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Anatomy of a Garden Design

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATE EASTON

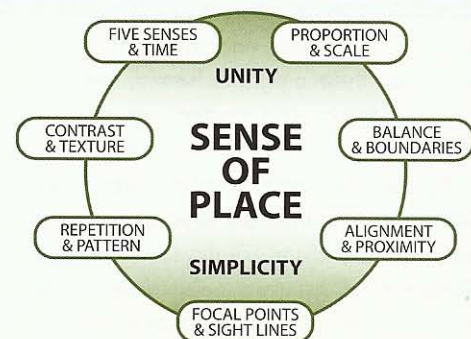
Creating a well-designed garden can be as easy as enjoying it. Garden design follows many of the same design principles of other three-dimensional art compositions, with the addition of accounting for the growing nature of plants. Gardens, like animals, have a support structure. Design principles that respect nature are the support structure of gardens. Following these design principles helps to produce gardens that are visually pleasing while being a sustainable ecosystem. These design principles are linked and related to each other through garden elements (structures, outdoor rooms,

"It is necessary to make houses and gardens and garden houses... There must be an intimacy and the feeling of living in gardens; to achieve this, one must build proportioned and well-arranged gardens."

— Luis Barragán

plants, furniture, focal points, walkways, arbors, gates, etc.).

Unity, proportion and scale, balance and boundaries, alignment and proximity, focal points and sight lines, repetition and pattern, contrast and texture, five senses and time, and simplicity are the design principles that contribute to "building proportioned and well-arranged gardens." These concepts are explored below.





SEQUENCE & FLOW

Gardens are about movement – physical and visual. As a visitor traverses a path, the eye is also directed along the path discovering surprises in fore-, mid- and backgrounds. Like a landscape painting, there is a planned visual movement that incorporates the whole and draws the viewer to notice specific elements in the garden through sequenced frames of view. Using focal points that enhance the lines of sight is an ➤

UNITY

Imagine a village of stucco houses with tile roofs and shutters that cover windows facing the street. The sun creates sharp contrasts and deep shadows of large trees in the yards. In the distance, rolling hills are planted with grapes, wheat or other agricultural crops interspersed with copses that provide cover for wildlife.

Or, picture tall conifers shading houses buried in the woods where glimpses of distant water or the sound of a creek and birds graces the wood. The light is diffuse and softens the edges of everything it touches. Two very different places yet they both have a sense of place, or unity, that holds all the elements together.

In a garden, unity is that quality that is created through selection and placement of specific garden elements to tell the visitor the main idea in a glance. Much like how a written report introduces the subject matter and then supports the main idea with arguments, unity is the hypothesis supported by every garden element. Using one idea, statement, or theme that is compatible with the existing environment to guide garden design, element selection and placement amplifies the message, and creates a sense of place in the garden. Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water home and garden were designed to mimic the waterfall over which it was built. Japanese gardens express Zen ideals through specific placement of stone, gravel, water, and plants. With a unifying theme, a garden reflects its owners' story/myth and style as well as the regional characteristics to give it a unique "joie de vive."

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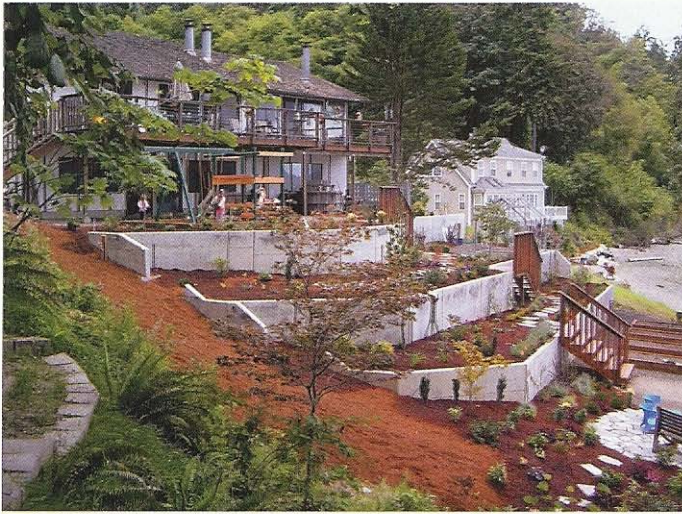
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A project during the installation period.



