

Creating a Beautiful Garden

Elements and Principles of Design

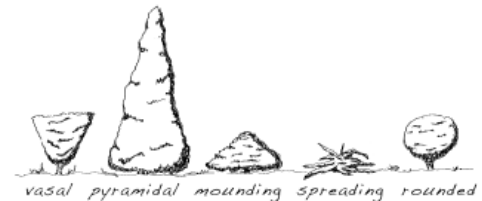
Designing a home garden involves more than just planting a variety of flowers and shrubs; it requires a thoughtful approach to arranging plants, hardscapes, and other elements in a way that is aesthetically pleasing and functional. The Oklahoma State University Extension fact sheet **HLA-6441**, [Homeowner Garden Design Series: Elements and Principles of Design](#), provides valuable insights into the foundational elements and principles that guide effective garden design. These principles are essential for homeowners looking to create a visually appealing, harmonious, and sustainable outdoor space.

Elements of Design

To create a cohesive garden, it is crucial to understand the elements of design, which include line, form, texture, color, and scale. These elements are the building blocks used to create a landscape that is both visually appealing and functional.

1. **Line:** Lines in garden design can guide the eye, direct movement, and create a sense of flow. Vertical lines, such as tall trees or structures, draw attention upwards, while horizontal lines, like pathways or flower beds, encourage the eye to move across the landscape. Curved lines create a more relaxed and natural feel, while straight lines convey formality and structure.

2. **Form:** The shape or form of plants and structures within the garden contributes significantly to its overall look. Different plant forms, such as columnar, spreading, or weeping shapes, can be used to create interest and contrast. Combining various forms adds depth and complexity to the garden.
3. **Texture:** Texture in garden design refers to the surface quality of plants and hardscape materials. Foliage can be fine, medium, or coarse, creating a range of visual effects. Coarse



textures tend to draw the eye and provide a focal point, while fine textures are more soothing and recede into the background. Mixing textures can create dynamic interest and balance.



4. **Color:** Color is one of the most impactful elements in garden design. Warm colors (reds, oranges, yellows) tend to advance and attract attention, while cool colors (blues, greens, purples) recede, creating a sense of calm and depth. Using color effectively can highlight certain areas of the garden, establish moods, and create visual harmony or contrast.

5. **Scale:** Scale refers to the size relationship between garden elements. A garden should be designed to complement the scale of the home and surrounding environment. Larger plants should be balanced with smaller ones to create a cohesive look. Likewise, furniture, structures, and pathways should be proportionate to the size of the space.

Principles of Design

While the elements of design provide the tools for creating a garden, the principles of design—such as proportion, balance, rhythm, emphasis, transition and simplicity—offer guidelines on how to use these tools effectively.

1. **Proportion:** Proportion relates to the size of elements in relation to each other and the overall space. Proper proportion ensures that all components fit together in a way that is aesthetically pleasing and functional. For example, small plants may look out of place next to large trees, just as a narrow path may feel inadequate in a vast landscape. In design, the sightline, size and stride of an average human adult provides the reference queues for path and stair width, viewing perspectives and distance.
2. **Balance:** Balance refers to the distribution of visual weight within a garden. It can be symmetrical (formal balance) or asymmetrical (informal balance). Symmetrical balance is often used in traditional or formal gardens, where elements are mirrored on either side of a central axis. Asymmetrical balance, on the other hand, uses different elements that are balanced by size, color, or texture to create a more natural and dynamic feel.
3. **Rhythm:** Rhythm in garden design is created by the repetition of elements such as plants, colors, or textures. This repetition establishes a sense of movement, drawing the viewer's eye throughout the space. Rhythm can create a feeling of cohesiveness and order in the garden.
4. **Focalization:** Focalization, or emphasis, directs attention to a specific area or feature of the garden, such as a sculpture, water feature, or a particularly striking plant. The focal point should stand out and serve as an anchor to the design. If the garden has multiple areas of interest, it may contain more than one focal point.
5. **Transition or Sequence:** Moving through connected areas in the garden requires visual guidance; this is in the form of transitional planning. Consider two areas with similar proportions...when moving from one to another, the sequence of changes should be gradual and only one element should change at a time to preserve the rhythm of the experience. For instance, change only the height of plantings when transitioning to another area...not size, color and form at the same time. If the scale of adjoining spaces is starkly different, use a distinguishing feature like an archway, a gate or a hedge to introduce the new space and make the transition less abrupt.
6. **Simplicity:** Starting with fewer elements and a basic design is always best; build on basic forms and keep the selection of colors, textures and materials to a minimum. Remember: gardens are always evolving and can be developed over time.

By understanding and applying these elements and principles, homeowners can create gardens that are not only beautiful but also well-structured and harmonious. Whether the goal is to establish a formal garden or a relaxed, naturalistic space, these foundational guidelines can help achieve a design that is visually appealing, functional, and sustainable.

Resources:

[Oklahoma Gardening Design Series: Color in the Garden Other than Flowers](#)

[Oklahoma Gardening Design Series: Plant Function](#)

[Homeowner Garden Design Series: Elements and Principles of Design](#)

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