

Designing Gardens and More

By Veronica C. Valero

Better Homes And Garden Landscaping and Deck Design software program.

By Chief Architect \$69.99 www.ChiefArchitect.com

Sunny days are here again! It's time to pull out my organic weeds and plant my long desired cottage garden al la California Style with draught tolerant California natives and a ton of vegetable plants to feed my family with—I'm going Locavore!

WEEDS BE GONE!

But, where to start? What to plant where? And, who next too? For the past 10 years, this has been my spring ritual: envision my great intentions, but get stuck at the design stage. The garden experts tell you to "draw it out". Visualize it! Color it! Draw circles of the circumference of the trees, bushes and plants! Then go buy your plants and dig away! I've tried. Come summer, it's the same story: hardly any planting and more organic weeds. And the few plants I did buy struggle to survive our hot Novato afternoons. Oops, I keep forgetting to water! I've got to "visualize" a drip irrigation system next. Call me the "black thumb" gardener. Seems I have more dead than alive plants—except for my organic weeds!

But, not this year! This year I have professional help! I have Better Homes & Garden *Landscaping and Deck Designer*. I get to draw out my landscaping plan using my computer. I can create different versions and take a virtual walk through my garden. I can try a variety of plants together or press my "delete" key and pull them out, then try other combinations and colors. I can add big rocks and little rocks and change my mind and toss them away—all without wasting paper or getting frustrated by my poor drawing skills. I can even add a pond and gazebo or other garden nick nacs.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Start with the digital tutorial that gives you an audio and visual tour. It's helpful, but the narration is way too fast, you'll probably have to repeat each module several times. Next open up the tutorial book. It's easy to follow, but the diagrams are extremely small and difficult to read—so grab a magnifying glass. Once you have your overview, it's time to design. Don't forget to use the Help menu when you get stuck.

The program comes with many sample garden and deck layouts. It's helpful to see other ideas to stimulate your imagination. There is a library that you use to build your outdoor living space: It can include a deck, patio with pavers, gazebo, a swimming pool or pond and a meandering path to nowhere. Before you start, it's best to take measurements of your garden space.

The *Plant Chooser* is where the fun begins. Type in a plant name, either the scientific or the common name. Don't know the plant name and just want to find the drought tolerant ones in your region 9? Then, put a checkmark next to your desired preferences in the search box and press "search" to see the recommendations. Warning: it's not a comprehensive plant library—so sometimes you come up with nothing. You can select flower color, leaf color, bloom time. You can also look for special characteristics: attracts birds, butterflies, container, cut, US native/wildflower, easy to grown, fast growing, fragrant, fall color, winter interest, deer resistant. Each plant lists sun requirements, hardiness zone, soil ph, etc. If you like it, you select it and the computer plops it in, and you move it where you want to place it.

If you are unsure how to lay out the garden, look at the pre-made landscaping beds included with the program. Take a walking tour and get inspired. No weeds, no bugs. The perfect garden. If you want

hills, valleys, stepping stones, or water features, you can use the "Terrain" tools to design these in your layout. You can include the elevation and other topographical features.

EDITING TOOLS

Click to select. Drag to place. Click on the handles to enlarge or reduce. Use the rotation handle to rotate. Unfortunately, the program lacks other basic tools found that would make the designing much more pleasant. It lacks the ability to "group" and "ungroup" elements together. Placement is a challenge. But, once you get the nuances it becomes easier. I can't use the keyboard arrows to nudge items a little over. And it has no alignment tool.

MANY, MANY FEATURES

Even though the editing tools are lacking, this program has many other great features: once you design it, it will generate a "Materials" list in a spreadsheet format. You put the unit price, it tells the total! You can also save the images in different file formats to share. And, there are many, many more features, including designing or remodeling a house. That's my next project!

IT TAKES TIME

If you enjoy working on your computer, it beats the pencil-paper-eraser method. But, like Photoshop, you cannot learn this software program in a day—or a few days. If you have not used drawing features in other programs, there will be a steep learning curve. Although it will take sometime to master, with frustrating moments, for those who have a hard time visualizing, this landscaping software program can be a tremendous tool. You can do various layouts and include a variety of plant species. You can have as many layout versions as you like and compare and share. Whether this is right for you is based on: (1) How big the project is. (2) How important it is to get it right the first time. (3) Computer experience—this is not a beginners program—and the tutorial is not in-depth. (4) Willingness to put time in to learn the program. (5) Frustration factor: if your computer easily frustrates you and you really don't want to learn more, it's best to do it by hand or hire someone to design it for you. Go to www.CheifArchitect.com and watch the demos to see if you like it! I do! You can even download a trial version.

For the do-it-yourself landscaper/designer, this can be a fun and creative way to think out a project so that once you go out with your shovel ready to dig, you can be confident that your finalized computer landscaping design is the perfect garden you've always wanted—without organic weeds!

Because of difficulty and missing editing features, I rate this:

Three Stars (out of a 4 star rating – 4 being best)

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