

Formal invitation

If you crave a sense of balance and order in your life, consider a modern formal garden

Words: Jacki Brown



If being surrounded by neatness and order gives you a feeling of calm and comfort, and you consider yourself something of a connoisseur of style, then a modern formal landscape probably suits you to a tee. A sleek, ordered and attractive space by day and an atmospheric, dramatically lit extension of the home by night, a modern formal landscape is a statement of status and affluence. Like the formal gardens of the past, owned by noble people and royalty, a contemporary formal garden is an illustration of mankind's ability to bring order to nature.

These days, everybody wants their piece of the palace, a lifestyle of luxury, and a garden of grandeur to go with it. It's a fantastic dream to have, but status symbols do come at a cost and require considerable maintenance. The noble people of old had large teams of gardeners to look after their lawns and keep the hedges perfectly trimmed. Without maintenance, the effect is more "abandoned castle" than "stately homestead".

Achieving a sense of order

The appeal of the modern formal landscape is that it feels so new and fresh, also very calm, with lots of clean lines and designer textures. Luxury items and materials are poached from interior design — a tiled alfresco area with an outdoor kitchen or pizza oven, a spa or lap

pool, and some bespoke sculpture or garden furniture. The modern formal landscape can represent a desire for order and the aspiration to affluence and status.

However, formal gardens often seem contrived in an Australian setting. In Europe, where the formal style originated, formal gardens have evolved and become entrenched in the culture, providing a sense of place. As a young country, with many diverse influences, Australia's styles are still developing. This is an exciting opportunity in landscape design because there is so much scope for creativity and originality. And this is why successful contemporary formal landscapes in Australia are quite different from traditional European formal gardens. Modern interpretations can be more playful and abstract with the formal style.

The trick is to find a classic and timeless style rather than a trend that will become dated in a few years. Longevity and quality go hand in hand with a modern formal landscape — because formality is such a controlled and ordered style, anything worn out or damaged may stand out and tarnish the effect.

Make wise material choices

One thing that really increases the cost of a contemporary landscape is the focus on manmade structures and hard surfaces — paving, retaining walls, pools, water features

and feature walls. These make up a large part of the material costs and also take a lot of labour by skilled technicians. There is also often an emphasis on earthworks and retaining walls to create flat areas and geometric angles and shapes to impose order on the space. These works accumulate costs that aren't encountered with a more natural style of landscape.

On top of these major expenses, you need to add the cost of drainage, irrigation and lighting, as well as electricity, chlorine and cleaning for water features and pools. As well as the initial costs, contemporary gardens require time for ongoing maintenance and technical skill from professionals such as horticulturists. It may be necessary to replace plants to keep the vigorous, new and structured

1. *The home garden of designer Linda Cantor, this backyard is a stunning example of the modern formal style.*

2. *Designed by Tig Crowley Designs, this front garden has a formal structure but a modern appeal.*

3. *Statuary adds a touch of formality amid the more relaxed planting in this garden designed by Art In Green.*



simpler way to get that look for less. It is possible, with well-chosen elements.

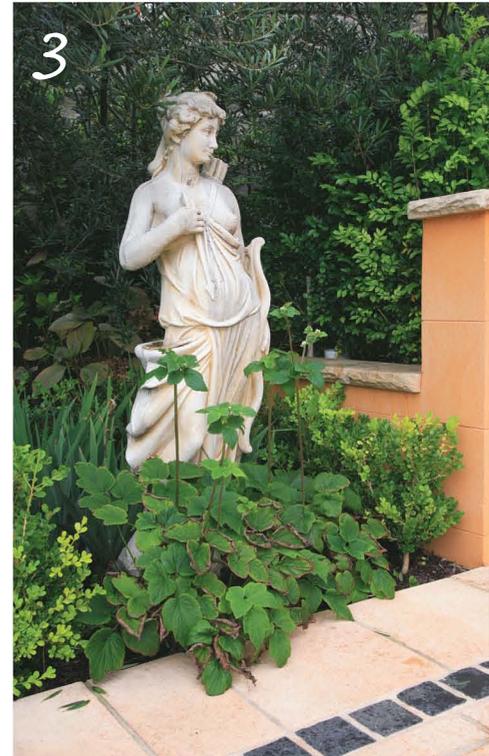
Get the key elements right

As with your house and any other investment, you get what you pay for — if you start with good quality and look after it well, you'll have a positive result that will last. Whatever your budget, choose your investment wisely — maybe a timber deck with simple mass planting will serve your purposes, or perhaps the most important feature is a paved path to create an axis through existing planting, or it could be you already have the garden structure and just need to select the right plants.

