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ENTERTAINMENT

Bringing out the best in your garden for summer gatherings

Steve Conaway Special to the Telegram & Gazette USA TODAY NETWORK

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Key Points

When company is coming, every gardener wants their space to look welcoming, refined, and finished, but however long a garden has been tended it will always be a work in progress.

A few thoughtful last-minute touches can bring some polish to any garden before the season of summer gatherings.

I recently moved into a new home and have been overwhelmed by the possibilities of the surrounding garden. In my more ambitious moments, I mark out space for a stone patio, add to an ever-growing list of “essential” trees, and sketch infinite iterations of future garden paths. I happily daydream of the garden’s final form while I putter around the back yard, checking off a meandering list of spring tasks. I’m jolted back to reality when I look at the calendar and suddenly remember the friends and family that we invited over to see our new garden this summer. When company is coming, every gardener wants their space to look welcoming, refined, and *finished* but however long a garden has been tended it will always be a work in progress. Fortunately, a few thoughtful last-minute touches can bring some polish to any garden before the season of summer gatherings.

Put an edge on everything

Putting a tidy frame on a messy garden adds a sense of intention that emphasizes successful plantings and makes the whole space more legible to a visitor’s eye. Clean up where lawns meet garden beds by cutting a shallow trench with a sharp square spade. Freshen mulch along edges to emphasize contrast, and rake and refresh

gravel or woodchip paths make cleaner lines. Simply redefining these lines brings some order to a chaotic garden and sets a mood of comfort and calm for visitors.

Bring the garden to your guests

No matter how much time I spend fussing over a precious planting in the far corner of the garden, I know most guests will gather where the creature comforts are: food, drinks, shade, and comfortable chairs. That means the most effective last-minute gardening often happens right around the places people will actually sit and linger. A few containers of annuals near a seating area, or even a hastily assembled vase on the table, create a beautiful focal point and make the whole space feel more inviting. I like to echo a few annuals from nearby beds, or even borrow a perennial or two, to carry the colors and textures of the surrounding garden into the gathering space.

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Fill gaps with large trees and shrubs

Major planting projects often stretch out longer than expected as larger trees and shrubs take significant time to site and plant properly. Rather than rushing to get a tree or shrub into the ground before guests arrive, I'll set it in a large container and use it to fill an unfinished gap in the garden. Keeping these larger plants above ground adds instant height and creates a stronger temporary focal point. It also gives me a chance to test a plant in different parts of the garden before committing to its final position.

Put your houseplants to work outside

My houseplants migrate outside each year when conditions are favorable. They usually need a couple of weeks to fully acclimate, but for a special event they can be shuffled into shady spots for the day or evening to add lushness and interest. Sturdy indoor plants with some size, such as *Schefflera* and *Ficus*, bring height and architecture to a gathering space, while unusual potted specimens can lend a more curated look.

Add vertical interest

I love to train climbing and scrambling vines over all sorts of structures, but even before they are covered in growth, garden ornaments can add instant sculptural value on their own. The precise placement of an obelisk or trellis creates real impact in the landscape. To improvise that effect, I use rods of coppiced willow and smokebush from my brush pile to create naturalistic tripods. Hanging baskets or garden lanterns can also be suspended from a shepherd's crook to give the garden height and a bit of whimsical charm.

A garden is never finished. I have to remind myself that my guests are more likely to remember conversation gathered around a table than the weeds I forgot to pull, but with some intentional effort I can set the stage for a comfortable and beautiful backdrop. A few well-placed containers, crisp edges, and pops of interest can help a garden rise to the occasion while still leaving room for all the plans, experiments, and daydreams in the future.

Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.

