

Globes & Domes

The opportunities for combinations with these familiar forms are surprisingly varied. Christopher Lloyd

GLOBES AND DOMES are among the most natural shapes to see in a garden. Many plants provide them without encouragement; others just need a helping hand with pruning of greater or lesser severity.

If you are so minded, it is possible to make a most satisfactory garden composed 90 percent of rounded shapes of various sizes. Santolinas, *S. chamaecyparissus* (Zone 6), are easily kept as low domes. Clipping them prevents their carrying those excessively proletarian heads of yellow buttons. With lavender or rosemary, you can clip as soon as flowering has finished, then again in spring.

In Japan, in particular, you see azaleas molded into rounded shapes rather like rocks, and they are often juxtaposed with real rock, always selected with the greatest care. The azaleas do flower in their season, but their role is essentially one of form.

Remember that small-leaved shrubs are the best for clipping.

Those with large leaves, like the laurels, are visibly mauled when their leaves are slashed at various angles, leaving greater or lesser portions behind. A shrub like *Prunus laurocerasus* 'Otto Luyken' (Zone 6) is naturally rounded anyway. If you go over it with secateurs, cutting into stems rather than leaves, the result may not reach the ultimate in formality, but it will be quite formal enough, and will not look mangled.

Boxwood, *Buxus sempervirens* (Zone 5), is, for many gardeners, the ideal globe. It has a musty smell, which sends

many people into transports of nostalgia. As I've lived with it all my life, I can't very well be nostalgic and I think its magic greatly exaggerated. Box has a number of disadvantages, which I shall be churlish enough to point out. Its texture is soft and easily loses its desired shape, especially beneath the weight of snow. The leaves are, admittedly, small and lend themselves to clipping, but a few days later they turn brown on the clipped margins. If you clip in fall, this brown look will continue until growth is renewed the following spring. I find it best to clip in July, which allows time for new young shoots to develop before cold weather puts a stop to growth, but without danger of immediate shagginess. A second trim can be applied in spring, if you wish (I don't).

Box is susceptible to soil-borne diseases, which you can buy along with the bushes that you introduce to your garden. The diseases are killers and easily ruin

formal plantings. An informal arrangement of box balls, for instance, is therefore to be preferred. Softer plants may look good among the balls, box providing the firmness which all plantings need.

Hydrangeas, especially those with large bun-heads, which we call hortensias, make rounded shrubs in the first place, to be crowned by similarly rounded heads of flowers. I like mixed plantings of hydrangeas, but I think they need a lift if the planting is large, and I use the giant reed grass, *Arundo donax* (Zone 7), for that purpose. It



Best of all the ornamental onions is *A. cristophii*, a two-footer with stiffly spiky, lilac-mauve globes up to 10 inches across.

grows in a season to twice the hydrangeas' height. The largest miscanthus, *M. floridulus* (Zone 4), which grows to eight feet or more, will provide much the same effect.

Variation can be obtained with other types of plants. The jagged, glaucous leaves of the cardoon, *Cynara cardunculus* (Zone 7), rise to branching domes, which are the flower heads.

Alliums, the ornamental onions (hardy to Zone 4), will provide domes at various levels in the border. *Allium giganteum*, for example, an early summer lilac-colored flowerer, rises to five feet, while the more robust 'Globemaster', flowering a little earlier, makes a good four feet. May-flowering *A. hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' is a favorite of mine. I like to see it rising above flimsier-textured plants. Best of all the onions is *A. cristophii*, a two-footer with stiffly spiky, lilac-mauve globes up to 10 inches across. It starts flowering for me in early June, and the globes keep their shape for many weeks after the color has faded, eventually to straw.

One of my other favorite alliums, Chinese chives, *A. tuberosum*, comes right at the end of summer. Its white domes are on the small side but very numerous and on a 15-inch-tall plant, which self-sows (as does *A. cristophii*) at the front of my border. The dried heads remain in good condition until midwinter.

Some gardeners are so anxious to show that they are in full control that they get busy with the shears to make balls out of shrubs that would look a lot better if allowed to grow naturally. Forsythia is one of the most abused, in suburban front gardens. Its thick, stemmy habit, natu-

rally inclined to make a pleasantly open cascade, looks prodigiously uncomfortable when reduced to a lump. Contrast that look with the small-leaved, evergreen *Osmanthus delavayi* (Zone 8), which I use in a formal role on the four corners of the garden overlooking a sunken, pool area. This plant is by nature a formless shrub but can easily be trained as a dome if clipped over annually, just after its flowering in early spring. Clipping encourages it to carry an increased number of flowering shoots, which are lined with heavily scented, little white flowers.

That is generally around Easter, after which the shrubs are given their annual trim, allowing them the whole summer to refurbish with new flowering shoots. You need to know your plant and how it will behave to get best value from it.

Domes can make an extremely strong impression, as with the native American *Yucca gloriosa* (Zone 7), which is much used in England as an end-stop and as a strong feature, as you can well imagine. Its globes of stiff, dark green, spiky leaves are, in fact, an integrated combination of globe and spikes. When yucca is well grown, flowering will be regular, and that is a great excitement, with heavy candelabrum of waxy, cream-colored flowers. On light soil, you might underplant with sea kale, *Crambe maritima* (Zone 6), which makes low domes of honey-scented blossom in May, accompanied and followed by large, glaucous leaves.

There's no end to the permutations that can be worked, starting from the rounded shapes of oaks and going down to the tight little buns of the alpine androsaces. ♡

"It is possible to make a most satisfactory garden composed 90 percent of rounded shapes of various sizes."



Because they don't lend themselves to shearing, large-leaved plants such as *Prunus laurocerasus* 'Otto Luyken', far left, produce more informal shapes. The domes of hardy geraniums, at left, and other plants such as *Sedum* 'Autumn Joy' or *Euphorbia polychroma* provide this shape at a lower level.