The project one year later.

irresistible pull to keep progressing further into the garden. Paths, arbors, gates, arches, and plant arrangement create a sequence and flow of progressive realization. Partially obscuring a view or focal point creates a sense of mystery and a desire to travel further into the scene to discover something new.

PROPORTION & SCALE

Being outside can be overwhelming when everything around is bigger than life. Wide-open skies, encompassing vistas of fields or water to the horizon, and trees that seem to touch the sky tend to make people feel uncomfortable. Making a garden feel people-sized uses proportion and scale to place garden elements and define spaces. Where proportion defines the relationship of the parts to the whole, scale is the dimension needed for the intended use of the space. Proportion and Scale are the bones of unity.

The Golden Mean provides a powerful guide for determining proportions in a garden. Derived from nature, the Golden Mean (or Golden Section or the Renaissance Divine Proportion) is the ratio defined by PHI or 1.618...or the square root of 5 (See sidebar for more interesting PHI facts). For any given space, the measure of its dimensions can be divided into sections that express the ratio PHI.

For example, a space that is 21 feet

long could be divided into an 8-foot and a 13-foot section to achieve the Golden Section in the garden. Another example is manipulating scale and proportion to visually reduce the size of a space by breaking up a large surface plane with a grid that based on the Golden Section ratio. Turning the grid on a 45-degree angle to the house or other structure creates additional visual movement while retaining the ratio. Another example is to make a walkway narrower at its beginning and wider at the end to give the false perspective that the width of the path never changes. All of these approaches based on the Golden Section result in gardens that approach nature's plan.

BALANCE & BOUNDARIES

Balance is creating visual harmony in the garden by strategic placement of elements so that their mass or weight will balance the view. A symmetrical approach to balance places exactly the same elements on either side of an imaginary line that divides the space into equal halves from the viewer's vantage point. An asymmetrically balanced garden places elements of equal mass or weight opposite the other in such a way that they appear to be the same size or of the same mass. A radial balance is achieved when elements are placed equidistantly around a central point thereby distributing the mass equally. Proportion and scale contributes to the actual element size and placement to

achieve the overall balance.

Along with proportion and scale, establishing visual or physical garden boundaries helps to make the garden feel people-sized and defines the outdoor rooms. Boundaries define the edges of the space as well as the transition zones between them. The floor of the room can be a flagstone patio, a deck or a low growing groundcover. The boundaries are the floor, walls, and ceiling of the outdoor spaces. The floor could be a ground cover while walls can be a mixed shrub and tree border or a trellis with vines or a fence. The ceiling could be the branches of a tree or the horizontal beams of a pergola. Choosing local materials for boundaries that are consistent with the regional flavor not only supports the principle of unity, it is a conservational and ecological sound choice.

ALIGNMENT AND PROXIMITY

Another relationship concept, alignment, determines how garden elements support each other and the whole (unity), while proximity is the space between elements or a group of elements. Alignment is also a consideration for boundaries. Elements can be in alignment with each other, such as in an alley of trees flanking a path. Elements can be in alignment with a house or structure or the cardinal directions to create an axial design layout. Alternatively, element alignment can be staggered in a regular pattern or in a random pattern.

"Magic can occur when all the elements are present and balanced."

— *Martin Hakubai Mosko, in "Landscape as Spirit"*

Proximity, or grouping elements, can be based on sameness or differences. For example, group the same plants, or different plants with the same flower or foliage color, or the same shape or texture creates a visual repetition. Groups typically contain odd numbers (3, 5, 7, 9, ...) of objects and are seldom more than nine in the suburban garden. Sometimes one of something is all that is needed — the larger object, less is more.

