



SHAPES *make the* GARDEN

In the first of a six part series, the author introduces the broad range of shapes that can be used to create exciting and lasting pictures. Christopher Lloyd

WHEN WE LOOK at a plant, what strikes us first? Maybe its blinding color or the overwhelming scent that it gives off. Maybe its texture; about a particular flower we'll be told, "It lasts only for a few hours," which immediately makes us want to touch it and sense its fragility and evanescence through our fingers (even if that fondling destroys it!).

But the shape of a plant and how that shape relates to its surroundings are as important as any of its other qualities. If we are interested in trees, we will come to recognize and be able to identify them by shape, from a distance, covered in foliage or in winter nakedness. In this way, a landscape takes on new meaning and life for us.

Similarly, if we are scrambling about among rocks at a high altitude, where the ground is no doubt covered with deep snow in winter and seems, from a distance,

to be barren even in summer, we will suddenly come upon a dense living cushion, snuggled into a crevice, an androsaceae, maybe, or a draba, and we are startled that such a plant actually prefers, indeed needs, such a habitat for its continued existence in the wild. And it is shaped to withstand the worst that the elements can bombard it with.

Between the extremes, there are all kinds of shapes around us that, under the necessarily artificial circumstances of a garden, we can manipulate and play around with so as to create satisfying pictures. For we must always remember that as well as being a craft, gardening is also an art, albeit vulnerable to change. We can be proud of that.

Among the strongest shapes in plants are **spikes and spires** reaching boldly upward. They may be trees, which will be used as accents, but may be graded down-

Spikes and spires such as foxgloves are visually uplifting, while globes like alliums and boxwoods are anchors.



ward in size to something quite tiny, like *Persicaria vacciniifolia*, a mat-forming plant from wet, rocky areas in the Himalayas. Its little flower spikes, innumerable in number, all point upward.

Large or small, plants of this shape are reaching for the sky. “We may be earthbound,” they are saying, “but the sky’s our real home,” and just to see them gives us a spiritual lift too.

Globes and domes are no less important. They make a virtue of being earthbound; there is always a sense of completion in a circle. Globes are anchors. This is the reason that boxwood balls are such a popular shape of this plant. “Go off on your questing,” they tell the spires. “It’s here and now that matters.” And they need not be so earthbound. The globes of alliums hover at various levels, over and through a border.

Flatheads and tiers continue the argument in a horizontal direction, the opposite of verticals. They have an air of settled strength. The plateau is somewhere you can rest. So we often site the flatheads near the spires. The horizontal motif is repeated in some plants whose branching is repeated to form tiers at various levels. The whorled foliage of *Lilium martagon* rises in tiers. So do the branches of the two striking dogwoods *Cornus alternifolia* and *C. controversa*.

Weepers and fountains contribute grace and a sense of relaxation. They need a bit of upward thrust to get them going and are most satisfactory if they do this naturally, but then weep at the extremities. If they are inspissated weepers from the first, they will grovel given the chance, and we need to give them an initial upward hoist. That too, can often be organized. Our material here ranges from trees down to grasses, many of which have excellent fountain-like habits.

Then there are the **strong personalities**—plants that pull the scene together and prevent it from dissolving into a spineless haze. It may be an annual, like the castor oil bean, or a perennial, like the fast-growing, almost treelike *Dahlia imperialis*, or a shrub, like some of the larger-leaved mahonias. Not only are the leaves of *Mahonia lomariifolia*,

M. japonica and the hybrids between them, known as *M. ×media*, strong, evergreen, and pinnate, but they are arranged in a circle around their shoots so as to stand out boldly. But boldest of all, in my own garden, is *Fatsia japonica*, with its large, shiny, palmate evergreen leaves. Just the partner for softening ferns beneath it.



The flattened plateaus of yarrows are restful, settled, making good companions for uprights like penstemons

Some plants are notably amorphous and short on character—many roses are like that, as are the mock oranges, weigelas, deutzias, and berberis—and you want to beware of herding these into shrubberies, where they will be dull features for much of the year. But they are often redeemed when actually flowering, as their flowers are borne along swags and wands of growth and they show up beautifully at that stage. Elders, of the genus *Sambucus*, may have arresting foliage and be grown for that; they are cut back hard on a regular basis to promote the handsomest leaves.

Those that we want to flower, however, are transformed at that time, their flat corymbs of blossom borne in arching curves along the entire length of many branches.

The most satisfactory roses, as garden plants, are those that make long wands in the first year, which we leave unpruned, so that in the second they have wonderful garlands of blossom. The garland effect gives a sense of unity that floribunda and hybrid tea roses, with their chunky habits, cannot emulate.

Finally, in this introductory piece, I should draw attention to the fact that the flowers or leaves, which clothe the shape of a plant’s presentation of itself to the world, have their own individuality, which gives a slant to the inflorescence as a whole. For instance, the loose, vertical raceme of a penstemon hybrid is composed of open funnels, whereas the dense spike of a hybrid delphinium is made up of large, usually flattened flowers, each performing its own double act, the “bee” in its center, the ruff of petal-like sepals as a frame. Both might be placed in the category of spikes or spires and be used to give a sense of uplift, but their individual composition will strike us as very different, which makes the game even more interesting. ♡