



Principles of design provide a framework for design elements

Over the last couple of weeks, I've talked about the importance of developing a landscape plan and the elements of a landscape. This week I'm going to share information about the principles of design.

Landscapes are composed of a combination of masses, lines, forms, colors and textures. The principles of design provide the framework of the various design elements into a cohesive whole. These principles include scale/proportion, balance, rhythm, emphasis, simplicity and sequence/transition.

The relative size of one landscape component compared to another is called scale. If a plant or object is out of proportion, it's either too big or too small for its surroundings. Individual components should be sized according to their surroundings. Something to keep in mind is everything in a landscape must be sized or placed relative to the human body.

Balance is the distribution of mass in the landscape. Balance can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical. In a symmetrical design, one side of the landscape mirrors the other. This type of design is rigid and formal and doesn't work in many landscapes. In an asymmetrical balanced design, plant sizes and numbers are relatively similar on both sides. The overall mass may be similar, but the form of the mass differs from one side to the other.

Rhythm helps achieve unity in the landscape and is the predictable repetition of materials and elements. It's good to use a variety of materials and elements in the landscape, but repeating these elements gives the space harmony and movement. Be aware of the fine line between balance and monotony. Too much of one element can be uninteresting and too many different elements create clutter and confusion.

Emphasis can be a focal point or a dominant element. A focal point can combine a variety of objects such as a tree, fountain or structure. An empty expanse of lawn can act as a dominant space, especially when surrounded by taller plantings or walls. The design of a landscape or garden helps create emphasis by directing your eye. Remember, a landscape can have more than one emphasis in different areas.

Everyone is probably familiar with the phrase, "less is more." This certainly holds true in landscape design. A complicated design disrupts rhythm and balance, and often eliminates the focus. Homeowners can achieve simplicity by limiting the variety of colors, textures, forms and construction materials used in the space, and by staying within one theme/style. Be careful, however, not to go too far, which can result in a boring landscape. Start simple because gardeners can always add more later.

Transition in a landscape is the changes across one space to another. This transition depends on the relative scale of two connected areas. If the areas are of similar scale, it's best to make the changes gradually to maintain harmony and rhythm. This can be achieved by gradually reducing plant height. For example, go from small trees, to shrubs, to herbaceous plants and finally to groundcover. Gardeners can also follow this line of thought with textures, form, mass and color.

When moving between two distinct spaces, the transition can be more abrupt. A gate, arbor, door or hedge can be the transition from one space to another. Good transition adds depth to a planting or can be used to accent a focal point.

The way we bring together the different elements is guided by the principles of design. Together, these foundations will help guide gardeners in selecting plant material and hardscape elements that will blend with the surrounding environment.