

# What is formal style?

Formal garden design relates directly to the classical architecture of Greece and Italy. Ordered gardens originally provided a setting for the villas of the wealthy or powerful across Europe, echoing the symmetry of their grand houses. Known as "power gardening", it was seen as the ultimate in garden-making, embodying a sense of control. Although famous formal gardens, such as Versailles, are vast, the basic principles

of the style can be applied to gardens of any size, even tiny urban spaces, where ordered, balanced designs work very well.

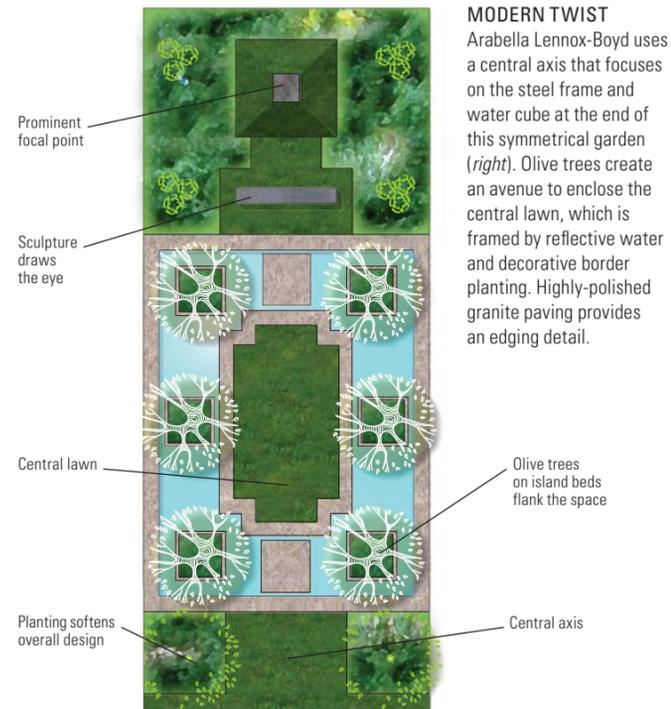
Symmetry about a central axis is crucial to emphasize the focus of the garden. Planting and construction are geometric and simple, with lawn, clipped hedges, and avenues forcing planting into order, and balustrades, steps, terraces, and wide gravel pathways all conspiring to unify the garden space.

## FORMAL GARDENS IN DETAIL

Formality demands an axis, or central line, which is the basis of the garden plan. This could be a pathway or lawn, or even a central planting bed. Generally, the axis focuses on a dominant feature, such as a sculpture, statue, or ornament.

If space allows, cross-axes can be created; some larger gardens have multiple axial routes that create views along and across the garden. A dramatic sense of scale and proportion is essential as planting and paving are often kept simple – one reason why many modernists and minimalists appreciate this style.

The space should initially be divided into halves or quarters. Larger gardens can be partitioned further, but divisions should be as sizeable as possible to maximize the impact of long vistas, or the repetition of topiary or trees. Parterres, water pools, and expanses of lawn are typical of classical formality; examples by contemporary designers may also feature decorative borders that soften the garden's structure.



Vaux le Vicomte by André Le Nôtre.

### DESIGN INFLUENCES

Although some of the earliest Islamic gardens were formal in layout, often divided by rills into quarters, classical and Renaissance influences have come to define this style. The doyen of the formal garden is André Le Nôtre, one of a long line of gardeners turned designers who found fame in France under the reign of Louis XIV. The gardens he designed at Versailles and Vaux le Vicomte are his most famous legacies. The false

perspectives, level changes and reflective pools of both gardens are typical of Le Nôtre's approach to design, which won him the affection of the King.

Hedges, vast lawns, water features, and parterres of box and cut turf, often decorated with coloured gravel, as seen in Le Nôtre's work, set the tone for all formal gardens that followed, with views and perspectives manipulated for the best theatrical effect.

## KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS

- 1 SYMMETRY**  
The symmetrical balance of a formal design can be achieved at any scale. Here, an olive tree and a parterre form a focal point in a circle that intersects the pebbled and paved central path.
- 2 STATUARY**  
Gods and mythological creatures were the original subjects of statuary in formal gardens. In modern designs, broader figurative subjects and abstract works function well as focal points.
- 3 TOPIARY**  
Clipped hedging, typically box or yew for evergreen structure, is used to define space. Topiary provides architectural effect, and dwarf box hedges are used to form patterns in parterres.
- 4 ORNAMENT**  
Large, ornate urns, often on plinths or balustrades, provide focal points or punctuation. Modern formal gardens use the same technique, although elaborate decoration is reduced.
- 5 NATURAL STONE**  
Paving provides an architectural element for pathways and terraces. Sawn and honed natural stone slabs can create regular patterns, or they can be used to edge lawns and gravel paths.