FOCAL POINTS AND SIGHT LINES

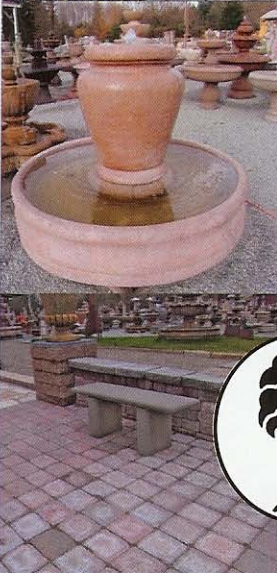
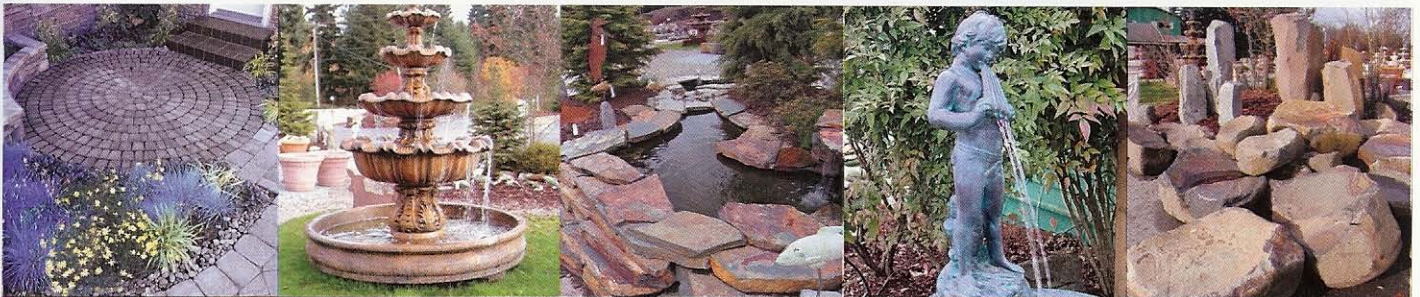
Alignment and proximity are used in combination to create places for the eye to rest as it travels through the garden. These focal points are in proportion to the structures and plantings around it. Focal points can be placed on a sight line from a view inside a house window that frames



the view, or at the bend of a path or the end of a garden room. A specimen plant with unusual characteristics such as twisted branches, an unusual color, shape or texture can be a focal point. Using an arbor or pair of trees to frame a view creates a view-through-a-view or a borrowed view of a living backdrop.

Geometric structures (circles, rectangles, pyramids, obelisks) or statues contrast with nature's patterns for another kind of focal

point. Placing focal point elements at ground level or above eye level forces the viewer to stop and notice them because of the unexpected placement. Strategic placement of focal points is one way to distract garden visitors from the neighbors' yard or unfortunately placed utility pole. Nature's style is one of minimalism and simplicity with everything in the proper place. Resist the urge to overuse sightlines and focal points, one per garden room is enough. ►



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REPETITION & PATTERN

Related to proximity, repetition and pattern defines how grouping is accomplished. Repetition of flower or foliage color, textures, shapes or even the same element produces harmony and reduces visual confusion. Repetition can be a unifying element. Repetition can be accomplished with any element, though plant material is the best way to mimic nature, making the whole look like it happened naturally. The same ground cover, edging, fence, walkway surface, rock type, garden art, and furniture all support unity.

A pattern could be grouping similar shaped plants repeated throughout the garden or repeating a flower color or a texture, or using the same color paving throughout the garden. A pattern could be a row of clipped yew columns fronted by a row of tropical-leafed *Acanthus mollis* (Bear's Breeches) that border a mown lawn. All are similar green hues, yet the texture of each plant is architectural and contrasting, reinforcing the line that is the boundary of the lawn. And then, there is the random placement of an element to create surprise, like Mother Nature's serendipitous placement of a *Trillium* along a forest path just as it transitions from darkness into filtered light.

