

Look at Me Now

A successful landscape needs just one great focal point

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In my professional opinion, there are five basic design principles involved in all successful landscapes: repetition, balance, unity, scale, and dominance. Last issue we talked about repetition, the one I consider the most important of all. In this article we will take a look at dominance or the use of focal points in the landscape. This principle is the one most likely to be abused because it takes

advantage of our human nature to be attracted to things that call attention to themselves.

So be warned: landscaping is not about collecting as many flashy things as possible to look at. Landscaping your home is not about “decorating” the grounds. It’s really more about making the elements fit in and belong to a place. And never forget that it doesn’t matter what the landscape



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Opposite: An architectural feature like this unique wooden gate easily dominates the landscape and provides one all-important focal point.

Here: One well-trained, brilliantly colored honeysuckle vine takes charge in this landscape.



Left: Just a single specimen tree or plant can become the star of the show. This red Japanese maple enjoys a lovely stage setting and strong supporting cast.

Right below: Structures like garden sheds can provide that all-important dominant element.

Any contrasting change of texture often attracts the eye. Therefore fine-textured grasses against broader foliage, spiked plants against prostrate ones, or succulents near non-succulents are generally points that attract the eye. Certainly color does the trick as well, particularly complementary colors – those opposite each other on the color wheel. These include purple next to yellow, blue near orange, or red beside anything green. Why do you think red berries attract so much attention on green hollies? This is how some folks make the red front door of their home the focal point of their otherwise green landscape. As a general rule, looking at your garden shouldn't be like looking into a kaleidoscope. The goal should be to use color to control the eye, not overwhelm it. That's why long hedges of red-tipped photinia or purple-leafed loropetalum often come across as garish and distracting.

Naturally, size and shape also attract attention. If everything in a bed is 3 feet tall and you place a 15-foot tall specimen tree there, eyes will be drawn to it. And certainly if you place a weeping or columnar specimen

looks like *now*. When I've taught landscape design, I've always told my students, "Landscaping is not accepting what you see, but creating what you want to see." Unfortunately, we like to see lots of things! The natural tendency is to place far too many focal points in a landscape. The very same appeal that causes us to purchase or collect a plant or item is often the very thing that causes it to be a focal point when placed in the landscape.

My rule for focal points is to have only one per main view. When you are looking toward your home and garden from the street, you should have a single focal point that is dominant in relation to all others around it. The same goes for looking out into your landscape or into any "room" in your landscape. This means you have to consciously decide what's the most important element and stick with it until you vote it out of office! There's nothing at all wrong with making a change, but until you do, that item needs to be the king. This makes it much easier when you are shopping at the nursery, garden center, or antique store to know whether your purchase or find will out-compete your existing dominant effect. Sometimes it's hard to know until you place it in the landscape. This has happened to me many times in the past (particularly with specimen plants), only to have to remove competing elements.

So just what makes a focal point? Many traits, actually. Hard materials in an otherwise soft green landscape tend to be focal points. This, of course, includes statues, furniture, yard art, and birdbaths.





Garden art of any appreciable size can quickly become the dominant element in a landscape. This bottle tree dazzles with height, color, light reflectance and novelty.

in a landscape, it will draw attention. These should be used sparingly and only where one wants attention. Water acts the same way in a garden. Whether it's moving or not, it generally draws the eye because it's different. Any pond, fountain, or birdbath is probably going to be a focal point.


Although it seems I have given the impression that you are allowed only a single focal point in your landscape, that isn't exactly true. Theoretically, you could make use of focal points looking both towards and out of the front and back of your home, plus down each side and out designated windows. And if that isn't enough, you could do as the English do and create separate rooms in your landscape with their own individual focal points.

Always remember that anything you can see from your landscape is really a part of your landscape, whether you own it or not. It's known as "the borrowed landscape." Views can certainly be focal points. My parents' house in East Texas is a prime example; it's located on a 500-foot hill. For years I tried different focal points in the backyard until I finally realized I couldn't compete with the view. Every time something ended up in the way, it ultimately had to be removed.

If your focal point isn't doing its job, frame it! Placing like items on either side of an object or plant will help it become a stronger focal point. The more frame you add, the more obvious it becomes.

Focal points don't have to jump out and poke you in the eye, however. The wonderful power of design is the ability to control the eye. You can bring viewers to your focal point instantly or visually skip them along through a series of secondary focal points leading up to the main show.

I made the decision with my own landscape to let the dominant effect show instantly. After all, I live in an old dogtrot farmhouse with a gaping breezeway running through the middle of it. It's kind of hard to hide an 8-foot hole in the middle of your house. So I decided to accentuate it, echo it, and frame it with an allée of tree-sized crape myrtles leading up to it. I also planted 6,000 pine trees in back to form a contrasting ever-green curtain behind my stark white house. In my case, the old house is clearly the focal point, and I lead the eye straight to it.

Focal points can be very tricky and require either forethought to prevent making a mistake, or afterthought to admit (and correct the fact) that you made one. It's a wonderful process, however. Seeing is believing! 

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