

# Labyrinths change mood of a garden

---

by MARTY ROSS

You can't get very lost in a labyrinth and, in fact, you just might find yourself while walking its gently curving paths.

Garden designers who specialize in the art of making labyrinths say they turn a garden into a meditative space and give anyone who walks their paths a chance to escape, one step at a time, from the intensity and demands of a busy world. They concentrate the mind. You don't need a large garden to make room for a labyrinth, and you don't need a degree in geometry to lay one out in your own back yard.

“Anyone can do this,” says Myra Smith, owner of The Laughing Flower Labyrinth and Landscape Co. in Bellingham, Wash. She even taught her 5-year-old how to draw a labyrinth.

The very act of sketching out a labyrinth on a lawn changes the mood of the garden, she says. “Immediately after the design is put down, there is a more sacred feeling to the space,” says Smith, who has two labyrinths in her back yard. “It adds a lot of dimension.”

Gardeners have always regarded their back yards as private spaces in which to ponder the world's problems – and their own – while puttering among the daffodils. A pretty patio or a garden bench under a tree creates a setting for relaxation and reflection, and a wind chime or a fountain can provide the quiet background sound that helps take you away from the beeping, buzzing world around you. But a labyrinth does more.

Labyrinths have a single path – there's no riddle to solve, and there are no dead ends – and the practice of walking the labyrinth, whether you do it regularly or just when the mood strikes, removes clutter from your imagination. Weeds and worries disappear when you walk a labyrinth, Smith says; the experience is restful and restorative. “I love the labyrinth because it's a universal experience,” she says. “You don't have to consider yourself spiritual to get something out of it.”

Marjolaine Arsenault, a garden designer and owner of The Garden Spirit, in Chestertown, N.Y., walked her first labyrinth almost 10 years ago, when she was in the middle of a divorce. She owned her own advertising agency at the time, but the experience of the labyrinth changed her life.

“Walking the labyrinth was like opening a gateway to something so much bigger,” she says. She sold her ad agency and started her new company, building labyrinths and conducting labyrinth workshops. “It was a way of exploring my creative nature in a whole new way,” she says.

Walking a labyrinth is a private experience, Arsenault says, even if you do it with a group. It gives you time to think about the questions in life, and it helps writers and artists work through knotty problems. Temporary labyrinths, created for an event such as a wedding or anniversary, or for a party in the moonlight, turn a

celebration into an indelible moment in time, she says.

Clients who decide to make room for a labyrinth in their own gardens usually have walked a labyrinth in a public place. They typically already have a garden with fragrant plants, places to sit, and paths to wander, Arsenault says, but they see a labyrinth as a more carefully focused meditative space.

Perhaps the best-known labyrinth design is in the floor of France's Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres, outside Paris. This classic labyrinth is about 40 feet across. Its paths weave through 11 so-called circuits, tracing a path about 850 feet long. Adaptations with seven circuits or fewer are more practical for back yards; Arsenault has built labyrinths as small as 16 feet across, with just five circuits.

Smith's designs for labyrinths fit in garden spaces from five to 50 feet across. The size and situation of a labyrinth will depend on the garden, of course. Smith works with clients on what she calls the “four P’s” – the place, the purpose of the labyrinth, the people who will be walking it, and the practical considerations, including budget. Some adaptation of the Chartres labyrinth is popular, she and Arsenault say, but there are many styles.

Even labyrinths that will be used by groups of people – at a church or in a public place, for example – typically have narrow paths, about 14 to 16 inches wide, up to a maximum of 24 inches. Narrow paths allow a more intimate experience. “If the paths are wider, it's easier to be distracted as you are walking,” Smith says.

Bricks or stones are often used to outline the paths, which may be of gravel or turf. A flat or very gently sloping surface is essential, and preparing the area by excavating and laying landscape cloth (to prevent weeds) is a good idea. It is important to set stones at soil level, so you can mow right over turf labyrinths.

The center of the labyrinth can just be a place to pause to gather your thoughts and feelings, or you might want to place a bench or a piece of sculpture there. Listen to the wind in the trees and the song of the birds. Let it all surround you there in the symbolic universe you have created for yourself. That is the whole point of the place: to get you centered.

---

## **Original URL:**

<http://www.ocregister.com/articles/labyrinth-142325-ocprint-garden-says.html>