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Shape up the yard with these contrasting forms

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

Most of us live our lives with -- not necessarily in -- corners. Our house lots are square or rectangular; our houses turn at 90 degrees. The perimeters of our gardens often follow those lines, and plants and structures follow suit.

To counteract corners, many gardeners make sure that their landscapes have wavy paths or beds, but the biggest visual impact we can make in the landscape is to use clean lines and clear shapes, whether the shapes have corners or are round. After that, we can let the plants do the softening.

Circles and squares give form to our gardens, on both large and small scales. Here are some ways you can add shapes to your garden.

When you consider adding circles to your garden, visualize them in two planes -- the plan view or in elevation.

In plan view, the circles and squares are part of the overall lines and curves of the beds, paths and patio. Beginning with the biggest form you have, the entire lot is a shape, and you carve out other shapes from that.

In elevation, the shapes are vertical to the earth; our plants and structures are in elevation (literally "above the earth").

We use shapes both ways, and it can be either the complement or the contrast that helps make the big impression.

The round patio cut into the landscape at Lorna McMahon's garden in Ireland is striking in its complements and in its cozy size. At about 15 feet across, it would fit in most gardens easily.

It has a grottolike feel -- even though it is only a couple of steps down -- setting it apart from its surroundings. The roundness of the patio is echoed in the millstone in the middle, the large Cretan pot, the pots of hostas, even the hostas themselves.

When circles are set against squares, the interest comes from a visual tension. You can build a round patio within a square space, or plant a round bed within a large lawn. The latter is called an island bed, because it's out there floating in a sea of grass.

In a small garden, there is room to create a contrast. In a tiny town garden in London, we admired a simple water feature made from an urn seated on a bed of rocks set within a square cut out from the lawn.

Plantings along the fence on either side and filling in the back of the garden behind helped set off this arrangement and make it more appealing than if it was closed in by billowing plants.

On a grander scale at another English garden, Lady Farm in Somerset, we were in awe over the contrast of round



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Some gardens in Great Britain are models of shapeliness. At Lady Farm in Somerset, a circle of lavender leads to a rectangular gravel path with geometric waves of boxwood and sheared yew. At Bosvigo in Cornwall, left, round and square shapes contrast and complement.



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At Birr Castle Demesne in Ireland, a circle in a stone fence creates some mystery: Should you crawl through or just admire the view?

shapes and sharp corners.

Judy Pearce planted a circle of lavender surrounded by clipped boxwood in the middle of a larger gravel circle. With the lavender in the forefront, our eyes were drawn down the path of neatly trimmed boxwood and carefully sheared yew. It was a series of circles and corners -- and mesmerizing.

For clear and generous use of a circle, look no further than the broad, shallow, round stone steps made famous by English architect Edwin Lutyens.

They are much admired and much copied. Great Dixter is just one of the famous English gardens where his designs can be seen.

At Great Dixter, the effect of the steps is magnified by their placement: looking out onto an East Sussex meadow. They make almost a platform for viewing. Each time we see steps by Lutyens on an England visit, I spend idle time on the return flight wondering where I can use steps like that in our garden.

Fortunately, it doesn't take an entire makeover to work some circles and squares into the garden. At the very least, it's easy to cut a circle out of the lawn for a birdbath.

Ready-made fountains and birdbaths are a simple way to use shapes. Are gazing balls out of fashion? If not, why not toss one or three into the water?

More permanent methods of designing with shapes include designs with a fence or a wall. Circles (or even ovals) in walls and fences work by adding roundness to a surface that usually ends with corners. Circles become windows or frames to view what is beyond. They add depth to a landscape.

At Birr Castle Demesne in Ireland, a circle in a brick fence creates some mystery and makes you stop and think. Am I supposed to crawl through it? Look through it? Or just admire it from a distance? As you can guess, most of us walked up to look through.

In the home garden, we often divide the garden with hedges or fences. In Cindy Combs' Magnolia garden, a circle in the lattice fence provides a visual gateway between the patio and the garden.

Although I can't give you the psychological reason, it's pleasing to the eye to juxtapose circles and squares, whether it's in a lattice fence or on a patio. The shapes give gardens of any style definition.

Anyone who as a child played with Colorforms -- those die-cut vinyl shapes that stick to a board -- will remember that most of the time we mixed the circles and squares. It made for a more interesting picture then and does so now.

3 easy ways to 'shape' your garden

- Set an armillary sphere in the middle of a square space. An armillary sphere is an ancient astronomical instrument representing celestial circles; armillary spheres have become popular garden ornaments. They are made of metal, usually rest on a pedestal and look fabulous set in a bed of lavender or ornamental grasses. You can find them at garden shops and online.
- Grow a ball of foliage that you don't have to clip. It isn't difficult to find a plant that grows round without any help, but you'd be hard-pressed to grow a square plant without intervention.

Plants that grow round all by themselves:

Pittosporum tenuifolium 'Golf Ball' -- At about 2 feet high and wide, this small evergreen shrub for part shade is a delight.



zoom

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In Cindy Combs' garden in Magnolia, a round opening in a lattice fence provides a visual gateway between the patio and the garden.

Thujaopsis dolabrata 'Nana' -- A bunlike conifer to about 3 feet.

Buxus microphylla var. *japonica* 'Morris Midget' -- A small, round boxwood to only 1 foot high and wide.

Chamaecyparis pisifera 'Plumosa Compressa' -- A big name for a tiny, mossy mound of an evergreen that grows to about a foot.

- Add corners to the garden with an angular, vertical element, such as a tuteur -- a three- or four-sided tower used to support a vine or just for its own architectural look.

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