

# Symmetry vs. Asymmetry

These two fundamental and contrasting design styles can each take different forms, and a combination of the two can have exciting results.

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WHEN DESIGNING OR redesigning a garden, there is always one huge decision waiting for you at the outset: Will the design be symmetrical or asymmetrical? Some people like it one way, and some like it the other. But why? And what are the virtues of each? It's a matter of principle, and worth considering before you start.

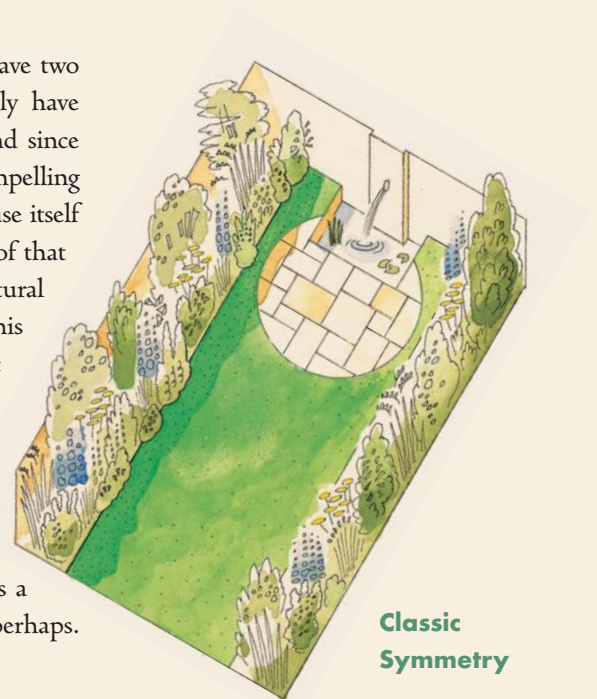
## The Power of Symmetry

THERE IS NO gainsaying the power of symmetry. **There is always that central line or a central point, around which the garden spreads out, on either side or radially.** And this means when you look from that central line or point, you are at the center of the garden. The garden could be said to be focused on you, as much as you are focused on it. It puts you in charge. Not for nothing have the great baroque gardens of Europe been described as landscapes of power.

If you translate that kind of symmetrical planning to a small and perhaps enclosed garden, it still works. When you look out your back door at the garden it may not make you feel like Louis XIV, but symmet-

rical gardens great and small still have two things in common: They inevitably have that central focal point or line. And since the house is usually the most compelling mass in any small garden, your house itself is likely to be the focus at one end of that focal axis, and a building or architectural feature the focus at the other. This arrangement has a satisfactory logic that calms the spirit. For those who like things to be seen to be ordered, this is it.

But not everyone likes that sense of order writ quite so large. Some gardeners prefer things a little freer, a little less intimidating perhaps.



Classic  
Symmetry

## The Appeal of Asymmetry

YOU MAY THINK that the opposite of symmetrical geometry is naturalism and wild gardening, which celebrates the competitive melee of the natural or seminatural landscape. In part that is true. **But even a**

**naturalistic garden has to have form and structure and logic.** It has to have paths that lead attractively and usefully through meadow planting or curving beds from house to summerhouse, or even just garage

to compost heap. Take away the flowers for a moment—the decorative elements of a garden—and there will always be a firm underlying design.

**In an asymmetrical garden the old “equal**

and opposite" rule of symmetry is abandoned. Instead the shapes and planes that define the garden—the paths, the groups of trees, the walls, hedges, steps, and borders—must be arranged so that the scene seems balanced in another way. A heavy volume of foliage here may be counterbalanced diagonally by a group of smaller, clean-stemmed shrubs there. A long flight of receding steps on one side may be counterbalanced by a wide paved terrace on the other. There is no easy rule as there is with symmetry, except that things should appear comfortable and somehow in the "right" place.

An asymmetrical garden need not be

loose and casual. It can be perfectly formal. Indeed some of the most formal gardens on earth are asymmetrical, gardens for example in which the tight volumes of topiary are contrasted with clean planes of water or colorful bedding-out below them, or in which more naturalistic masses of small-leaved evergreens are used to enhance the momentum of a garden by seeming to roll down its length.

