

# Balancing act

The effective use of scale in a garden design is what gives it a well-balanced look

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Garden design by Garden Expressions

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Sometimes you can look at a landscape and just feel that something isn't quite right. Maybe the driveway is too dominant in the front garden or there are tiny shrubs huddled around the foundations of a large house that look odd. In short, things just don't look balanced. Visual balance is created when plants and structures in a landscape are in scale with each other — and this can extend to any of the nearby buildings and the wider surrounds.

Scale is a key design element and refers to the relative size of each of the different parts of the overall composition (or landscape design). This may be the size of the trees compared to the shrubs, the length of a path versus the size and shape of the lawn, or the height of the garden compared to the elevation of the house. As each of these elements is observed from the human perspective (that is, of the person viewing the scene) they also need to be in human scale.

## Getting the scale just right

There are several key factors you need to consider when striving to get the scale right. They are:

- **Perspective:** This is an important concept to bear in mind when thinking of scale. Objects in the foreground appear larger, so a very large feature right at the front of the view can monopolise the landscape and prevent the rest of the view from being appreciated. Large objects in the foreground also give the impression of being very significant. This can work in your favour if the background is not an attractive scene. On the other hand, a small ornate feature at the far end of your garden will probably go unnoticed. Focal points need to have an intended viewing perspective so that they are appreciated from that vantage point. To make the most of small, intricate features, place them near seating or areas where people often walk past.

- **Proportion:** You also need to think about proportion. How much of the landscape do you need as lawn, how much as entertaining area, how much for utilities, and how much for garden beds? Too much or too little of a particular functional space can create imbalance. Proportions of different elements don't need to be equal, but should be relative to each other. A miniscule patch of lawn surrounded by vast swathes of paving, or a mass of lawn bordered by a diminutive garden bed will each have an imbalanced appearance. Aim to make each space big enough for their intended purpose. Lawns might need to be big enough for a game of backyard cricket, garden beds should be big enough to support the growth of the plants and provide enough mass for screening where needed, and you might want a paved area big enough to fit an eight-seater table for when friends come over for a barbecue.
- **Plants:** The scale of garden plants has





an impact on the landscape. This includes their leaf size, the size of flowers and fruits, and the overall size of the plants. When it comes to leaf size, will the plant be effective at the distance it's normally viewed from? For example, small leaves give the illusion of being a flat surface from a distance, which is considered desirable in a formal landscape where clean, smooth lines are prized as integral to the design style. Larger leaves are used in different garden styles to make a standout feature of the plant itself.

### Trees and foliage plants

Plant trees that will, at maturity, be large enough to suit the scale of the house. Don't be afraid to plant trees that will eventually grow to be taller than the house as healthy trees in the right position are an asset — they

1. A garden in which all the elements are of the appropriate style, scale and proportion will look and feel balanced.
2. Don't be afraid to plant trees that will grow taller than the house. They provide a welcome sense of belonging.
3. You can use a feature plant with a weeping or sculptural foliage form to contrast rows of neatly clipped hedges.
4. When placing an element such as a sculpture, pot, fountain or bench, you must consider the viewing perspective.

- **Formal:** Often low plantings with sudden changes in scale. No gradual blending from size to size. Features and focal points are at a human scale, or slightly enlarged to give a sense of awe. Small foliage plants are used to give the impression of flat surfaces.
- **Contemporary:** This style will be characterised by the use of a range of foliage sizes with large striking foliage plants employed as features. Large manmade features and focal points will be put to good use to make a design statement.
- **Bush gardens:** The goal is to replicate a natural scale with layering of different-sized plants to create a sense of depth. In a bush garden you will see the use of natural features such as rocks which suit the scale of the plants and the size of the space.

add shade and value to your home and give your property an established, permanent appearance. Just make sure the tree doesn't have an invasive root system that will disturb any nearby structures.

Use a variety of plant sizes to make the space comfortable to look at. If there is a gradual progression of plant sizes, it lends a more relaxed atmosphere. If you wanted to add a little drama, introduce sudden changes in the sizes of plants. This can create a very striking effect. For example, you could have a low hedge with a large leafed feature plant bursting out from behind it to create interest and add some movement. Or you could have a feature plant (potted or growing in the ground) in front of a backdrop comprised of a tall hedge.

### The hardscaping elements

Just as a vast expanse of lawn can be visually overwhelming and dominate the space, so too can a blank wall. You either need something of a very large scale to distract attention from it (such as a sculptural feature) or you can visually break it up by using different textures

or colours. This can be done by adding new surface finishes or cladding.

The size of the pavers you use will also have different effects on the composition of a garden space. Large-format pavers are good in larger open spaces, but may look funny in small spaces or narrow walkways. Large pavers make a feature of the paving so they're good for modern minimalist styles where you want the hardscape to be prominent. Small pavers are less conspicuous and are good for paths, irregular-shaped paved areas, and for when you want to intermingle paving with garden areas.

Effectively using scale within your landscape will make an immense difference to the end result. If the prospect sounds a little daunting, a landscape designer can show you how you can achieve the right balance. ■

This article was prepared by Jacki Brown and the team at ecodesign on behalf of the Australian Institute of Landscape Designers & Managers (AILD). If you would like to find an AILD member in your area, visit the website: [www.aildm.com.au](http://www.aildm.com.au).

