O
f all the elements of design, consider
structure first. The layout of paths, fenes, walls and beds provides good
bones for the garden. We crave an underlying
order in composition, whether it is immediately
obvious or not.

One inspiration for structure can come from
nature. Looking at a Northwest landscape, we see
the geologic forces that produced it. Wind and
water shape the bedrock produced by volcanoes.
Glaciers and rivers make the valleys and plains.
Forests, meadows and grasslands cloak and
soften it. Garden designers can take inspiration
from the landscape and lay out natural-looking
lines in the garden. Traditional Japanese gardens
provide good examples of this abstraction of nature.

Formal geometry provides a different kind
of structure. Take inspiration from the classi-
cal gardens of Europe; think Versailles or Italian
Renaissance gardens. Formal design dates
to Persian gardens, which were enclosed by
walls against the harsh desert environment and
featured crossing paths representing the four
rivers of paradise meeting at a central point.

Familiarity with both naturalistic and formal
gardens gives us a variety of design tools.
Consider which one suits your style. Can’t
decide? You don’t have to: A garden can combine
both formal and naturalistic structure, with one
playing off against the other.

Add structure by considering circulation.
How you move through your garden—both
with your eyes and your steps—provides a key
to design. Paths linking one point to another
become design elements. For naturalistic design,
imagine paths as rivers, pooling in quiet places
to create patios and gathering places. In a formal
design, straight lines create focal points with
a striking plant pot or sculpture at the end of
the view. Curving lines create mystery: What is
around the corner, out of sight?
Pay attention to positive and negative space. Negative space—lawns, patios and pools—provides the open areas in a garden for activities. Positive spaces are the beds and buildings that outline the negative open spaces. Open space gives breathing room and a foil for the pattern and texture of plants. In a garden filled with only plants, you could not see the forest for the trees.

Use the shapes of the negative spaces to reinforce the design. A freeform lawn, patio or pool adds a naturalistic element to an informal design. In a formal garden, consider a square or rectangle or other geometric shape for the open spaces. A circle fits into a formal or informal design. Circles center a space, bringing order to a garden with irregular edges. Circles and curves also provide contrast and add variety to straight lines.

Make your planting plan reinforce or contrast with the lines and shapes of the garden design. Formal planting plans include topiary, sheared hedges and regular repetition of plants. However, in a formal geometric layout, the strong lines are often enough to create an organizing framework that supports an informal arrangement of plants. Informal planting plans are a good match for an informal layout, however they can have their own inherent structure too, such as the patterns formed by the contrasting shapes, colors and textures of the plants.

You can’t get away from structure because it supports the success of your garden design.

**Phil Wood** is the owner of a residential landscape design company and serves on the Editorial Board of the “Bulletin.”

**FACING PAGE:** A circular stone patio centers this Seattle garden and provides strong geometry for supporting an informal planting plan.

**ABOVE TOP:** Stone paths and a circular patio give structure to this garden in Bellevue. The repetition of plant forms reinforces the formality.

**ABOVE BOTTOM:** In this tropical island-themed Kirkland garden, built around an existing palm tree (*Trachycarpus fortunei*), the informal shape of the patio provides open space, and a stepping-stone path gives circulation and visual movement.