

We Go Gardening

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This article is reprinted from the Native Garden News email newsletter with the permission of the author, Trish Beckjord. Billie Childress spotted this article and obtained permission for us to include it with our newsletter. This is being included as a bonus for our members who receive the newsletter via email. Part 1 was included as a bonus with the March Newsletter.



Designing with Native Plants Part II: Balance and Harmony by Trish Beckjord, RLA

Last month I wrote about the importance of order and coherence in the native garden to gaining acceptance of using native plants by the general public. This month let's delve into this idea in a bit more detail.

Achieving order in your garden (whether using native plants or not), is largely dependent upon whether the plant selection and layout is balanced. Historically formal gardens were designed to be balanced symmetrically, that is to have the same plant forms, heights, mass, color and textures similarly arranged on both sides of a center line.



Image courtesy of Homedit: Symmetrical landscape design does not typically use native plants although it is possible to envision how it might be done with this design layout.



Today's gardens, however, are more often balanced, or weighted asymmetrically using variation in form, color, mass and texture that together achieve equal visual weight on either side of the center axis without using identical species and mirroring placement.

Image courtesy of Avalon Park and Reserve, Andropogon Asymmetrical balance such as seen in this Andropogon design, can be achieved by a mix of plants and other garden features. The plant massing to the left is balanced against the contrasting turf to the right around the axis of the large central fieldstone boulder.

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When thinking about how to balance your garden, remember that large size, coarse texture and bright color are more visually dominant and should be used carefully. Plants of smaller scale, finer texture and more subdued color are more effective at knitting the garden together in a harmonious whole. The key is to introduce some interest through the former while harmonizing the garden through the latter.



Image courtesy of Friendship Garden, Washington, DC; OEHME van SWEDEN: The much taller Joe-pye-weed is used very effectively as a backdrop to the statue of the seated women. Its coarse texture also contrasts to the finer leaved plants and grasses around it that knit the garden together. Heights move up front to back of the garden.

Give consideration too, to the overall height and mass of the mature plant and garden relative to people and surrounding structures. When in proper proportion and balanced against the remaining open space, the view is visually pleasing and congenial to the eye. Are you creating a garden that will be three to five feet tall overall? Using native species is challenging in this regard when the mature height of a number of them tops four or more feet. Dependent upon their location and function in the garden, their mass may overpower the viewer's perspective and the gardens approachability.



These tall Silphium species (Compass Plant and Prairie Dock) can top more than 6'. Next to the sidewalk in this random prairie seeding they are overpowering, add a significant "messy" factor, and tend to fall over onto the sidewalk.

This edge planting of Side Oats Grama (Bouteloua curtipendula) is much more in scale and creates a neat, consistent appearance next to the sidewalk. Ecological diversity is added on the berm to the left.



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On the other hand, using a taller plant such as White Wild Indigo (*Baptisia leucantha*) sparingly as a visual accent adds species diversity and visual interest.

Image courtesy of commons.wikimedia.org: Wild White Indigo (Baptisia leucantha)

I've thought a lot about what height and overall composition means relative to creating an attractive native plant garden. Anecdotally, the gardens that seem most attractive are generally where the bulk of the plant species are less than three feet tall and harmonious in general form.

This Lake Geneva resort garden by Roy Diblik is illustrative of the principles of using height, form and texture to create a pleasing whole. Keep these general ideas in mind when choosing natives for your garden.



Have you ever noticed this? A few taller accents in proportion to the overall height of the garden are successful but it would be jarring to have an accent that is 6' tall when the overall garden is 2-3' high. The heights are simply not in proportion. Similarly if the height of the selected plant species is layered front to back from 18" to 36" to 60", the progression front to back is legible and logical. With many of the native plants having their ecological roots in the tall grass prairie, this means careful species selection and placement with regard to height is important.

Visual harmony in the garden beyond height also supports balance and coherence. This harmony is built on characteristics such as color, repetition and rhythm, and texture. How have you introduced repetition of a particular form, color, species or texture in your garden that adds an underlying rhythm to the gardens composition?



If you think about it, one reason a Hosta garden can be visually pleasing is the way in which it is unified through a repetitive, mounded form while height, color and mass are varied.

*Image courtesy of Friends of the Garden: This hosta garden is held together by the similar form and mass of the different varieties similar to the Diblik design in the above photo. Native sedges such as Bebb's Oval Sedge (*Carex bebbii*) and Plaintain-leaved Sedge (*Carex plantaginea*) as well as Jacob's Ladder (*Polemonium reptans*) with their similar form would mix nicely.*

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This same – or similar – approach may also be used in a native garden, for example, by combining the rounded/mounded form of Prairie Dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*), Aromatic Aster (*Symphotrichum oblongifolium*), and Prairie Alumroot (*Heuchera richardsonii*) backed by the more vertical form of Little Bluestem (*Schyzichyrium scoparium*), Showy Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia fulgida* var *speciosa*) and Smooth or Sky-blue Aster (*Symphotrichum laeve* or *S. oolentangiense*) used repetitively to create a visual rhythm.



This garden uses similar ideas where the fountaining, mounded form of the Side Oats Grama is mimicked by the Black-eyed Susan and Obedient Plant (*Physostegia virginiana*) the sidewalk edge. Taller natives, with more upright form are stepped to the back.

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Another way to create rhythm is through weaving similar flower color through the garden such as the pinks and mauves of Prairie Smoke (*Geum triflorum*), Pale Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*), Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), and Prairie Blazing Star (*Liatris pycnostachya*). Knit the composition together using the finely-leaved Prairie Dropseed as a contrasting but unifying matrix.

*The mauve/light pinks of Pale Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*) and Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) provide the continuity and rhythm in this garden scene.*



These blendings of form, color and texture create unity and harmony in the garden but with enough contrast to keep the garden visually interesting. When massing plants or other features, remember the rule of three which says that odd-numbered groups of three, five or seven appear more balanced than those that are even-numbered. The eye is not trying to divide them evenly across a center line and therefore they more easily read as a group and can more strongly unify the garden.

So, in summary, what are we saying? Select native species for your garden that are shorter unless at the back of the garden or used as a visual accent but keep the heights in relative proportion. Don't mix randomly but create coherence and rhythm through repetitive form or color. Layer the composition using variation in the height and mass of different species. Plant groups of odd numbers of the same species. Add visual interest through form, height and/or texture.

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Image courtesy of The Native Garden, New York Botanical Garden Bronx, NY OEGME, van SWEDEN: Plant selections are kept low, visual interest is added with the spikes of blazing star, the mounded mass of the Eragrostis to the left of the path echoes that of the Rudbeckia on the right. Textural contrast between the fine stone of the path and the large boulder further balances and heightens the design.

While applying design precepts such as these to creating a native plant garden may seem counterintuitive to some as it seems without ecological base, using them is a way to create a more visually coherent garden framework that is acceptable to more gardeners who may want to use native plants. Selecting species based on known ecological alliances and conditions will add the underlying ecological structure and coherence to the overall design.

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