CONTRAST & TEXTURE

Where repetition and pattern are about sameness, contrast uses differences to draw attention to a unique plant or garden element. Perhaps it's a focal point

that needs a sight line to draw attention or it's a desire to distract visually from an inopportune view. Contrast can be accomplished with color, shapes, or textures.

In the garden, texture refers to foliage and overall image of the plant — coarse (large) or fine (finely-cut) leaves or moderate (everything in between). The leaves of *Fatsia japonica* and *Acer macrofolium* are 12-18 inches across and are considered coarse. The leaves of *Nasella tenuissima* (Feather Grass) are hair-like while *Acer palmatum* "Dissectum" (Cut Leaf Japanese Maple) leaves are toothed and finely cut, yet both are a fine textured plant.

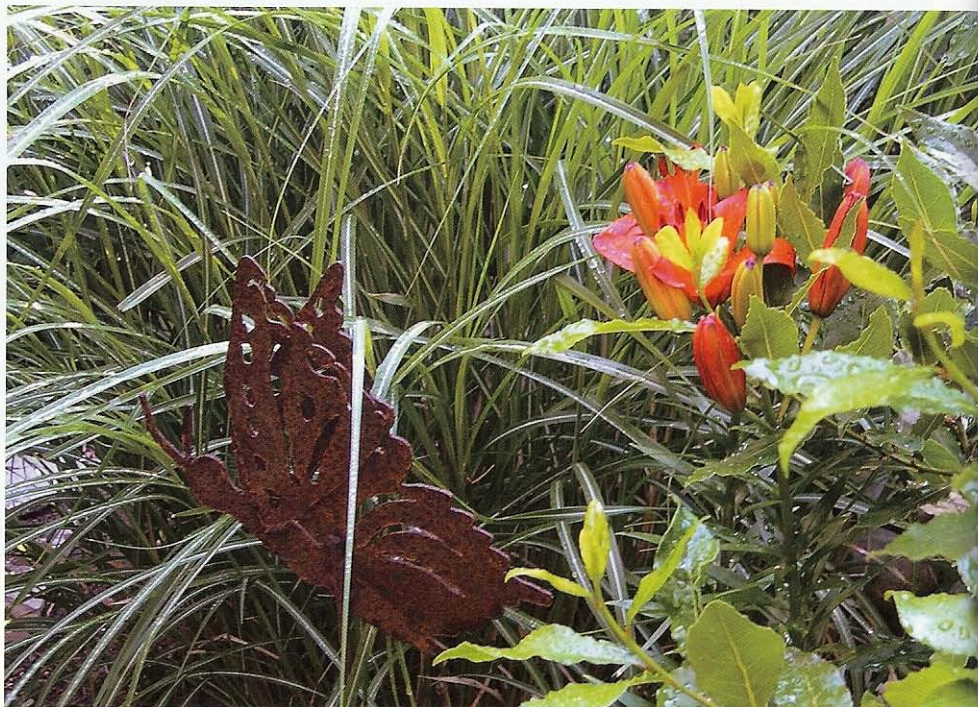
Flower and foliage color are commonly used in contrast and repetition. Warm colors (red, yellow, orange) can be used to highlight and visually advance an element to the front. Cool colors (blue, green, purple) can be used to blend or create more visual weight. Neutral colors (grey, silver, tan, white) advance or recede depending on the surrounding color(s). Many plants have interesting leaf shapes, bark and fruits that have a longer life cycle than flowers that can also be longer lasting contrasting or textural elements.

Plant shapes (mound, upright, vase, creeping, columnar, globose, oval, spreading, cascade, pyramidal, etc.) can be used to accent an element or keep the eye moving along a path. A grouping of similar shaped plants keeps the eye moving forward while a grouping of dissimilar shapes causes the eye to pause.

FIVE SENSES & TIME

Sound, touch, smell can enhance the garden experience for the visitor, especially for those who are visually impaired. Create sound with cascading water features, wind chimes, birds and other wildlife, or just the rustle of leaves in the wind. Noise can be blocked with large, dense hedging, fences and buildings to create a quite contemplative space.

