

Style and composition in Garden Design

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Have you heard the saying about 'synergy'—that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts? (NB, I am not promoting any particular brand of petrol!) This is what we are aiming for in garden design. In fact, my best definition of design is simply, "making synergy".

To achieve this we must have an idea, a conception of what the garden is to be. This concept might be no more than a certain atmosphere or mood (peaceful, luxuriant, stimulating, amusing), it might be an idea of beauty (symmetry, simplicity, diversity), it might be the best qualities of a place that we want to re-create in essence (the bush, sand dunes, a historic or contemporary garden ...). For designers of the really 'heady' kind this idea might be an abstract concept like Charles Jenks' Garden of Cosmic Speculation (well...I'll come back to that later!).

Whether you design and make your own garden or employ a professional designer, it is well worth spending time pondering such a basic idea before you do anything on site. An easy way to get started is to think about popular styles of garden like cottage gardens, sub-tropical, sculptural succulent, minimalist, high tech, Mediterranean, bush etc. These are a good starting point because they show the great range of character you could achieve. Think about which best suits your house and setting, then use your imagination to build on these 'borrowed' styles and turn them into something personal and original. The sculptural qualities of succulents impress in the Landsendt Nurseries Garden (Oratia, Auckland) below:



Style or character is also useful because it gives a 'home' for particular plants that you might want to grow. For example, if you like flowery perennials and bulbs, aromatic foliage and seasonal change all loosely mixed in a melange of colour and texture, then the cottage garden is for you. Beth Chatto's Gravel Garden is a stunning example of carefully designed colour in the cottage garden style:



The gravel garden at Elmstead Market, Essex, by Beth Chatto

If you prefer startling contrasts of foliage and intense flower colour the sub-tropical garden would suit you well. The subtropical garden below is at Landsend Nurseries, Oratia, Auckland and features the bromeliad *Alcaterria imperialis* (right foreground) and *Parajubea cocoides* (the palm with fibrous trunk at left)



Once you have decided on a range of plants, you still need to put them together convincingly. To do this, think of three properties: FORM (shape in three dimensions and in silhouette) – compare the neat domey form of most hebes with the pure sculpture of many aloes; TEXTURE (chunkiness or smoothness of the plants appearance) – compare the bold chunky foliage of cannas and agaves with the delicate, wispy sedges and grasses; and finally COLOUR (not only hue (blue, green, red, etc) but also its intensity and darkness or lightness).

When designing with plants of different forms, textures and colours, the principle I have always found invaluable is *combine harmony and contrast*. You might not notice at first, but in fact these two always go together. A successful plant combination has both harmony and contrast because without one you cannot appreciate the other. The harmony in domed and circular forms and the complimentary flower colour feature in this planting design by Danish Landscape Architect Preben Jacobsen:



Another example; drifts of grasses and sedges are related by arching shape and fine texture but this effect, however graceful, is more notable if a small amount of contrast is introduced. This could be bold foliage such as *Yucca* or *Agave* which is linked to the grasses by similar, linear leaf shape, but contrast with them in their chunky foliage. A harmony of colour, such as between *Agave attenuata* and *Carex comans* also helps, further emphasizing the contrast in texture.

When you put the right two plants together you create a kind of magic between them and both show more of their qualities than they would in isolation. With planting design we can get the very best out of plants in a garden and achieve a kind of horticultural synergy.