

LESSON 1 FORMAL GARDENS

You might choose to create a formal area within your garden, or you may prefer to make the whole garden formal. Even the most natural gardens will often have at least a small area which is reasonably formal.

A formal garden follows a geometric design, where shapes and lines are duplicated on both sides of an imaginary line that divides the area in two equal halves.

A formal garden often looks best when viewed from above, so the design can be seen in full. To create a formal garden, you need to be able to define shapes and lines in the garden clearly.

Shapes might be provided by such things as patches of lawn, garden bed, paving or gravel. Lines can be defined clearly by walls, fences, hedges, brick edging, edging tiles, and so forth.

This design style can be used to create a feature in part of a garden, or may be used on a larger scale for an entire garden.

Formal gardens are often used to create an area of visual impact in highly visible places, such as:

- In the middle of a lawn
- In the middle of a driveway
- In a courtyard
- Below a window, verandah, terrace or deck

ELEMENTS OF THE FORMAL GARDEN

The framework of formal gardens is by and large symmetrical but within that framework a number of different elements may be incorporated to provide formality.

1) A Parterre

In 17th century Europe, this was a formal pattern of low hedges, with the spaces in between filled with coloured gravel.

The concept has evolved and broadened since that time, though a parterre garden today is still created by partitioning the ground into a series of shapes that make up a formal pattern. The different shapes need to be well-defined, contrasting with the space beside them.

Today, we use different coloured plants, stones, gravels, masonry or virtually anything the imagination can come up with. These are often referred to as mosaics.

2) An Avenue

This involves two rows of plants either side of a walkway or driveway. In larger, grand properties a tree-lined avenue was used to introduce the onlooker to the beauty which was about to be revealed.

Suggested Tasks: ▼

Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks and reading to aid with your understanding. These will appear in the right hand column. Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.

3) Hedged Beds

By adding clipped hedging to any garden beds you are increasing the formality of that garden. Clipped hedges also present a transition from the formality of the architecture of the building to the natural shapes of the garden plants within the beds. In fact, although the hedging is very formal the roses, perennials, climbers etc within are usually planted quite freely.

Although hedges may be used to provide symmetry by dividing the garden up into geometrical areas, a sense of perspective can also be applied to make it more interesting.

In addition to hedges, walls, pots, trees or shrubs can also be used to divide formal gardens into separate areas.

4) Topiary

This is often a feature of the formal garden. Tightly growing plants with small leaves, such as box, make the finest topiary because they lend themselves well to being shaped. Box hedging may be pruned into a variety of shapes such as cones, pyramids, spheres, spirals or even chickens. More complex shapes involve pre-shaping the plant using wire. Suitable plants for topiary include *Buxus sempervirens*, *B. rotundifolia*, *Taxus baccata* (tall topiary), and *Ligustrum* sp. (privet).

5) Arched Walkway

These may be long, consisting of many adjoined arches, or shorter with perhaps just a couple of arches. Whatever their size, the intention is to frame a view and provide support for climbing plants. Longer walkways tend to have two viewing points - one at either end.

7) Ornamentation

In the formal garden, ornamentation is displayed symmetrically in keeping with the geometric theme. As such, modern sculptures do not tend to fit in too well. More appropriate are recreations of statues and antiquities which may be housed aloft plinths at the end of vistas within the garden. Sculptures of animals such as lions and dogs are also popular and may be used to frame steps or in fountains as centrepieces.

Ornamental vases, pots and urns with figures in relief are also suited to this garden style. These may be in terracotta, stone, marble or lead (these days faux lead is often preferable due to the significantly reduced cost and weight).

8) Terraces

All formal gardens have a terraced area where the emphasis is on sitting and relaxing. These areas may be as simple as a garden seat with an equal number of pots either side. Seating is often cast iron with wooden slats and tables with stone tops and iron legs work well with these. Cane furniture also works well.

Terraced area may be paved with stone, brick or gravel and might be covered with a pergola. Timber decking can also work within a formal theme.

9) Steps

Many formal gardens include steps either leading up to houses or joining different levels of the garden. Typically these are flanked with pots containing topiary, or shaped shrubs, hedging, and so forth.

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Suggested Tasks

Search for some (or all) of the following terms, in relation to formal garden design:

Garden vista
Focal point
Division of space
Sunken garden
Terraces
Lawns and flower meadows
Statuary
Garden paths

Note how each of these can be used to accentuate a formal theme.

You might do this by searching these terms on the internet or in books. Spend no more than 20 mins on this task

SIMPLE FORMAL GARDENS

A simple formal garden may be something like a circle divided into quarters, perhaps by 2 intersecting paths. Each quarter circle might be planted with exactly the same type of plant.

Alternatively, it could be a square divided into quarters either diagonally or vertically/horizontally.

A paved courtyard with raised brick garden beds around three sides, a rectangular or circular raised brick pool in the centre, and perhaps a wall mounted plaque or fountain is an example of a simple formal style.

Keep the Main Planting Simple

The key to enhancing, or creating, an air of formality is to use plants which are not too variable in terms of colour, shape, texture, and so forth. Also, formality will be promoted by limiting the number of species used.

If using hedges to define lines, then use the same variety of hedging plant throughout. You also need to repeat planting. For instance, you could have identically sized and shaped garden beds on either side of the garden, all bordered with box hedging and housing red geraniums.

If you are going to plant a herbaceous border - an element of the English formal garden, then you need to have one variety of plant which is repeated all the way along the border. Choose a colour scheme and stick to it. If you propose

to have a path running alongside the border, or between two borders, then it needs to be in proportion to the width of the borders. You also need to make sure that there is a smooth transition in the height of plants from the tallest ones at the back to the shorter ones at the front.

FORMAL AREAS

If you wish to combine formality and informality, then you can separate the two styles. For example, you could create a formal garden within your larger garden and separate it from the larger garden with a wall or tall hedge. Perhaps you just want to have a formal garden at the front of the house but use another style at the rear.



Repetition is very much part of a formal theme.

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Suggested Tasks

Watch the video at <https://vimeo.com/showcase/6558573/video/368419836>

and take notice of how formal garden areas have been created as rooms within larger gardens in the video.



1. A symmetrical layout is one of the key elements of formal garden design.
2. A topiary box hedging parterre may be simply filled with gravel or pebbles.
3. The great space afforded by this formal parterre allows for it to become part of a natural garden vista.
4. Ornamentation in a formal garden is displayed symmetrically, often at the end of a visual axis.
5. Formal gardens are often used to create an area of visual impact in highly visible places such as courtyards.