



BACKYARD
colour
THEMES

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Photos by Melanie Rekola

Colour is an individual taste. The landscape, from colourful foliage and flowers to pool interiors, can be homogenous or high-contrast, bold or subdued, soothing or exciting. Colour can invoke any number of strong feelings from exhilaration to serene calmness, as the diverse array of human emotion is intricately connected to colour.

Scientifically, colour is a function of light. However, light from the sun cannot actually be seen, as it is colourless. In fact, colour is a result of light refraction, absorption, and reflection. The sunlight that reaches our eyes as a specific shade depends upon objects it touches, how light is absorbed by said objects, and what light is reflected. Our brains receive messages as a result of this process and are interpreted as colour.

Individual experience plays a key role in the emotion we attach to colour. For example, the colour red is an emotionally intense hue. For some, it evokes feelings of love and passion, but for others it is interpreted as a sign of danger or rage. It is through our own familiarities, cultural influence, and personal taste that we attach meaning to colour.

COLOUR THEORY

The basic colour wheel is an excellent tool for understanding how colours relate to one another. Fear not devotees of colour and those who are colour-shy. Once these elementary principles of colour design are understood, it is much easier to use it to your advantage and narrow down the dizzying array of choices.

Primary colours

Blue, yellow, and red are the three key hues that all other colours are derived from.

Secondary colours

Green, orange, and violet are formed by mixing two primary colours.

Tertiary colours

Orange-yellow, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-violet, red-violet, and red-orange are tertiary colours that are made by mixing a primary and a secondary colour. This is why they always have a two-part name.

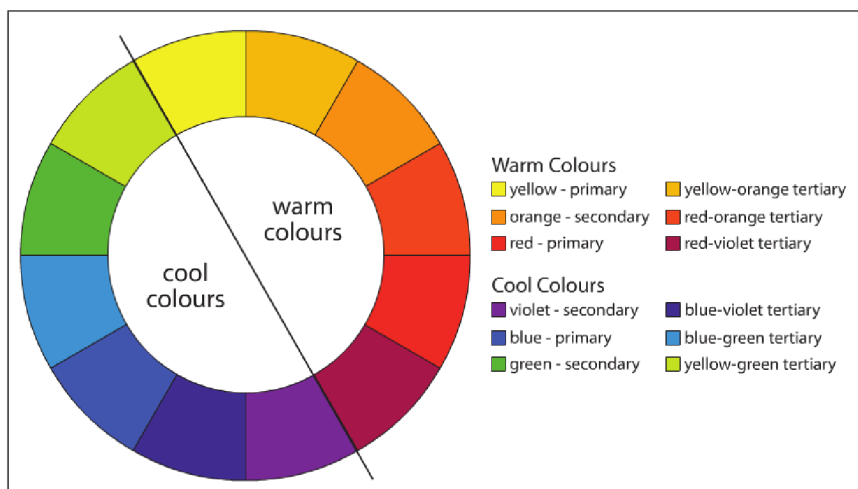
WARM AND COOL TONES

When the colour wheel is divided down the 'red-violet/violet' and 'yellow green/yellow' axis, the result is warm tones on one side and cool tones on the other. An easy style concept to follow is to select colours from either the warm or cool spectrum. Most already gravitate firmly to one side or the other.

Generally speaking, vibrant landscapes presenting the sunny hues of red, yellow, and orange sizzle with energy, whereas a soothing outdoor space filled with peaceful purples and cool blues evoke a sense of serenity.



Daylily 'Red Rum.'
The colour red is an emotionally intense hue.



The basic colour wheel is an excellent tool for understanding how colours relate to one another.

However, personal taste aside, colour tone also has an influence on perspective. Warm tones come to the forefront of view, seeming closer than they actually are, whereas cool tones recess and appear farther away. Both are noteworthy concepts that may be manipulated to bring out the best in every alfresco environment.

MONOCHROMATIC

A monochromatic motif is one which simply uses one colour. Though this may sound dull and dreary, it is amazing how many tonal and shade variations can be found within just one hue. This high-impact unicolour effect is terribly stylish and put together, and is likely the easiest theme to follow in regards to most hues, with the exception of white.

A word about white

The ever popular all-white garden treatments is, in essence, a monochromatic theme, but white itself being the absence

of colour makes this style challenging. The fact is all whites lean slightly towards other tones. Creamy whites have hints of yellow and/or red; cooler whites have bits of blues or greens. Therefore, it is important to follow the all-warm or all-cool tone rule to avoid certain whites looking dirty by comparison.

White in the landscape also has the additional advantage of magical nighttime luminosity. Place white blooms, pots, or even garden sculptures to highlight steps and entry ways or along passageways to light the way for an evening stroll. This effect can also be greatly amplified by placing white poolside to take advantage of the reflective qualities of pool water and, more subtly, in plants with glossy foliage.

