

NSG

# feature



The repetition of flower colors and lines, plus fence and arbor color and lines, makes this landscape especially cohesive and inviting.

GREG GRANT



# Repeat After Me

The landscape design element that tops them all

Greg Grant



## Most landscape experts

command long lists of basic design principles. However, I don't consider myself an expert. Instead, I am – and will always be – a dedicated *student* of landscape design. And as a student, I like shorter lists that are easier to remember. My short list of basic design principles is made up of balance, unity, repetition, dominance, and scale. I'm fully convinced that no artistically pleasing landscape can be created without using each of them. I boiled the lists down to five so that I could remember them on one hand. And I remember them in that order so that its acronym reminds me that all

*Landscape design is not accepting what you see, but creating what you want to see instead.*

–GG

landscapes need *BURDS* in them. OK, it's hokey, but it works.

I could start with any of the five, but I'm going to begin with the one I consider the most important of all: repetition. If you can remember only one, this is it. It's the one most gardeners and plant collectors fight the most; however, it's the one most likely to

make you appear to know what you are doing! So fight the urge and repeat after me: *I will use the same lines, shapes, colors, plants, and materials throughout the landscape.* You have to, or the landscape won't visually hold together.

Let's look at two analogies that might help a bit. First of all, design is design. It doesn't matter if it is interior design, floral design, or fashion design. The principles are just the same. Most folks do a pretty fair job with interior design, and most folks do an acceptable job of dressing themselves in the morning without getting laughed at. That's because they are aware of coordinated furniture, frames, colors, jewelry,



sweaters, socks, etc. But unfortunately these same folks tend to scatter one of everything in their landscapes and not realize they should have used the exact same thought processes.

Look inside a home or business and note the repeating shapes and lines in the floor and ceiling tiles, the door and window shapes, the furniture types, the trim and wall colors, the room shapes, the curtain colors and materials, etc. These all artistically hold the vision together to accommodate the addition of more eye-catching items.

I happen to own a large collection of heirloom family quilts. These amazing pieces of folk art were fashioned from bits and pieces of materials mostly saved from making clothes. Think of these bits and pieces of colored cloth as plants and yard art in the landscape.

*The repeat architectural elements of this lovely old arbor are enhanced by landscape repetition of plant materials, design lines, flower colors, and edging materials.*

The image created would be way too chaotic and busy on the eye if it weren't for the repeated patterns the quilter used putting them together, along with the same border and backing. The final glue that holds them together is the exact same quilting stitch running through them. This stitching might be likened to the border running along the edge of your flowerbeds.

Being repetitive in landscaping isn't all that hard. It's all about having a plan and sticking with it. Repetition can be accomplished by using similar bed shapes, by maintaining the same edging, by sticking with the same type and color of pots, by repeating similar pruned and natural plant shapes, and

by using the same colors over again. These are known as "color echoes" and they help hold the landscape together as a whole, instead of dividing it into a bunch of parts. The colors don't always have to be exact matches, as even related colors share a common bond. Naturally, green serves this unifying purpose very well, but it can still use help from the showier colors.

I suggest keeping your bed edging simple and the same throughout the landscape, just as a frame remains the same around a painting. As we all know, in a long-term project it's easy to start a different border based on the materials or cash on hand. Resist that urge. My general rule of thumb





*Repeat plantings of ferns, nandinas and annuals form the backdrop for a whimsical, repeated mushroom garden art motif.*

for hardscaping is to use no more than three different kinds of materials. The background is way too busy when there's a dizzying combination of concrete, asphalt, brick, stone, wood, metal, and plastic. Any time you place something new in your landscape, at least ponder the thought, "Am I repeating a material, color, or shape I already have?" Repetition is a good thing. Our natural tendency is just the opposite.

My own old-fashioned landscape in the country is far from your typical suburban one, but the design principles I work with are the same nonetheless. I repeat the rectilinear shapes established by my old dogtrot house in my plantings. I use the same fencing material with the same kind of posts throughout. My barns and outbuildings are painted the same color, as are my house and outdoor furniture. I used 13

(one side longer than the other) of the exact same lilac-purple crape myrtles in an alleé leading to my house – and 6,000 of the same kind of dark green pines as a backdrop behind it. I limit my color palette to a portion of the color wheel containing assorted pinks, whites, blues, and purples, and repeat those as well. My recycled white crown tire planters are, of course, tacky as can be (a compliment in East Texas), but I have 26 of the same planters in the backyard kitchen garden laid out in a parterre-like rectilinear pattern. The white repeats the color of the house, the fence repeats that of the front border and nearby vegetable garden, and the brick paths repeat that of the front walk and that of the chimney, where they originated as extras from a combination of both grandparents' old homes.

Naturally, as a plant lover, I've indulged in plenty of diversity and show. But without some repetition, any landscape would be too carnival-like – too busy on the eye. The goal of a fine landscape is to provide pleasing visual stimulation without tiring the mind and eye. It's generally also about fitting in, not leaping out and forcing an issue. One final word of advice when it comes to repetition: better too much than too little. Some of the most beautiful landscapes in the world – both manmade and natural – are very simple and rhythmic. Just remember that repetition is the common thread.

*About the author: Greg Grant is a horticulturist at the Stephen F. Austin State University Pineywoods Native Plant Center in Nacogdoches.*