

# SUM OF THE PARTS

A beautifully composed garden is a joy to behold and an even a greater joy to spend time in

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**A**fter reading the previous Design Guides in *Backyard & Garden Design Ideas*, you may be wondering how to combine all the different design elements we've discussed into a cohesive and attractive landscape. The answer lies in good composition.

Composition refers to the arrangement of the different design components (lines, forms, colours and textures) to achieve a unified whole. Simply put, composition is the big picture created from the various elements that make up a garden design. In landscape design, the picture you create is multi-dimensional — you can touch, smell, hear and even taste it, and it changes over time and with the seasons. So composing a landscape involves understanding and arranging many different visual and physical elements.

When creating your work of art (that is, your garden), the landscape is your canvas, the

plants, hardscape and features are the paint, and the design elements you've learned are the tools.

There are many ways to compose a landscape. Rather than leave it to chance, determine what site constraints there are and what your functional and aesthetic requirements are, then you can place the various elements accordingly. The planning and preparation of your landscape design should take place before the first plant is bought or any building work begins.

## The effects of composition

A well-composed landscape can reveal a garden's story, whether it's a literal story or the style or atmosphere you want to convey. Often, the story unfolds as you move or journey through the landscape.

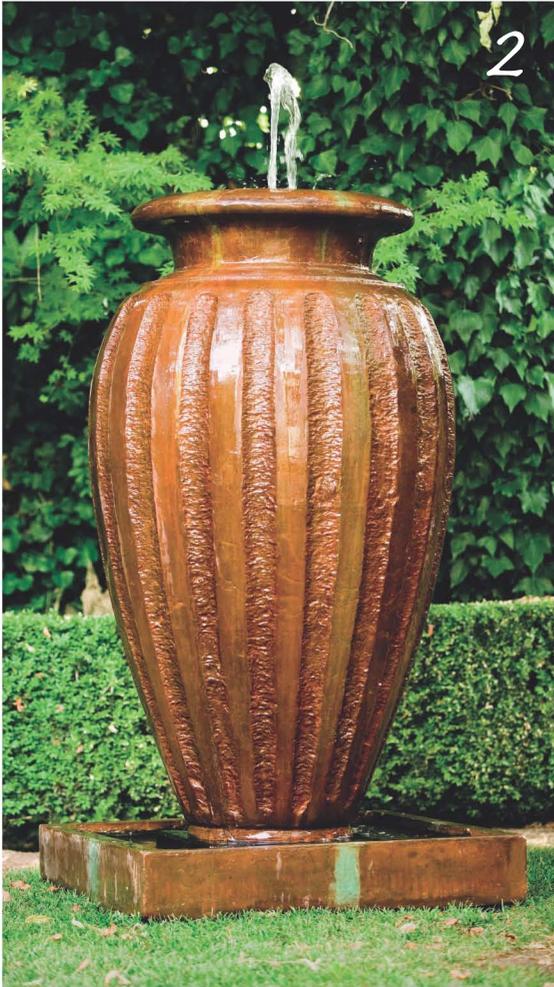
There may be occasions when you want to create illusory effects or elicit emotional

responses from the users of the landscape, such as making small spaces feel larger, providing a feeling of calm, protection and safety, distracting the eye from unsightly views or encouraging the viewer to ponder a pleasing outlook.

The composition of a design can create a sense of depth in small spaces, or draw the eye to a vista. It can hurry you through a space or cause you to pause. The composition can be the difference between a landscape you're

**1.** *A well-composed garden is one in which the elements work as a whole. Garden design by Art In Green.*

**2.** *Focal points are used within a garden's composition to draw the eye where you want it to go, day or night.*



happy to be in and one that provides no sense of invitation, so getting the big picture right is important. This is an area where a professional designer can be invaluable. They can develop an overall concept for how the different spaces will be used, to which you can add your own personal touches.

### The placement of elements

The deliberate and considered placement of elements can lead to visual harmony and balance. This can be achieved by eliminating visual clutter, by having focal points in strategic places, by matching, blending or complementing different elements and, most importantly, by having an overarching vision, idea or theme for the landscape.

Plant composition is a topic in itself. Do you choose plants with glossy or brightly coloured leaves, furry leaves, smooth leaves or leaves that release their aromatic leaves when crushed? Do you want plants that can be clipped into hedges or topiary?

Other aspects of plants that should be understood when creating a plant composition include the shape, seasonality and colour of the flowers. With trees, you need to consider the texture and appearance of the bark, the branching structure and the shape of the crown.

Then there's the size of the plant. Depending on size and placement, plants can make the landscape seem smaller or larger by creating a foreground, mid-ground and background.

Trees can frame views and vistas and plants provide accents or function as features in their own right, like the Dragons Blood Tree (*Dracaena draco*).

With a little creativity, your landscape can convey a theme without just using the standard ingredients. Look at your "canvas" in more depth and try out different "paint" compositions.

### Achieving good composition

How is an effective landscape composition achieved? First, you need an idea of the big picture you're going for, as we mentioned before. Think about the purpose each space will have, what main features you want and your preferred overall style and then think about how they will all fit together. Consider different ways of arranging the vital elements until you come up with a composition that is both practical and aesthetically pleasing.

Then you need the frame for the picture: where is the scene going to be viewed or enjoyed from and how can you improve the view? For example, ugly views can be screened, plants added to soften edges, and sculpture introduced to seduce the eye. Look at your garden from different angles and work out where you can make use of existing views and features within the composition you're designing. If you want an axis leading to a focal point or view, make sure the viewpoint is located somewhere accessible: this may