Frame a path, a border, or a gate with "touchables" — plants that have velvety or soft, smooth or rough edged surfaces. *Stachys* (Lamb's Ear) leaves and the male flowers of the Pussy Willow (*Salix* spp.) are a sensual treat to the fingertips. Lily turf's (*Ophiopogon* spp.) wider, strappy leaves are smooth and supple while the leaves of *Miscanthus* (Feather Reed Grass) have minute dentations on the edges and a prominent midrib that give a zipper-like textural experience. On the other end of the spectrum, plants like holly, barberry, hawthorn and firethorn can be used as effective barriers.



"Throughout the world, people re-create in their surroundings their ideas of perfection and natural beauty. The garden is filled with mystery, the myth of creation. It is a place of peace, solace, healing and inspiration."
 – Martin Hakubai Mosko, in "Landscape as Spirit."

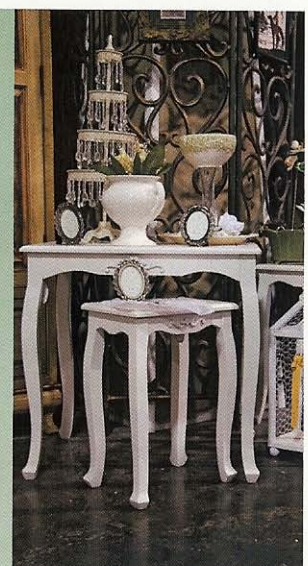
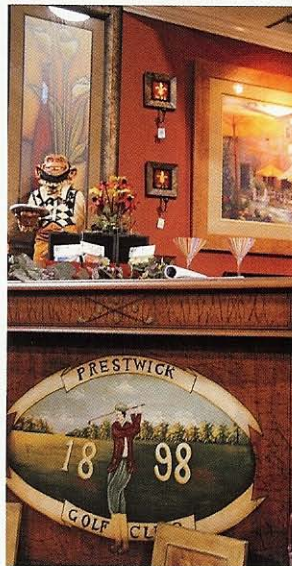


Since gardens are for people – remember, people will be people, so plan accordingly.

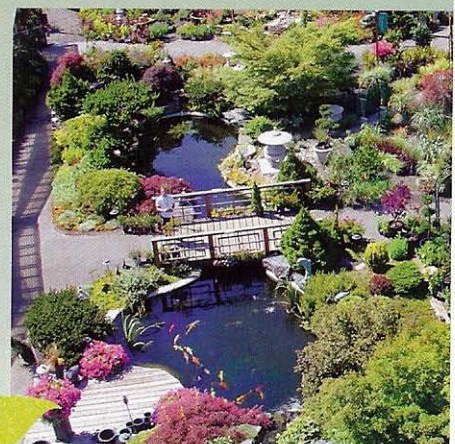
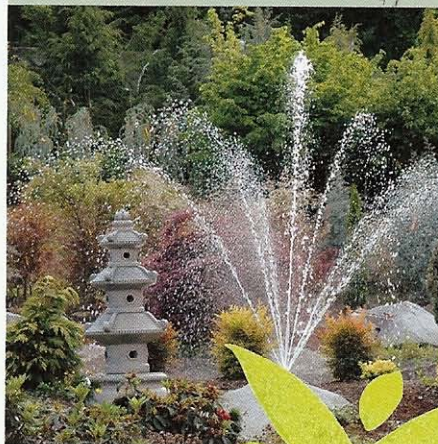
Fragrance can also augment pleasure in the garden. From shrubs such as *Daphne odora* (Winter Daphne) to *Viburnum carlesii* (Korean Spice Viburnum) to *Buddleia davidii* (Butterfly Bush), fragrance can span the year from February to October. Perennials like *Lilium* (Lily), *Jasminum* species (Jasmine), *Lonicera* (Honeysuckle) and *Rosa* (Rose) have flowers that scent the air throughout the blooming season. Others have fragrant leaves: *Lavandula* (Lavender), *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* (Katsura Tree), *Thuja plicata* (Western Red Cedar). Many herbs (Thyme, Basil, Rosemary) provide fragrance through flowers and leaves and they are well-behaved additions to a border. Be cautious with mint, however; it has a tendency to spread and be a bad actor.

