

Good Landscape Design

A three-part course in creating great landscapes

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY DEREK THOMAS

Over the next three issues, I will focus on giving our Hill gardeners with a tool chest of landscape design ideas and principals. This month we will begin with several principals that cannot be ignored when designing or rethinking your landscape. Landscaping is the physical manipulation of the physical environment to achieve a desired outcome. Three principals that are indispensable in this process are balance and symmetry, repetition, and contrast. As with any process these three principals must be placed in your mental CPU

the internet. Take notes and pictures of designs that you like. Research the names of favorite plants. Pull together a list of the necessary elements your garden must have. Then edit out the things that are not going to work now or over the next five to ten years. Do not plant a maple that will become a 30-40' tree against your house. Though it may look great now, there will be a problem with this trees placement in time. If you take the time to develop your ideas, before lifting the first shovel of soil, tragic and potentially costly mistakes can be avoided.



Balance and symmetry can be achieved with out being staid or predictable.

and run through an idea development phase where all three principals are combined and intricately interwoven.

Idea Development

When gardens don't make sense and have a feel of things being too scattered or overly contrived, you can be certain that the thought process was absent. When designing your garden, take the time to get ideas from neighbors, public parks, garden centers, books, and

Design

There are several principals that have to be used when designing the small gardens that most of us have on the Hill.

- 1) **Balance and Symmetry:** This is the first thing that must be considered. Many of us are working within a box and balance may the only thing that will hold it together. When considering balance ask yourself



Repetition is achieved in this garden by adding color through out the landscape in drifts.



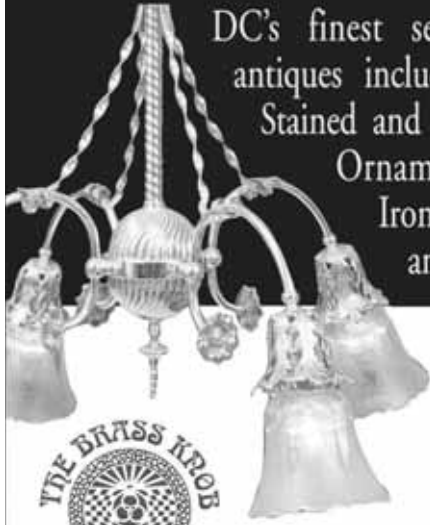
Contrasting elements can collide and still add to the overall design flow. Here Grasses contrast with each other as well as strong stone and lighting elements. The contrast is purposeful not contrived.



Here the three elements of balance and symmetry, repetition, and contrast collide seamlessly.

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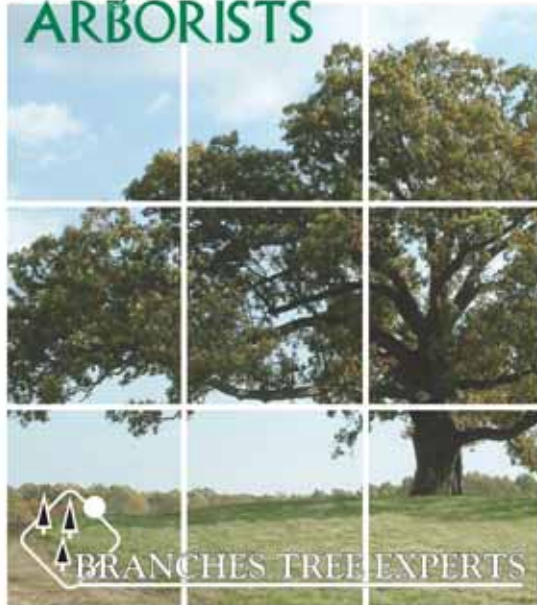
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do you want a symmetrical balance or an asymmetrical balance? You can achieve balance and not use identical plants. Perhaps you want a tall evergreen in one corner of the landscape and then the balance will be found in the use of similar evergreens, although much shorter, through the landscape. You can introduce balance by putting in a row of evergreens on one side of the landscape and have the garden flow away from them. Maybe you have a winding walk that is made symmetrical by using plants in repetition to bring about balance. You are now using balance combined with repetition to give your walk a flow that perhaps was lacking before. When considering symmetry keep in mind that there are many ways to achieve symmetry without using the same plants. In fact when you look at all the choices that we have in plant material, the true challenge in designing your landscape is to achieve a symmetrical feel without using all the same plants. Using plants that are in the same family with a similar or slightly contrasting look to play off of each other can work well.

- 2) *Repetition:* Repeating plants works, whether they are in groups, borders, or planted randomly. In all good design there is repetition. When designing your garden consider that you will gain a sense of comfort and ease when you repeat plants throughout the design. Repetition will add harmony and cut confusion. Experiment with repeating colors, textures, shapes, forms and sizes. When designing with repetition avoid the temptation to place things in straight lines. Unless you are making a formal English garden, straight lines don't occur in nature and will look amateur and contrived in your design. You can create a row of specimen plants that serve a purpose -- for example a hedgerow placed against your front fence that softens the harsh ironwork.

But stay away from straight lines of begonias in your front border bed. It is better to stagger the row so there is a random repetition.

- 3) **Contrast:** The most important element of contrast is remembering that a little goes a long way. A beautiful, brightly painted song sparrow nesting box hung on a 7-foot wooden entry gate of a garden. The birdbath placed in the center of the garden. The planter added to the garden, perhaps on its side with plants flowing out, the marble statue that makes a statement and adds interest. The specimen tree or shrub added for its unique qualities. All of these items when well placed and in moderation, add contrast to your garden. You can also achieve great contrast through different leaf textures and shapes. Don't be afraid to experiment with contrast as a way to break up the flow of balance and symmetry, and to add a merging point of two repeating elements. A hedgerow can be slowly merged into a flowerbeds boundary by adding a buffer row of contrasting evergreen plants.

Combining the three principals

Although the three principals of balance and symmetry, repetition, and contrast can and do stand well on their own merit, when you incorporate all three into your garden design and idea development process your amateur garden will take on a more professional, enviable appeal.

Over the next two months we will provide additional good landscape design articles. The three articles are designed to help all gardeners achieve garden greatness. Enjoy.

Derek Thomas is principal of Thomas Landscapes. His garden designs have been featured on HGTV's Curb Appeal. His weekly garden segment can be seen on WTTG/Fox 5 in Washington. He can be reached at www.thomaslandscapes.com or 301.642.5182 ★

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