

# Way to Grow in Orinda

## *It's All in the Details*

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The phrase “It’s all in the details” holds true when it comes to quality landscaping. Poor attention to detail can make even the most expensive landscape look cheap or just plain shabby.

**Rock and Stone Details:** Dry-stack retaining walls are very popular in our area due to the number of sloping lots. Rocks for dry-stack walls come in many shapes and sizes, but when you use too many of the same size rock the wall can look very artificial. It’s best to use rocks of varying sizes from boulders to what’s known as head-sized stones. To achieve an old world, softer and more natural look, plants should be placed in front of and on top of the wall. The foreground plants should be allowed to grow to varying heights and those planted above, grown to drape down over the wall. Planting pockets can also be built into the face of a rock wall to further soften its appearance.

Varying the stone size is also an important detail to assure a natural looking dry creek, wet creek or waterfall. Be sure to incorporate several larger stones, especially for creating small falls, which look as if they’ve been “kissed by water,” in other words, stones that are flat and smooth or have a carved out crevasse. As with rock walls, adding some draping edge plants and water plants creates a naturally softened appearance.

Here’s a detail that when poorly executed can destroy the look of an expensive stone patio – mortar color. It’s very important to use a mortar color that matches or slightly contrasts your stone. Using a mortar with a strong contrast or in a different color tone creates a very busy look, while something that blends with your stone creates a natural and more soothing appearance.

**Lawn Edging Details:** Here’s another detail where the proper installation and correct material choice for your yard make a big difference in its overall appearance. Aside from framing the lawn and giving it

a finished edge, lawn edging provides your mower an edge to run against or up to.

Edging comes in varying thicknesses from ¼-inch steel, to 6-inch concrete, or brick mow strips. The newer composite (Trex type) bender-board looks good as long as it is staked down properly. Bender board edging should always have both sides on the same level. These materials are not designed to be used as a retaining edge for a soil-lawn because it’s not strong enough and will bow or break and get gouged by the lawn mower when it falls off the edge. We prefer to use 2-inch by 4-inch bender board over thinner options because it provides smooth and flowing curves. Thinner boards are weaker and don’t bend as well leaving a wiggly edge on curves.

To help choose your edging material, look at your landscape design; if your yard is formal without a lot of plants over hanging near the lawn, you can go with a narrow mow strip. Modern or formal designs look great with knife-edge steel. If your garden lends more toward an English country garden or California romantic style with soft flowing plant material, choose something wide like concrete or brick where the plants can overflow without being chewed up by your lawn mower.

**Unnecessary Eyesores:** Drain grates are a necessary evil but they don’t have to be an ugly, discolored, white plastic. Brass drain grates are economical, look much better than plastic and last practically forever. Another detail we’ve used in stone patios is to cover the drain with a removable piece of stone, which has drain openings cut right in.

Unsightly, white plastic skimmer lids on a beautiful stone or concrete pool deck is a detail easily improved on. A stone lid can be cut to fit in its place. There is also a product that allows you to pour a formed lid that matches any concrete color.

**Lighting Details:** At night, a garden can be over lit with too many lights or under

lit with too few. If your garden has lots of trees or other vertical focal points, it’s important to choose carefully which ones to highlight. Sculptures are beautiful, but if you have too many and illuminate them all with the same intensity, it can be confusing to the eye and resemble a graveyard. Another sloppy detail is visible wires next to the fixtures. It’s easy to bury these connections making the installation look professional and clean.

Finally, crooked path lights are a detail that can easily be remedied. Landscape maintenance people often knock path lights askew but rarely take the seconds required to straighten them out. Ask your gardeners to add this to the services they perform occasionally.

Details, details, details, they usually refers to something small and often trivial, but if your landscape designer does not have an eye for them, well the result will be far from trivial.

If you have any specific question on the topic of plant placement or species, feel free to email us at [office@gardenlight-landscape.com](mailto:office@gardenlight-landscape.com).