BENDING THE RULES

Just because a line isn't straight doesn't mean it can't be formal.

Stephen Anderton

WHAT MAKES a garden formal? For some people it's a garden in which the right angle and straight line are supreme. For others it's a garden where the plants are all clipped and marshaled to the last degree, and few if any are native.

I favor a definition that is at once broader and tighter. To me a formal garden is one in which form itself is paramount—form in the sense of the shape of the spaces and masses in the garden, both on the ground and in three dimensions. In such a garden the form of the spaces is frequently more important than color or perfume or plant association (although of course it need not mean these elements have no place).

Given this definition—that line and volume are preeminent in a formal garden—it is possible to see that curves can be just as formal as straight lines. For curves are just as capable of defining spaces on the ground and in three dimensions. Only their character is different. We can use curves carefully and formally, without feeling that just because we are using curves the garden must be informal or naturalistic.

Nature does not readily produce the clean lines that are often found in a formal garden. It produces irregular, woolly battle zones, where one plant wars with another, or land battles with water. And so any smooth, long line defining a space, be it absolutely straight or an

A circle of pleached limes.....
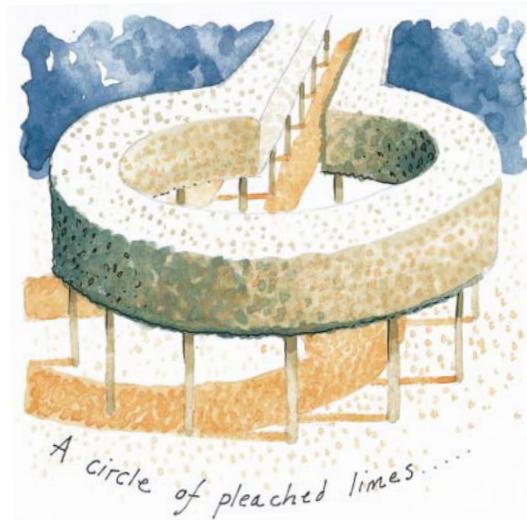
irregular curve, is still alien to nature. Both are a formal, man-made invention, and we might as well get on and work with both of them, joyously. Therefore, naturalism, if we were to define it, would be the kind of gardening which seeks to pretend that the gardener is not in control, either by letting nature play a slightly larger role, or by gardening so cunningly that nature only *seems* to be playing a larger role.

Designers have celebrated the formal, irregular curve for centuries, and in gardens of all sizes. The rolling 18th-century landscape parks of Capability Brown used the curve on a large scale around great country houses. Where his predecessors had favored geometric symmetry and straight avenues running off into the sunset, Brown played instead with curving woodland belts and clumps, and sinuous lakes and rivers. They were in fact so stylized in their sinuousness that a whole movement—the Picturesque—sprang up in opposition, promoting a more "natural," less linear approach to design.

Formal curves can have dramatic effects in our own domestic gardens. One simple bold curve can completely alter the character of a garden and the way it is read by the eye. An entrance path or a flight of garden steps, for example, might be changed from the headlong certainty of a straight line into a more relaxed and circuitous progress, yet still making a

crisp and perfect line upon the garden. A curving pergola would, for most of its length, hide the view out of the far end, whereas a straight pergola would be perpetually focused on that far end and the light at the end of the tunnel.

Once you start to think of the bold curve as formal and not necessarily more discreet and "natural" than a straight-line feature, you may also begin to take a different view of curving elements in your garden. You begin to wonder, perhaps, if there is any point in that path meandering around the edge of the lawn, where a straight line would be less conspicuous and contrived for being simpler. You might consider whether the severely serpentine island beds of perennials beside your drive are in fact so powerful an effect—so strong and unrelated to the rest of the scene—that they upstage the house much more than simple, straight, flanking borders would do.

In a garden where the power of all lines is used to full advantage, there is a strong contrast to be made by setting the occasional curve against a rectilinear background. That curve might be flowing and irregular, or it might be a geometric curve such as a circle, but the contrast is still as strong. Consider how striking is the famous rondel of yew hedges at Sissinghurst in a garden of otherwise rectilinear enclosures, or the circle of pleached limes at Dumbarton Oaks. Consider how you might use that curve-versus-rectangle contrast in your own garden, to similar effect.

In my garden it is done by contrasting a sloped lawn of topiary balls that appear to be rolling with a rectilinear building at the bottom. But you might do it by making a flawlessly sinuous path just wide enough for one through a small bamboo grove, the curve of the path contrasting with the right angle where ground meets vertical cane. Similarly, when gardening under trees, you might edge the path with stones to emphasize the line, or even edge it with logs on end, rising like organ pipes with the angle of the path's curve. On flat land in front of a simple modern house, you might make a terrace by pouring concrete in interlocking ovals, stained in various simple earthy colors.

All of these are just ideas to be played with. So let's hear it for the formal curve. Let's work the idea hard and with imagination. 🌱

A Curving pergola

A terrace of interlocking ovals

A curving flight of steps