Edible plants – vegetables, fruits, and herbs – can have a place in the ornamental garden as annuals, color spots and surprise elements. Pole beans trained on a support add a vertical accent to the garden while apples espaliered on a wall or fence can be a screen and a spot of color. Nasturtium, pansy, violet, rose flowers not only bring color to the garden, they can brighten a summer salad as well.

Although gardens may be timeless, time changes the garden. Plants will be plants and they will grow every season to the size they want to be. They may even crowd out other plants. Choose the plants for the space and the cultural ►



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conditions (light, water, soil) available. Select plants that will look good over long periods of time with little to no maintenance. Over time, ecological succession will occur — small trees become large trees that shade out sun loving plants. Plan for the change in the garden and work with it. A regular maintenance program to selectively prune branches or replace plants as conditions change acknowledges the cycle of growth and ascension.

SIMPLICITY

With all the choices available for garden elements, it is easy to end up with too much, making the garden busy instead of restful and pleasing. Simplicity is the principle that guides selection. Limit the number of different elements in the garden: one path that creates circulation throughout the garden; one pond in a room; one deck in a room. Limit the number of different plants in the palette: one to three groundcovers; two to three genus each for short, medium, tall shrubs and trees. Concentrate on selecting materials and plants that exhibit intrinsic characteristics that support unity. Over time, selected additions can be made to enhance the tapestry for specific reasons in specific places. Eliminating the extraneous, anything that does not support the overall unity of the garden, contributes to sense of place and the beauty of the garden.

PRACTICAL MATTERS

Since gardens are for people, remember people will be people. They will take the shortest route unless they are lead with a defined path. Consider lighting to provide a safer and more secure environment as part of the overall garden design. Locate and plan around utilities (electricity, water, telephone, gas, cable, etc.) so that access is preserved and garden structure and elements are preserved. Plan for vehicles, the largest movable element, in the overall layout of the garden. Remember that plants, like people, need water, nutrients and sun, so meeting their needs will sustain the garden and provide pleasure for a long time. ♦

DOES IT RHYME WITH SEA OR PIE?

PHI is usually represented by the Greek letter – Φ . The correct pronunciation of Φ depends on what country you come from, what language you speak and if you are a mathematician. According to GoldenNumber.net (see <http://goldennumber.net>), the most commonly accepted pronunciation is “fi” and rhymes with pie. The Web site contains additional discussion.

PHI is the ratio of a line segment divided in a unique way so that the ratio of larger segment to the whole line is the same as the ratio of the large segment to the small segment. This is true only when the longest line (A+B or C) is 1.618 ... times the longer segment (A), and when segment (A) is 1.618 ... times longer than the shortest segment (B). The decimal number for PHI has an infinite and non-repeating sequence in its fractional portion.

Line C



Line A



Line B



A + B is to A as A is to B

$$\frac{A + B}{A} = \frac{A}{B}$$

The Golden Mean can be found in architecture (Notre Dame, Egyptian Pyramids, Cal Poly Engineering Plaza), nature (leaf stem and segments to the whole, the human body, DNA), dimensions of credit cards and standard paper sizes, and movements of the stock market.

PHI is also the basis for the Fibonacci Sequence, a series of numbers, beginning with 0 and 1. Subsequent numbers in the series are the sum of the two before it (0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, ...). Each pair when expressed as a ratio approaches PHI. For example: 5 / 3 = 1.666 and 8 / 5 is 1.60.

Other online resources about PHI

<http://www.vashti.net/mceinc/Golden.htm>

<http://www.mcs.surrey.ac.uk/Personal/R.Knott/Fibonacci/fibInArt.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_ratio