



## Personal Space

AWAKEN YOUR INNER GARDENING  
DIVA WITH SUSIE COELHO

By Sara Jackson

**Susie Coelho is many things:** garden designer, entrepreneur, restaurateur, TV personality, lifestyle guru. But she has a design philosophy that is less about imposing her vision on her clients' outdoor spaces and more about helping them uncover their own.

It's at the heart of what she has done for years, she says, on TV shows like HGTV's *Outer Spaces* and *Surprise Gardener*, as well as her books, *Secrets of a Style Diva: A Get-Inspired Guide to Your Creative Side* and *Style Your Dream Wedding*.

"It's about empowering people and pushing them to make choices they like," she says. "Many people think they don't have the 'design gene,' but my job isn't to make their decisions for them. It's to help them find the creativity they have that they probably don't know they have."

To many clients, that concept can be intimidating, she admits. They're looking for guidance and suggestions, and even direction from a gardening designer. And finding their own gardening styles can take some time and thought. But Coelho has a process to get them there, and it goes something like this:

### GARDENING 101

**1 START WITH YOU.** Pictures from a magazine, ideas from other gardens — all are great, she says. But the real work begins with finding your own sense of style. Don't worry if you're not an experienced gardener or don't know the names of particular plants.

Look at your lifestyle, she says. Do you entertain frequently? Spend most of your time with your family? How much of your leisure time do you spend outdoors? These questions all determine what type of garden will work best for you — formal, casual, open, intricate, etc. "Let your garden speak to you. It will tell you what it needs," she says. For example, the genesis for the French courtyard garden she created in her own front yard was a hedge she had put in place simply to block a view of her neighbor's driveway.

Also, think carefully about what the space needs to do for you and your family. A structured, formal garden space probably isn't ideal if you need a place for children to run and play, she points out.



**2 LOOK INSIDE.** Let your interior sensibilities guide your exterior ones. "You want a flow from the indoors out," she says. Look around the inside of your home. What colors do you gravitate toward? What textures appeal to you? What patterns or themes have you used in your decor? "If you've got French country decor inside, you [could] try a Provence-style outside, with blues and yellows, [and] a daybed with toile pillows," she says.

**3 FIND YOUR VISION AND NAME IT.** Giving your style a name helps it become more concrete and easier to visualize, she says. "Give it a name, even if it's one that no one else understands," she says. One of her favorites is "French laundry," a moniker she gave one client's breezy, French-provincial outdoor style. The design even included clothesline strung on one side of the client's patio, with white sheets and a few pieces of vintage clothing pinned to it, enclosing the space while adding a sense of whimsy.

"It could be anything. Tropical, Japanese/Zen, contemporary. Or it can be much more personal, like 'Grandma's garden,' or the garden from a villa in Tuscany that you visited," she says. What's important is that once you've given it an identity, it will take on a life of its own. →

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## Personal *cont'd*

**4 IDENTIFY THE KEY ELEMENTS TO YOUR FINAL DESIGN.** Once you have a style, you can determine what plants, props and other materials you'll need to bring it to life. For example, with a tropical style, you first have to determine what kind of tropical, she says: "Some people think tropical and think Hawaii and tiki torches. Others think of the jungle." From there, consider a color palette that appeals to you. Again, with tropical themes, most prefer bright, vivid colors, but you have to determine which two or three to focus on.

Then decide if you need other style elements such as a water feature or furniture to completely capture your vision. "With a tropical theme, you'll probably want a natural feel, like a waterfall or a fountain. Look for something that has that sensibility" rather than a contemporary statue or modern art, she says.

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— SUSIE COELHO

**5 DON'T COMPROMISE YOUR VISION.** The vision is the heart of any gardening design. You can compromise on everything else — what plants to use, how much space to cover, which hardscape materials are appropriate and how much money to spend, Coelho says.

Even if your budget is tight, don't give up on your style ideas. Look for low-cost options at swap meets or flea markets. And don't be afraid to barter for gardening skills you don't possess yourself. "Have your friend work for four hours in your garden, then you spend four hours painting her house. You have fun, drink some wine, have a barbecue at the end of the day ... and you get it all done together," she says.

Susie Coelho will speak at the **Extraordinary Women's Exchange** on March 3. The luncheon will be held from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Crowne Plaza Hotel at 555 E. Canal St. To register, call 783-9368 or visit [grcc.com/View/Page/events\\_ewx](http://grcc.com/View/Page/events_ewx).

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