Knowing you can “pick your battles” in a landscape design, key elements can be chosen from the formal palette — simple planting, flat lawn, straight edges, symmetry and one or two sculptural focal features. Potted feature plants (perhaps a standard topiary ball or citrus tree) and embellishments of garden art (especially in the form of wall art, figurines or water features) from different cultures or styles can be a great way to add a formal flair to an otherwise bland or nondescript landscape.

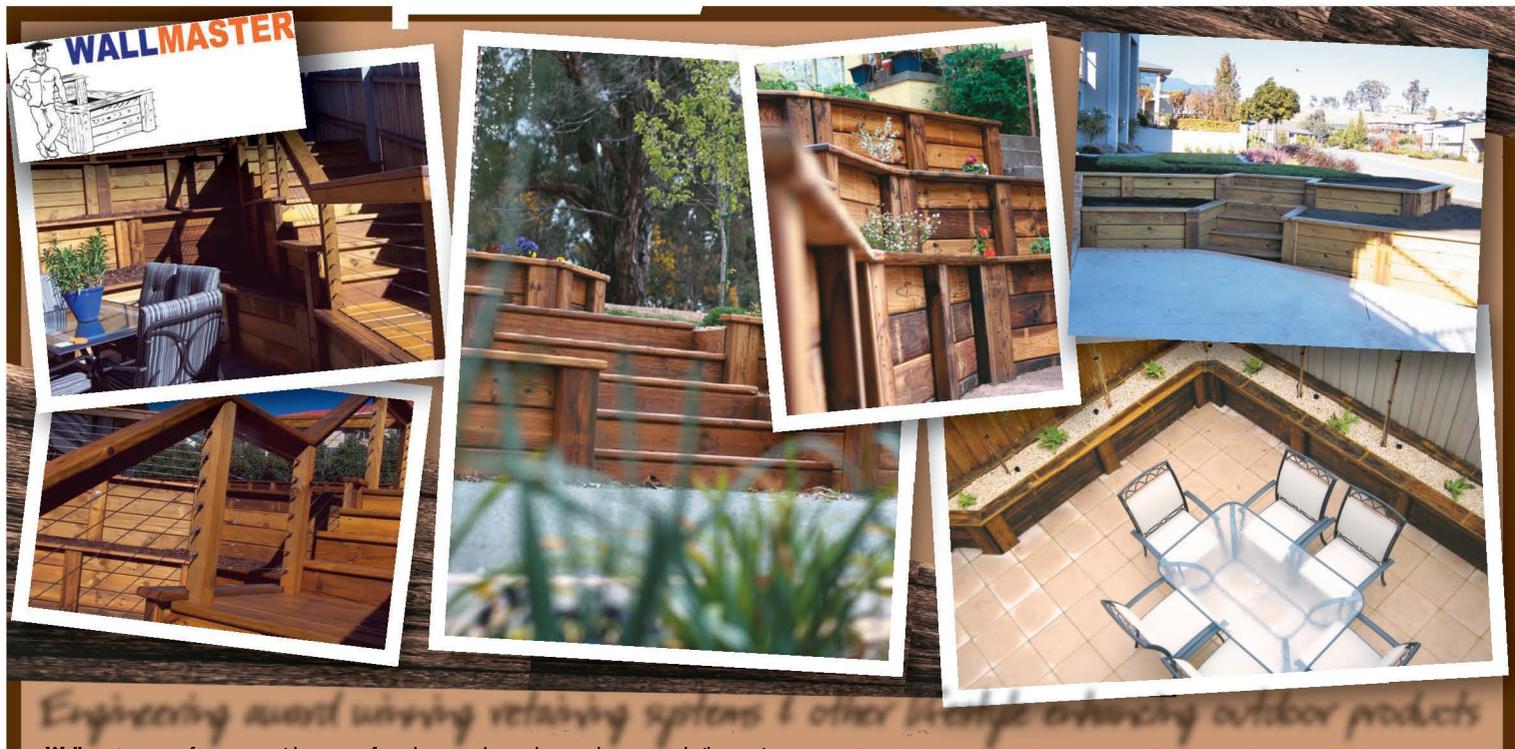
So is a formal landscape a good investment for people with busy lifestyles and limited budgets? Is it worth the time and effort needed, or would another style make more sense? If you are not convinced, stay tuned for future *Design Guide* articles and we will explore other popular styles of landscape. ■

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



look the gardens originally had. Without making this ongoing investment, a formal landscape may not maintain the desired image.

If the extreme designer-quality modern formal landscape is out of your reach, but you still like the look of a neat, formal landscape, you're probably thinking there must be a



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