

# Balance *and* Mass

How to create spaces that are easy on the eye. Stephen Anderton

THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE who, when you go into a garden with them, always say, “Okay, now stand just here, will you. It looks so much better from this spot.” These people always see gardens as pictures, as spatial compositions that can be made exactly right, exactly balanced. “Do you notice how the weight of that raised pool is balanced by the branches leaning over on the other side,” they will say, “and how the lawn cuts across the whole composition along the opposite diagonal, to the summerhouse?”

The overriding concern of these picturesquely-minded gardeners is mass, and the balancing of it in the garden scene to form a composition that is perfectly comfortable to the eye. Perhaps we can define *mass* as the apparent weight of the elements in a garden scene, and *balance* as the comfortable distribution of those elements. Of course you don’t have to stand in that exact spot alone to enjoy a garden; it would be a poor garden if you did. But a good gardener will constantly have those elements of mass and balance in mind when creating his garden. It is painting not in the usual two dimensions, but in three. Four, if you add the passage of time as well, and the way that affects the picture.

It is a symptom of our age that the great symmetrical set-piece moments become fewer and fewer in modern gardens. On a large scale this means that we prefer a flowing meadow garden or even one of the great 18th-century landscape gardens to the rigid geometry of Versailles. On a smaller scale, instead of a



symmetrical house with central steps leading to a vista culminating in a piece of sculpture, we might prefer an asymmetrical house with steps to one side. A group of trees might then stand off-center on the lawn. Beyond that, the view might become a simple path of short turf, curving off between longer meadow grass, and apparently without end. But whether

you choose to make a garden that is symmetrical or asymmetrical, there will be a constant need to balance the use of mass effectively, to make every image in the garden satisfying. That need remains unchanged.

## Seeing Mass

If you look hard at any garden scene, you will see where the weight of the image lies. It might be in a dense, solid conifer at the far end of a lawn or summerhouse. Looking back from there it might be in a block of broad-leaved evergreens at the end of a colorful mixed border. On a smaller scale it might be in the broad, simple foliage of bergenias at the front of a border, anchoring an aspiring planting of red-hot pokers and grasses behind.

As you look at plantings like these, think about whether the scene seems to have an anchor point, a place where the impetus of all the other shapes comes to rest. If there is no point of rest, then maybe the garden will be less than restful to the eye, and less comfortable to be in. Plants that are literally restless, such as ever-swaying grasses and bamboos, never anchor a scene

the way a clipped shape or architectural form might, however generous the block in which you plant them.

Plants can be restless in the way they are set out, too. Everyone has seen gardens in which every open space, be it gravel, garden or lawn, is dotted with young plants or flower beds. All are lightweight and bear little relationship to each other, scattered throughout the space like balls on a pool table. The overall result is a feeling of great restlessness. It is as if the components of the garden are still in motion, like the billiard balls, waiting to see where gravity will finally make them settle.

### Playing with Mass

I would not want you to think that every moment in a garden must somehow be stapled to the ground by heavy planting. Mass is there to be played with, like any other aspect of design. If the balance of the overall space is satisfactory, then you can start to play tricks with mass.

You can create shapes that seem to defy gravity, for example by making topiary forms on clean stems. The weight of these forms seems to hover above the earth. This adds momentum (or suspended momentum) to their mass. The same is true of hedges pruned up so they are on stilts. These effects can be used, for example, to counteract the weightiness of a walled courtyard, making mass rise up from the ground and hover, like a fountain in an otherwise earthbound picture. (Fountains, of course, do the same trick, but using a different element and a different time scale.) In the same courtyard, waving plumes of *Miscanthus sinensis* or *Stipa gigantea* would not have the same effect, for although they move and rise from the ground, there is no suspended mass there. The weight of the clumps is still perceived to be at ground level.

Mass can offer momentum as well as anchorage to a scene. Apparently heavy shapes, be they sculpture, topiary, or informal clumps of shrubs, can, if they are

“rollable” shapes, enhance the impression of downhill momentum. In my own garden I am developing a “terminal moraine” (the boulders and smaller stones left behind by a glacier) made from various topiarized evergreens, to reinforce the slight slope of my lawn down to an architectural terrace, which floats, static, at the bottom of the slope. In a similar way, imagine a spiral of box spheres set in level gravel, and the sense of fluidity they would suggest. Mass and momentum are tools of the garden designer’s trade, waiting to be exploited.

### Mass through Color and Texture

A sense of mass is further enhanced by fine texture and dark colors, which suggest density. Thus a black granite cube at once seems heavier than one made of white textured polystyrene. We know that it is physically heavier, of course, but that is only part of the reasoning. It is for the same reason that yew hedges make such strong bones in a garden; their dark green foliage and dense texture, coupled with their ability to recreate architectural forms, suggest greater mass than the plants actually possess.

But equally, a large flower border might derive its point of rest, and greatest mass, simply from a block of dark-leaved cannas. You might use their rigidity and darkness to anchor a whole garden picture. To make the same degree of anchorage from, say, a cream-variegated pittosporum or holly, you might need a specimen eight feet tall and with a denser-looking clipped outline.

Handling mass should not be a burden to a gardener. Indeed many do it intuitively. But if you are trying to improve a part of the garden, and give it resolution, sometimes it is better not to ask, what should I be planting or taking out? Instead, look hard at it, screw up your eyes perhaps, and ask: Is this picture balanced? Is it settled? Where is its mass? How can I give it repose? ♡

