Springtime is so close I can smell it, literally! Forsythia, Bradford pears, daffodils, hyacinth, tulips, and so many more; the landscape is coming alive with the colors and scents of spring. Every year it amazes me how beautiful our surroundings are. Bright yellows, neon greens, deep purples, and thousands of other colors bring life to the drab browns of winter.

On my drive to work in the morning, and when I am around town, I love to check out the landscape handiwork of others. Some people prefer a bright, eye-catching landscape, while others stick with more traditional, formal evergreen plantings. Each person has his or her own style and it is reflected in one’s landscape design.

I often have people who call and ask for design advice. I will be the first to tell you that I am not the one for the task. I am great at designing a basic functioning landscape for myself, but everyone has their own vision, and I am not so great at seeing yours. So, when people want advice about basic design, I have 5 questions I ask them…

**What do you absolutely love?** Do you enjoy sitting in a garden listening to the birds? Do you like running around with the kids playing ball? Are you the person everyone runs to when they need fresh produce? Your first consideration when planning you landscape should be for the things that you love. Whether it is a water feature, a specific plant, or area for an activity, keep that as your number one priority. Because if you do not love you landscape you will not care for your landscape. Which leads me to question number 2…

**What are you willing to do?** How much effort and care are you able and willing to put into your landscape? Is this a hobby that you have a few hours a day, few hours a week, or is it not a hobby at all? If your landscape requires a lot of hand pruning and you are just not willing to do the work, it will cost you more money and time in the long run.

**What do you want the landscape to do for you?** Are looking for lower power bills by shading the house in the summer? Do your kids cost you a fortune in vegetables that you could grow yourself if only you had a garden to grow them in? Is the neighbor’s house bright pink and it makes you cringe when you see it first thing every morning? Landscapes can be used to shield, shade, produce, stimulate, and entertain.
How much are you willing to spend? Plants come in all manner of sizes and prices. Typically, your big box stores are going to be less expensive than your local nursery because they buy them in larger quantities. But how well do they know the plant material and can they care for the plants within the store? Local nurseries know their stock inside out and front to back and they can sometimes help with the installation. Clearance racks are great, but how much does the fungicide cost to get rid of the powdery mildew that came with that clearance plant? Are you willing to wait for the plant to grow and fill in the space, or do you want the instant gratification? Cost determines a lot in the landscape of a home.

So now that you have answered my first four questions, it is time to design. Sketch out your dream landscape. Incorporate all the things that you love. Remember how much time you are willing to spend taking care of your landscape. Make sure the design has all the things that you need from it. When you are completing the basic sketch, just put a symbol where you want a plant. Once you have this basic plan move on to question number five.

What plant goes where? Whether you have the perfect plant and need a spot to place it or a great spot and need a plant, it is like a matching game. Make a list of the plants that you love. Find ideal spots within your design for each of these plants. When you have those plants placed, determine what is left. Consider the sunlight that spot will get, the water drainage in the area, the surrounding plants, and hardscaped areas. Shop for your plant material with a spot to put it already in mind.

These questions seem basic, but they will usually point you in the right direction. My landscape is a constant work in progress. I thought I loved brick edging. My husband Zack labored for hours installing it across the front of our house. A year later, I asked him to take it up because I wanted to expand the bed area. He was not happy, but he did it with a smile. I realized that I need my landscape to be fluid. I want to be able to put new things in with a limited amount of hassle. But that is me. My answer to question number one is that I LOVE plants! So that is what my landscape is all about.

If you have any questions, comments, or ideas, please feel free to contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at (910) 671-3276 or by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.