

Summary of Design Principles

Good landscapes have many similarities. My own designs, done by instinct, often match the guidelines of landscape architecture. I'm a firm believer in intuition and gut feelings, but I also respect the traditional guidelines. Here is my condensation of the classic components and goals of tasteful landscape design.

Accent

A plant or element of a striking texture, shape, or color, used in a limited number so as to stand out from its surroundings.

Association

Two plants placed together to produce a noticeable contrast, such as a dark green, glossy leaf and a silver-grey leaf.

Asymmetry

Elements not arranged as mirror reflections of a central point. Important for a more natural-looking landscape.

Balance

Having the visual weight of one part of a composition matched or countered by another part. The goal is to produce an equilibrium of attention throughout the garden.

Color

Best used as an accent, to increase richness. Can easily detract from composition, unity, and balance. Greatly overused in modern landscapes.

Composition

The arrangement of all elements, living and structural, into a pleasing presentation. Space is as important as solid form in composition.

Density/Mass

The apparent bulk or visual weight of an object. A visual "feeling" that is important in achieving balance.

Harmony

A goal of classical design. The use of repetition for a calm, symmetrical balance. Also emphasizes the commonality of unrelated things.

Proportion

The relative arrangement or relationship of one part of the composition to another.

Repetition

The repeated but limited or restrained use of elements with the same interest, density, or scale. The recurrence of an object or plant throughout a design enhances a theme and furthers harmony. Can lead to monotony.

Rhythm

Produced by regular breaks in continuity, or by recurring accents. Used classically to refer to regular alternations of form, space, light, or color.

Richness

A certain amount of variety, not to be overdone. A rich landscape is one with depth and nuance. A combination of richness and simplicity is an ideal goal, often unrealized.

Scale

Elements in proportion to the overall size of the landscape. Useful in revealing perspective.

Sequence

Elements placed to guide the eye.

Simplicity

A reduction of nature's diversity, to reveal a select beauty. Limiting

elements helps to accentuate their distinctive virtues. For me, a paramount and difficult goal.

Structure

The inanimate framework of the landscape. Composed of rocks, paths, fences, water, trees, buildings, and so on.

Symmetry

Matching geometry, where both sides of an axis are similar or exactly balanced. A common motif among the formal gardens of Europe.

Tension

The use of contrasting elements to produce a kind of creative balance of the expected and unexpected. Too much variety or accent generates unproductive tension.

Texture

An important element for adding richness to compositions. The landscaper has far more options for texture than does the painter or even the sculptor of stone.

Unity

The synthesis of all elements to reveal a common theme.

Variety

Most commonly overdone. A certain amount of variety furthers harmony between contrast and tension. Too much appears chaotic.

Use this list as a source of ideas, inspiration, and reflection, not as a scorecard for your own landscape. You have years to build a landscape that exhibits the virtues of unity, simplicity, harmony, and balance. It is a goal worth reaching for.