

Does My Landscape Look Dated?

We know that a house can get dated over time with colors, styles, materials out of fashion, and lack of upkeep, but does that happen with your landscape too? To save the suspense - the answer is “yes”. What are some of the signs of a dated landscape - ask yourself these questions to find out about yours?

1. Does it have huge plants that fit the space initially, but now the **plants have grown together**? You see plants that are too tall and/or too wide for the space where they reside. This may be due to the original landscaper who planted shrubs and trees too close to each other and/or too close to walls and houses. It may also be due to overwatering in a cared for landscape. With trees and large shrubs you may see walkway, wall, patio, driveway, or street buckles and cracks. Near a house they may cause foundation, wall, and roof issues
2. Are **trees planted too close to the street** which end up getting “truck pruned”? If plants did not continue to grow or we didn’t tend to overwater them, this wouldn’t be an issue!
3. Do **shrubs or trees hide windows** and restrict visibility? Do they **block vents**? These can be a safety, fire, or an aesthetic issue. Be sure that plants considered as replacements will stay below the windows at maturity. Keep plants away from vents. Plant diameters and heights are available from numerous sources but use local ones if you can and be sure to measure the space to see if they will fit.
4. Does your landscape contain **plants that have gone out of fashion** e.g. Bowles mauve, Russian Sage? Russian sage may have overtaken other plants from the original design. Consider replacing them with plants that have continued to look good over time.
5. Does it have **lots of volunteer plants** in bad places - hanging over the streets and sidewalks making it difficult for people to walk by and cars to drive by? Chamisas, apache plumes, and fourwing saltbush are good examples of this. Too many volunteers change the look of the landscape. Removing the volunteers, especially when they are small, keeps the landscape looking “cleaner”. But if a volunteer has placed itself in a good location and will fit the space, offer thanks to the gods!
6. Does it have **unhealthy or sick looking plant choices** - choices that never look good? These may be plants that are not adapted to our sun, wind, and alkaline soil, but whose homeowner has nursed them along. These may be plants that were planted incorrectly (with trees it is usually too deep). You may see trees with branches without leaves, brown-edged leaves, and/or yellowing leaves. Many of these are heat stressed and if they come from acid soil areas will not be able to take up nutrients like iron from diluted water in the soil. Some plants may have too small a space for healthy root growth. For trees this is often called “tree in a box” and is found in parking lots and tree planters. Consider the mature diameter of a plant when assessing whether there is enough space to support its growth. This is especially true for trees where the root space needs to be about 2-4 times the diameter of the mature tree canopy. Roots grow out beyond the leaves to capture water.
7. Are there **“holes” from dead plants** so the landscape has lost the sense of design? This is an opportunity to add something to your landscape – a colorful plant, one that’s evergreen over the winter, something for wildlife, or a fragrance to make you feel better.

8. Are there **missing layers in the landscape**? Landscapes should consist of trees on top, shrubs in the middle, and perennials or grass on the bottom. If there are missing layers, you may need to add these. An exception to layers would be something like a meadow or turf that a planned open space in the landscape.
9. Are there lots of **weeds or other plants in the turf grass**? Healthy turf repels weeds. Unhealthy turf has bare spots or brown spots that allow weeds or broadleaf plants to encroach. Large brown areas often are the result of poor (uneven) coverage by irrigation spray heads. For buffalo grass keep it taller so mow it higher (leave 2-3"). Fertilize and irrigate it when it's growing, not before. To remove cool season weeds in buffalo grass (or any warm season grass) use glyphosate in January or February when the weeds are growing, but the grass is dormant.
10. Does **one plant dominate**? This is often a grouping where the plants have different watering needs – a high water plant being watered with the same frequency and duration as a drought resistant plant. If one is happy with the amount of water applied, the other one will not be. Group plants based on water and mulch needs e.g. trees like wood chip mulch not gravel. One exception would be desert willow which does like gravel.
11. Were **shrubs pruned into shapes**: boxes, balls, cones, cupcakes, and lollypops. High Desert doesn't allow topiary in the covenants or guidelines to sustainability. These landscapes look out of place in High Desert where natural plant shapes are supported. See my article on pruning to learn how to prune naturally or selectively.
12. Are **thorny or spiny plants in locations where people pass**. Because plants grow, a lovely native cholla or a rose bush may be a great choice initially, but now they get in people's way and may hurt them.
13. Is there **plant debris** in the street, walkways, and driveways. This may be a plant choice where the debris from the plant was not considered before planting. Now it is a maintenance nightmare. Would a different plant choice reduce the litter?
14. Does it **contain an invasive plant**? Most of these were not intended choices, it's just that one plant loves the area. In the common area this would be fourwing saltbush, hairy golden aster, gopher plant, purple prairie clover, Mexican feather grass, and chamisa. These plants have found a home with the right conditions for them. In fact, Mexican feather grass has moved into the arroyo. To correct this, thin the plants and reseed another strong performer like big sage, sand sage, or winterfat. Periodically you may just need to remove the plant from your landscape. Volunteers come back from seed so you'll never really lose the plant.
15. Are there **slopes with eroded ruts**? Over time the landscape space is getting smaller. To reduce the erosion, dig in some strawbales where water overtops the slope and then seed some native grasses to hold the soil in place. Add a few well rooted plants like one-seed juniper and chamisa.
16. Are there **suckers or crumbling stucco caused by vines**? Consider putting any vine on a trellis. It makes it a lot easier to restucco a wall or house.

Some problems may be solved with hardscape or mulch. Consider this for hard to work areas or areas where "quick shade" is needed. Remember that most landscape changes require Modifications Committee approval before beginning.