

Edgings – A Garden’s ‘Finishing’ Touch
by UCCE Tuolumne County
Master Gardener Carolee James

Whether you have a formal garden, a cottage style garden, or a garden that is a mix of several styles (what I call a casual garden), an attractive edge will enhance and put the ‘finishing’ touch to your garden.

Formal gardens will usually have **hardscape materials** like brick, concrete pavers, metal or wood edging or even cement walkways around garden beds. A lawn with crisp, razor sharp edges can define a garden bed and present a formal look whether the bed is curving or more linear in shape.

Cottage and casual gardens will have a **more relaxed** type of edging. Perhaps a small edging fence made out of willow twigs or one made of metal. In the Master Gardener Demonstration Garden we have used a 2-foot high picket fence to delineate the native plant gardens. It defines the areas, yet still maintains an informal look. Rocks—small, medium, and large—also provide a nice edging for a cottage or casual garden bed. For those gardeners who enjoy a bit more whimsy in the garden, you might try lining your bed with bottles, sea shells, small logs, overturned clay pots or anything else you find that tickles your fancy.

When walkways or paths through the garden are made of cement, pavers, gravel, bark, chips or even lawn, the edges of the beds may still seem to be missing something. And that’s where plants come in.

In the **formal garden** small, lacy plants would not look appropriate along the edge of a bed. Instead the **best edging plants** are those with enough height and leaf definition to **contrast** with the grass and/or the hardscape edging material. In these gardens you will want plants that declare a clear visual separation from the lawn/edging like:

- Bergenia
- Hosta
- sweet flag
- upright sedums

And if you need plants to edge a bed that **transitions from sun to shade**, look for shade lovers and sun lovers that share enough qualities to look compatible like similar leaf shape, foliage color, or flower color. A sample of silver foliage would be:

- white sage (*Salvia apiana*) in the sun and
- furry gray lamb’s ears (*Stachys byzantina*) in the shade.

However, the **cottage and casual garden beds** just cry out for a lighter edge, like a finishing touch of a trim on a piece of clothing. If the bed is edged with some type of ‘hard’ edging material, the **spilling over of plant foliage or flowers will soften the edge** and give it a relaxed look. Plants with filigreed foliage and delicate flowers will give a ‘lacy’ look to the bed edge. They add lightness to a garden bed while contrasting with other plant groupings within the bed. Suitable lacy edging plants include:

- filigreed artemisias
- cranesbill (*Geranium sanguineum*)
- ‘Moonbeam’ coreopsis or
- ‘Lemon Drop’ marigold

In the shade;

- bleeding heart can highlight a dark corner while adding that lacy look.
- Border pinks and
- sweet alyssum are other good choices.

Plant these little beauties at the very edge of the bed and let them drape over the edging material or spill out into the walkway.

In gardens where the **walkways are meandering paths** of gravel or decomposed granite, edging **plants spilling into the walkway** are almost mandatory! Look for plants less than two feet tall...low growing ground covers like:

- sweet woodruff
- lamium
- Ajuga

and prostrate perennials such as:

- Saxifrages
- creeping phlox
- lamb’s ears and
- violets to edge these beds.

Almost any low-growers will give borders and beds a desirable finished appearance. Often it’s the little two–inch to two–foot-tall plants that make the biggest difference in unifying a garden. While not always showy, low growers are essential in creating tapestries of form, texture and color and there’s nothing better at keeping weeds at bay. A carpet of sweetly scented violets beats a drab dressing of bark mulch any day.

In my casual garden, I like to use several species of native grasses and plants to soften edges of cement walks, patios and parking areas. Even on our **cement block retaining walls**, shrubs and perennials like:

- rosemary
- barberry
- spirea
- salvias
- and lavender are allowed to spill over to soften the hard edge

Whatever edging materials you use in your garden, just remember that spilling, draping, and creeping plants will be the perfect 'finishing' touch.

Carolee James will purchase more native plants to spill, drape and creep in her garden at the Oct. 17th California Native Plant Society sale in Jamestown, CA.