ANALOGOUS

An analogous colour pallet is one where any two or three colours located next to each other on the colour wheel are used (e.g. red, red-orange and orange or blue, blue-violet and violet, etc.). In effect, the colours are similar and, therefore, blend together wonderfully in a soft and harmonious way. Just because analogous colours blend quietly does not mean they cannot be high-impact. Just look at how lovely Mother Nature's take on this colour theme is showcased in the vivacious pinks and oranges of some *Echinacea* blooms.

COMPLEMENTARY

Complementary colour motifs are bold and high-contrast. These colours are located opposite of each other on the colour wheel, such as violet and yellow, or blue and orange for example. Complementary motifs bring out the sheer *joie de vivre* of each colour involved. Just be conscious when selecting colours with a similar depth of vibrancy to avoid colour washout when placing them side-by-side. The complementary colour pairing is a classic, common-knowledge theme used across all aspects of art and design.



A contemporary effect can be achieved by using high-contrast neutral shades of light grey and charcoal alongside soft wood tones.

TRIAD

A colour triad theme is created by drawing a symmetrical triangle connecting three colours, such as red, yellow and blue, or violet, orange and green. This look offers the maximum of colour possibilities, which is great for gardeners who struggle with wanting one of everything. This motif is restrained enough to avoid the crazy hodge-podge look; however, similar to the complementary theme, when placing unlike colours next to each other, be sure to select those with a comparable depth of pigment.

NEUTRALS, DARKS, AND LIGHTS

Just as in other areas of design, neutral colours are necessary for balance. In the landscape, neutrals such as soft greens, silver, grey, brown, and white can serve as a buffer between clashing colours and provide the required framework to showcase livelier hues. Alternately, a contemporary effect can also be achieved by using high-contrast neutral shades of light grey and charcoal alongside soft wood tones.

Colour nuances are equally important. Similar to the effect of cool and warm tones, dark colours recess into the distance and light colours come to the forefront, appearing closer than they actually are. They also provide the contrast and dimension needed to bring focus to finer foliage textures. Further, similar to white in the landscape, pale pastel shades have the added benefit of luminosity in lowlight situations.

The colour red can be particularly confusing with regard to shades, as when white is added to red, the outcome is pink. Pink is in fact, light red. Contrary to some opinions, red and pink actually look great together. An example of this is shown in this image of pink blossoms with red sofa cushions and furnishings in this backyard below.

POOL INTERIOR COLOUR CONSIDERATIONS

Pools are a central component of many landscapes, and thus the interior hues must be contemplated carefully. As mentioned earlier, light colours have the appearance of being closer; therefore, light pool interiors seem shallower. Light tones also enable swimmers to see the bottom of the pool, which is an

excellent safety feature—especially for young swimmers. On the other hand, light coloured pools will also show any debris present, so they must be kept meticulously clean. Pools with dark interiors appear deeper. Dark tones attract the sun's warmth making them naturally warmer, while also better hiding pool grime.



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White in the landscape has the additional advantage of magical nighttime luminosity.

A pool's pigment is greatly influenced by the addition of water. The reflection of sky, pool surroundings, and water depth all play a role in how the water colour is perceived. This will also change drastically depending on light and weather conditions. The following are some common pool interior hues and how the addition of water can alter them. Keep in mind, however, the reflected surrounds will also impact the final colour.

White

This is the classic colour choice for plaster pools. It changes to a light, bright, crystal-clear blue.

Sand tones

Sandy coloured pool interiors turn turquoise—similar to a Caribbean beach.

Contrary to some opinions, red and pink actually look great together, such as in this backyard where the pink blossoms and red sofa cushions and furnishings work well together.

Greys

Grey pool interiors transform into soft grey-blues, blending in naturally to their surroundings.

Blues

Blue pool interiors typically remain the same; however, the shade of blue can change depending on the time of day.

Just as you choose to adorn the interior of your home with a personal touch of colour and style, the same should be done for the exterior. Your outdoor living space is meant to surround you with beauty and enhance your life. Regardless of trends and styles, there is no right or wrong way to use colour if it makes you happy. Ultimately, it is your home environment so do as you like. However, for those who prefer some seasoned advice and direction, carry your indoor themes into the outdoors. Select your colour concept wisely and consider their effects on all aspects of your outdoor living space, including patio furniture, plantings, pots, pool tile, pavers, and exterior décor to create the chicest of backyard resorts. Just remember, continuity is fundamental to avoid a potpourri end result. 🌊

Since 2001, award-winning landscape designer and garden writer, *Melanie Rekola*, has been making backyard dreams a reality. Offering inspired landscape design and consultative services throughout Ontario, and remotely to contractors throughout Canada and the U.S., she is one of the lucky few to have found their life's passion. Rekola can be contacted via e-mail at melanie@ladylandscape.ca. For more information, visit her website www.ladylandscape.ca.