landscaping, and "when your mulch is the focal point of your flower bed, that's a problem. As long as you can see the mulch, you're not planting enough flowers."

Sharpen your eye by comparing corporate landscaping as you commute to work, stop at an ATM or drive through a fast-food joint. Some ideas are worth taking home to chew over in your own backyard.

Landscaping in the fast lane

Jimmy Turner, director of horticulture research at the Dallas Arboretum, is an enthusiastic gardener in charge of a 66-acre garden that simply never stops blooming. Texas gardeners may be especially qualified to judge corporate landscaping, he says, because they spend so much time driving and because they're reluctant to get out of an air-conditioned car for just any garden.

Here are some of Turner's thoughts and observations on the landscaping of fast-food restaurants, shopping centers and corporate campuses.

Well-established shrubs and perennials require maintenance, of course, but they usually do not need watering as often as annual flowers because they have deeper roots. Colorful annuals can be planted in pockets among the shrubs.

"It's one way of saving money and making things look better," Turner says.

Businesses -- and gardeners -- with no planting space often rely on pots for landscaping color. Turner advocates big, bright, glazed pots. A dramatic pot may need only one large plant in it. On the other hand, if you want a cottage garden in a pot, "stuff it full," he says.

"If you can see the pot, you don't have enough flowers in there," he says.

Hanging baskets dry out fast in hot climates.

"In Seattle, you see these gorgeous baskets" hanging from lampposts, he says. "In Texas, that's like a microwave on a stick."

Lately, Turner has noticed a trend toward more texture in corporate landscapes. Instead of bright annual colors, he sees agaves, yuccas and even palm trees outside restaurants in Texas.

"It looks cool, and it gets my attention," he says.

"Don't rule out roses," he says. Flashy 'Knock Out' roses have taken corporate landscaping by storm and never seem to stop blooming. They are easy to take care of and thrive in tough situations, including the unrelenting exposure to cold, heat and wind in a parking-lot planting, he says. They even flourish in big flowerpots.

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