However asymmetry is used, its appeal remains the same. It offers a freedom unavailable from symmetry, a feeling that no one is telling you what to do or where to walk or how to see.

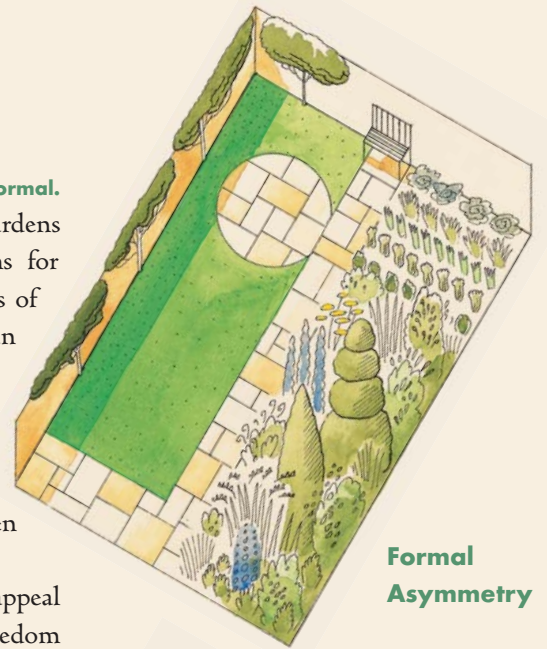
## Combining the Two Approaches

SOME GARDENS TRY to have it both ways, combining symmetry and asymmetry, and they succeed. Part of the enduring fascination of a garden such as Sissinghurst, in England, is that it has a wholly abstract layout, of interlocked rectangles and circles of all shapes and sizes, some of them sufficiently enclosed to be called garden rooms. Look down on the garden from its tower, and you will see there is no grand central axis around which all things symmetrically toe the line. But within that range of compartments, the interiors of some are perfectly symmetrically designed into neat patterns of beds or turf and paving, while other compartments have interiors that are irregular and naturalistic, letting paths weave through meadow planting or orchard. On a smaller scale, the same sort of blend occurs at Wave Hill in the Bronx, New York.

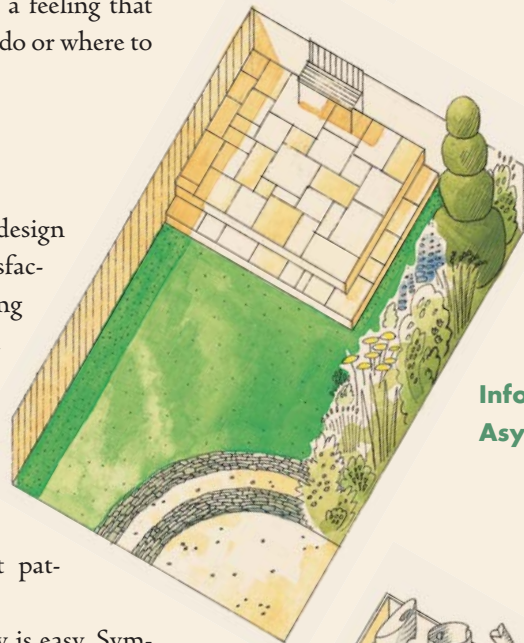
But then Sissinghurst has acres to play with, not to mention staff. Most of us who opt not to go down the path of

absolute symmetry have to design a garden that will offer satisfaction and logic without having a dozen compartments in different styles. And one way to do that is not to run to naturalism, but to make a formal design for one simple space that celebrates the abstract patterns of asymmetry.

By comparison symmetry is easy. Symmetry's focal logic is always apparent, even if the design is none too felicitously conceived. Abstraction is harder because it needs so much more attention given to balancing the elements of the design, and to their relative proportions. **You might say that balance and proportion are what asymmetrical design is all about.** So examine the four views presented here, different treatments of the same space, and see where your sympathies lie.



**Formal  
Asymmetry**



**Informal  
Asymmetry**



**Abstract  
Asymmetry**