

Flatheads & Tiers

From the flowers of yarrows to the layered branches of dogwoods, these shapes give the border strong contrast and a sense of stability.

Christopher Lloyd

A GARDEN focused on shapes, disregarding other factors like color and texture, could be entirely satisfying. In such a garden the horizontal lines of flat-headed plants, and plants that rise in tiers, would provide an invaluable contrast to the various other shapes. That said, I must add that the best shapes deserve to be combined with the best of other features.

Flatheads and tiers can occur at all levels in the garden. Among trees, horizontals occur notably in cedars when they reach maturity, as with *Cedrus libani* and *C. atlantica* (usually grown in a glaucous-leaved form). In youth the tree is more spirelike. Sometimes you have to wait for your platforms.

In my introductory piece (February-March 2002) I briefly mentioned the dogwoods *Cornus controversa* and *C. alternifolia*, both normally grown in variegated-leaved forms. But their naked branches in winter are scarcely less interesting in the garden setting, being tiered in horizontal lines that never fail to draw attention. I particularly love my *C. alternifolia* 'Argentea' (USDA Zone 4) when its naked branches are hung with raindrops. These dazzlingly catch the light and remain in suspension because the branches have no slope. The same characteristics are often evident on many forms of Japanese maple. You can truthfully claim that these tree/shrubs have year-round interest and beauty, though their quality and attraction change with the seasons. Furthermore, wherever you place them they will draw the eye.

A classic flathead at a lowish level is *Sedum spectabile* (Zone 3), but the effect is even more pronounced in the hybrid 'Herbstfreude' ('Autumn Joy'). It is a first-rate landscape feature, widely combined with the fairly low-growing *Rudbeckia* 'Goldsturm' (Zone 3) and a tall ornamental grass (generally miscanthus) behind.

Earlier flowering but equally familiar is the flat-headed, brilliant-yellow yarrow, *Achillea filipendulina* (Zone 3) 'Gold Plate' (six feet) or 'Coronation Gold' (three feet),

both often contrasted with the tall spires of delphiniums. But the yellow of the yarrows looks truly dreadful as it fades through oxidized mustard, before reaching the dried stage that makes the winter skeleton agreeable once more. This fading process is often too little taken into account.

When it comes to the flat arrangement of flowers themselves, there's nothing to beat many members of the Umbelliferae, the family of Queen Anne's lace and the like.

White can be a rather aggressive color when presented in solid blocks, but the umbellifers diffuse it into a lacework of usually flat compound umbels. Nothing could be whiter than the annual *Ammi majus*, widely grown as a cut flower in Germany and Holland, but it never looks oversolid.

There are many comparatively harmless umbellifers like the common culinary fennel, *Foeniculum vulgare* (which also can self-sow fairly uncontrollably), much sought after in its dark, purple-leaved forms. Here the



White *Ammi majus*, yellow *Patrinia scabiosifolia*, and *Verbena bonariensis*

flatheads are scattered over the plant at different levels, creating a series of tiers, although, in aggregate, not especially flat.

It is the same with the giant fennel of the genus *Ferula*. This is one of my greatest favorites. Hardiness varies, but *F. communis*, the most widely known (and probably often misidentified), is often deep under snow in its native Turkey and nearby countries. Whether it is biennial or perennial is another variable. In early summer the plant rises to nine feet, and the inflorescence opens out into tiers of yellow flatheads at different levels. As it runs to seed, it becomes dormant for the next six months. We integrate it into a mixed border setting by, first, interplanting with a tallish tulip, like the red 'Halcro', which flowers above the undulating, mossy filigree of foliage at a reasonably low level. Then, as the fennel dies off, we interplant its crowns with an annual, like cosmos, to provide color and interest into fall.

Yellow and white are the most common flower colors among umbellifers. White-flowered *Selinum wallichianum* (Zone 4) is one of the most desirable hardy perennials. Four feet tall, it takes a while to develop, with decorative, finely divided foliage. The flat-headed flowers follow and are long in bloom. Spikes of pure pink *Sidalcea* 'Elsie Heugh' make a nice contrast in front of this.

There are also a number of pink umbellifers, like *Chaerophyllum hirsutum* 'Roseum' and *Pimpinella major* 'Rosea', both perennial, the former preferring partial shade, the latter sun.

A great perennial flathead is the six-foot-tall *Eupatorium purpureum*, best grown in its slightly deeper purple 'Atropurpureum' clone. Native to the US, it is, as often happens with natives, rather despised in its own country and known as joe-pye weed. I think it deserves

a place of honor. It grows well by the waterside, but I have it deep in my one-sided mixed border, backed by a yew hedge. For bedfellows it has great spiky orange pokers, *Kniphofia uaria* 'Nobilis', soothed by creamy panicles of the six-foot *Artemisia lactiflora* (another moisture-lover), but I also enjoy it in the company of tall perennial sunflowers like *Rudbeckia* 'Herbstsonne'.

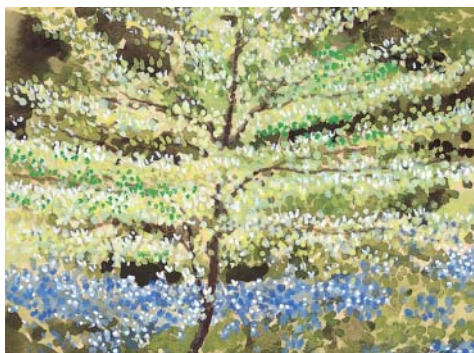
Tiers can be created by contrasts within the same plant. The zebra grass, *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Strictus', is of notably upright habit, but each leaf is cross-banded with horizontal yellow stripes.

Turning to **shrubs**, we should note the flatheads of *Spiraea japonica*, of which the best-known cultivar is the deep pink 'Anthony Waterer' (Zone 4). If you are in a hurry to deadhead it when the flowers turn brown, perhaps in early July, the plant will reward you with a new crop of blossoms opening in fall.

Most of the popular and showiest forms of *Hydrangea*, where they are hardy enough to be grown at all (they are often happiest near the coast), are the bun-headed hortensias, largely cultivars of *H. macrophylla*. But they badly need a contrast to their comfortable rotundity. This can be provided by flat-headed lacecaps, many of them derived from *H. serrata*. They come near to the wildings and have a free-and-easy appearance. 'Bluebird' is one of the hardiest (Zone 5). To name a hydrangea blue-anything is a bit risky, as

the coloring is apt to be pink if the soil is at all alkaline, but in the case of this cultivar, blueness comes much more naturally.

With flatheads and tiers, as with all other plant, foliage, and flower shapes, we should never lose sight of the context, never see plants as isolated examples. It is the tapestry of contrasts and similarities that adds up to the essence of our best gardening. ♡



Cornus alternifolia 'Argentea' (top); *Achillea* 'Lucky Break', *Delphinium* 'Mighty Atom', and *Geranium* 'Ann Folkard' (Bottom)