

Way to Grow

Solving the Challenges of Hillside Landscaping

by Steve & Cathy Lambert



There are many challenges when designing and installing landscapes in Orinda, but one of the most prevalent is our hilly terrain.

Because the need for hillside landscaping is so common, there are plenty of creative and proven solutions to choose from. The best place to start is by writing down your goals for the space. Is the slope within view of your home and or yard making aesthetics a priority? Do you need to alleviate erosion problems? Do you want more flat space for a vegetable or flower cutting garden? Is there a need to expand your living or recreation space?

The simplest solution for low-maintenance hillside landscaping is to plant the whole hillside with species of groundcovers or ornamental grasses that are well adapted for slopes. If you like the look of grass and your slope is not severe, buffalo grass or fine-leaf fescues (no mow lawns), along with some groupings of native Berkley sedge, are good choices. For steeper slopes, larger grasses will root deeper, along with many natives like; cotoneaster, symportocarpus, and monkey flowers. There are also numerous varieties of creeping groundcovers which root firmly enough to make them a good hillside option.

For a more dramatic look plant your slope with perennials and shrubs, which vary in height, such as purple smokebush (*cotinus*) with a foreground planting of cantaloupe torch lily (*kniphophia*). In shady areas native brown twig dogwoods, along with rhododendrons and azaleas work well. Throw in a few foxgloves (*digitalis*) like the new 'apricot beauty' for a long lasting, blast of color.

For steeper hills, or areas that can't be graded easily, terracing can add more level ground. The amount of terracing will of course depends on the degree of slope and the desired use for the space. One approach is to build evenly spaced steps, using pressure treated landscape timbers, boulders, or other building material to create step height walls. The flat areas can

then be used as individual beds, planted with low-maintenance, cascading plants and groundcovers.

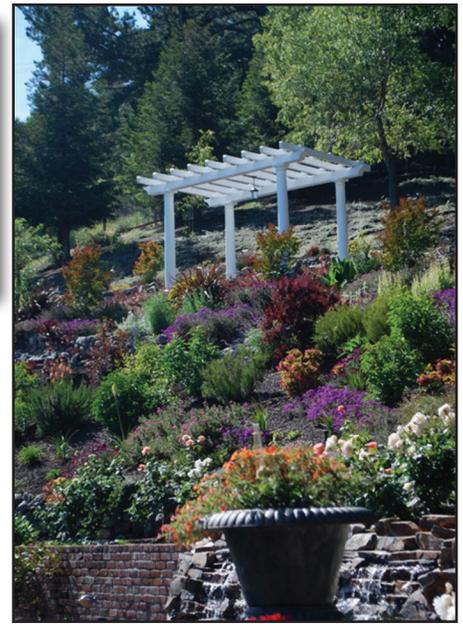
Adding a walkway is a great way to take advantage of a property with a view that would otherwise not be enjoyed. However, if you add a pathway to the top of your yard you should always have a destination. This can be something as simple as a bench or something much more elaborate like a gazebo or sitting area with an arbor for shade in the summer and a fireplace for warmth in the winter.

Another option for a steeper hillside is to create deeper terraces using retaining walls. It's surprising how much space can be achieved with the addition of a small (less than 30-inch high) retaining wall. These retaining walls can be built using rock, steel or pressure treated lumber.

Any retaining wall above three feet will require engineering and city approval. They are usually made using concrete (poured in place), segmental concrete blocks, and concrete filled cinder block. Segmental block such as Keystone can be very industrial looking, but newer products such as Country Manor Keystone or Belgard's Celtic Wall, are varying sized, colored concrete that is tumbled for an antique stone look.

The availability of certain stone colors and types changes fairly often. For a cooler look we prefer the many shades of Connecticut Bluestone, and for warmer tones our favorites are Oyster Thistle, Petrified Forest Floor or Pioneer Stone. For a more formal look, stones such as Bitter Root or Kennesaw are good choices. There are also stones from Asia that have been precut for ease of installation. One of our best cost saving techniques is to cap walls with stone and then cover the face of the wall with a fine Venetian plaster (stucco).

Grapevines have been planted on terraced hillside for centuries but backyard vineyards are a fairly recent trend. There are now companies, such as the local Diablo Vineyards, who will plant and maintain your grapevines, pick and crush your grapes, and



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Steep slopes can be made picture perfect.

bottle your wine with a custom label for your home grown varietal. Adding grapevines to your landscape can add a wine country feel and beautiful fall color.

Make your hillside a plus by adding a recycling waterfall with or without a pond. We've taken advantage of this natural gravitational force for many of our clients. A waterfall will also allow you to broaden your hillside plant palate to include water and bog plants such as water hyacinths, water lilies and irises.

A sunny, side yard hillside is a great spot for a terraced vegetable or cutting flower garden. You can use a less expensive material to install your retaining walls and can enjoy the fruits (veggies and flowers) of your labor without affecting your view.

When irrigating hillside it's important to keep in mind the simple notion that water flows down hill. We often find slopes where the upper plant material is suffering from lack of water while the plants at the bottom are being overwatered. The two most effective and efficient ways to water a planted hillside are traditional over head watering, which should be adjusted to water above the upper most plant material, and drip system watering. When using drip, it's critical that you place all emitters above the plants on the slope so that water moves into the plants root zone, and not away from it. Which ever method is used we find it beneficial to use two or more cycle start times to give water a chance to soak into the soil. To figure out how long each cycle should run start your irrigation and watch for run-off to start,

allow a short breather and then start the second start time.

Hillside landscaping may involve more work than landscaping a flat space, but the end results are well worth it. If you have any questions or need some advise on the topic of hillside landscaping please feel free to email us at office@gardenlights-landscape.com.