



Stephen &amp; Kristin Pategas

## in the garden by Stephen and Kristin Pategas

All photography by Stephen G. Pategas/Hortus Oasis

### Well Balanced

We are relatively symmetrical. Just glance in the mirror. Typically, there is one ear and eye on one side and another pair on the other. A nose and mouth anchor the center. In the world beyond our reflection we respond positively to formal symmetrical designs. A formal design is a tried and true way to lead the eye towards a destination. Numerous cultures have gardens – from simple to grandiose – that successfully employ formal symmetry.

However, plants can present a problem when they are the backbone of a formal balance. When one of two flanking plants doesn't exactly match the other, the viewer is left unsatisfied. The mind's eye expects them to be identical but perhaps one is in decline or growing differently and balance is compromised. Plants may grow at different

rates or even bloom at slightly different times. One way to partially overcome this problem is to plant them in matching containers so there is continuity from side to side even if the plants become mismatched. Topiaries trimmed alike are a relatively easy way to maintain matching plants. Another possibility is to forgo plants altogether as the focal points and create a strong balance using architectural elements or ornaments. Flanking columns, pergolas, arches, or trellises are possibilities for creating symmetry.

Place two objects together and when they are not in a formal layout the eye bounces back and forth between them never resting. Add that third object to create an odd-numbered grouping and the world is right. Like chocolate and peanut butter blended together.

Interestingly, there is a positive mental response to a view of odd-numbered groupings of objects

– three, five, or even seven instead of two, four, or six. Universally, odd numbers are considered lucky. If one isn't enough, cluster palms, trees, other plants, or objects in groupings. Objects could include boulders, containers, or ornaments such as glazed balls or items on walls or fences.

Meanwhile asymmetrical designs with equal "visual weight" on each side also feel comfortable. This is accomplished with the massing of plant materials and perhaps structural elements. Within the mass, a striking plant or object may serve as a focal point. This type of balance is more forgiving when maintaining a design since there is not a need to maintain a mirror image. Combining formal symmetry with asymmetry is also a possibility and can lead to a satisfying visual experience.

Left brain, right brain, or no brain? Whatever! It works.



*At left: A walkway leading to a cottage in the Cotswolds uses asymmetrical plantings to lead one's eyes and feet. Above middle photo: Sissinghurst's Cottage Garden blends symmetry in the center with asymmetry towards the edges. Above right photo: Vaux-le-Vicomte (created before Versailles) outside of Paris exhibits formal symmetry par excellence. At right: Balanced plant masses flank the walkway in this asymmetrical design.*