Color Basics for Landscapes

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The topic of color can become very complicated. This publication introduces some basic concepts of color theory and some ideas about our reactions to color that may be applicable to choices we make when choosing plants for landscapes.

We see only a small portion of the total electromagnetic spectrum. We cannot see ultraviolet or infrared light, X-rays, gamma rays, microwaves, radar, or waves from television or FM, AM, or short-wave radio. What we perceive as “visible” is light waves of a limited range of wavelengths. We “see” these light waves when they are reflected from objects to the retinas at the back of our eyes. We see black when nothing is reflected, and white when all visible-wavelength light is reflected. We see red when all light is absorbed except red, blue when all light is absorbed except blue, and yellow when all light is absorbed except yellow.

Twelve basic colors form the color wheel, which was invented by color theorists to help us think about color. The twelve colors are called hues. Three colors (yellow, red, and blue) are called primary colors because you cannot mix other colors to make them. If you mix the primary colors you make the secondary colors (orange, purple, and green). If you mix the primary and secondary colors that are adjacent to each other on the color wheel, you create six more tertiary colors.

Twelve hues of the color wheel

Primary colors
Yellow
Red
Blue

Secondary colors
Orange (yellow-red)
Purple (red-blue)
Green (blue-yellow)

Tertiary colors
Yellow-orange (saffron or amber)
Orange-red (vermillion or terra-cotta)
Red-purple (magenta or fuchsia)
Purple-blue (navy or royal blue)
Blue-green (teal)
Green-yellow (chartreuse)
These twelve colors can be mixed with white to form tints or black to form shades. This produces different values (gradations of lightness or darkness) of the hues. For example, if you mix white with red you can produce the tint of pink; if you mix black with red you can produce the shade of burgundy. Many tints and shades can be produced, depending on how much white or black is added.

Colors of varying intensity, sometimes referred to as chroma or saturation, are developed by adding grey or the complimentary color, the color on the opposite side of the color wheel; the more that is added, the less the intensity.

**Examples of complimentary colors**
- Yellow and purple
- Blue and orange
- Red and green
- Yellow-orange and blue-purple
- Red-orange and blue-green
- Red-purple and yellow-green

Complimentary colors, when placed next to each other, intensify each other. This phenomenon is called simultaneous contrast. This works especially well when the two colors are of similar value. Because green is a dominant color in landscapes, a commonly used complimentary color is red. If you stare at a color for a while and then shift your eyes to a white background, you will tend to see an afterimage of the complimentary color; this phenomenon is called successive contrast (for more on this, see the reference by Zelanski and Fisher). Therefore, in landscape arrangements the placement of complimentary colors next to each other will tend to intensify each color and create a harmony.

Colors not opposite on the color wheel are usually referred as colors of discord, especially when they are far from the complimentary color. Examples are orange and yellow-green, and blue-green and blue-purple. Colors of discord often have been frowned upon, but today less rigid color prohibitions are followed. However, it is usually safer to use complimentary colors, which produce harmonious color combinations.

**Balance of colors**

Certain colors are more intense than others. Yellow is much more intense than its compliment, purple, and orange is more intense than its compliment, blue, while red and its compliment green are equal in intensity (Itten, 1970). To balance these complimentary colors, use the following ratios:

- Yellow:purple 1:3
- Orange:blue 1:2
- Red:green 1:1

In landscaping it would be balanced to have equal amounts of red and green. Fully saturated, pure hues are heavier than lighter and darker values of each hue. When located higher, blue and yellow are lighter, and red is heavier. When located low, blue is heavy, red is stable, and yellow is buoyant (Itten, 1970).

**Depth of field**

To create depth of field in a landscape, place cool colors in the background and warm colors in the foreground. More contrast and larger size will tend to move the objects forward (Lauer, 1990). In tropical gardens, try all-green palms in the background and plants with warm-colored flowers or leaves in the foreground.

**Symbolism**

The culture of the country where the landscape is, or the country that it is trying to evoke, must be considered. Examples of cultural symbolism given by Lauer (1990) include the following:

- Green is a holy color in Moslem countries.
- Red represents good luck in China.
- Black represents death in the United States, purple in Latin America, and white in China.
- In the USA, where traffic lights are common, red means stop, green means go, and yellow means caution, but in rural China where no stoplights exist, these colors do not have the same meanings.
- Brides wear white in the United States, yellow in Hindu India, and red in China.
Color and feelings
(examples from Whelan, 1994)

Yellow—moving, lively and happy, constant motion, bright
Yellow-orange (amber or saffron)—most welcoming.
Yellow-green (chartreuse)—accent color used in youthful and offbeat objects.
Orange—friendly, open and easy, used in some fast food operations
Orange-red (vermillion or terra-cotta)—if dark, earthy; otherwise vitality, vigor, and warmth
Red—powerful, forceful, bold and extreme, masculine, always attracts attention
Red-purple (magenta or fuchsia)—energetic and active
Purple—elements of surprise and magic, unpredictable personality
Purple-blue (navy or royal blue)—dependable, authority, regal, police and navy officers
Blue—strong and calm
Blue-green (teal)—refreshing, invigorating and depicts travel and leisure
Green—fresh, health and prosperity, tranquil and pastoral
Burgundy (shade of red)—wealth
Hunter green (shade of green)—possession, banks and legal offices
Pink (tint of red)—romance!
Turquoise (tint of teal)—tropical, tranquility
Pastel cream (tint of yellow)—elegant, impression of ease and opulence, classic understatement
Light blue (tint of blue)—young and sporty, calming and restful, sense of well being and peace

Darkness vs. brightness of colors
(examples from Berry and Martin, 1991)

Dark  Bright
Rich  Inexpensive
Exclusive  Mass market
Authority and dignity  Youth culture
Restrained  Loud
Passive  Active

Physical and psychological impact of color
(examples from Berry and Martin, 1991)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Warm</th>
<th>Cool</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulsive</td>
<td>Contemplative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artificial</td>
<td>Natural</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>Shadow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opaque</td>
<td>Transparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulant</td>
<td>Sedative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dense</td>
<td>Rare</td>
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<tr>
<td>Earthy</td>
<td>Airy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Near</td>
<td>Far</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy</td>
<td>Light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dry</td>
<td>Wet</td>
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</tbody>
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Feminine vs. masculine
(examples from Berry and Martin, 1991)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feminine</th>
<th>Masculine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cool colors</td>
<td>Warm colors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curvilinear lines</td>
<td>Sharp angles, geometric lines and forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silky, fine texture</td>
<td>Broad texture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighter values</td>
<td>Darker values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muted contrast</td>
<td>Sharp contrast</td>
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Literature cited