



ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

Putting in a new paved path at the Miller Garden became a valuable lesson in scale and proportion.

Scale and Proportion: Sizing up the Garden

BY RICHIE STEFFEN

Last year, we added a new paved path at the Miller Botanical Garden to improve access to the main house by wheelchair. What started out as a simple project soon turned into something much more involved—one that provided a valuable lesson in design.

Our first thought was to create a wider, more gently sloping pathway from the end of the house to the French doors that lead into the living room. However, though functional, a lone path cut through the existing space clearly would not have looked right. This simplistic approach did not consider how the new addition would relate

to the proportions of the surrounding house and garden, or to the human scale of the visitors and staff who would be using both.

In landscape design, proportion and scale are defined, respectively, as the relationship of the plants and landscape elements to the buildings and encompassing area, and the size (and visual weight) of these elements compared to that of the human body. Fortunately, we realized the issues with the walkway early in the design phase and started to think in a broader sense.

This eventually led us to add a stone terrace, additional walkways and a staircase to transition

A grove of large *Gunnera tinctoria*, at the Logan Botanic Garden in Scotland, demonstrates how scale can be manipulated.



In the Miller Garden, the finely-textured *Podocarpus* 'County Park Fire' in the background makes the larger-leaved *Yucca recurvifolia* stand out and look closer.



and integrate the new structures into the garden. Scaling up the design nearly quadrupled the size of the project (and likewise the budget!), but the end result was a hardscape that had a feel of belonging and fit comfortably with the house and the mature landscape.

Proportionate Landscapes

Scale and proportion can be difficult to control in the garden. In older landscapes, they become an imperfect balance of compromises. You will always have some features that are too big or too small in the garden, but the design goal is to have a majority of them near just the right size.

The challenge with scale and proportion is that plants grow, so your context is always changing. The rhododendron of yesterday's foundation planting is tomorrow's multi-stemmed small tree that is way too close to the house. You must be able to take a step back from the garden and look at it as a whole—then see what works, and what does not, and make those choices about what is too precious to cut down and what must be removed.

One of the hardest lessons to learn during my years at the Miller Garden has been that sometimes something choice needs to go! When you are ducking and weaving between branches along a trail or walking along the edge of the opposite side of a path to accommodate spreading branches, it may be time to consider that these plants are now out of place.

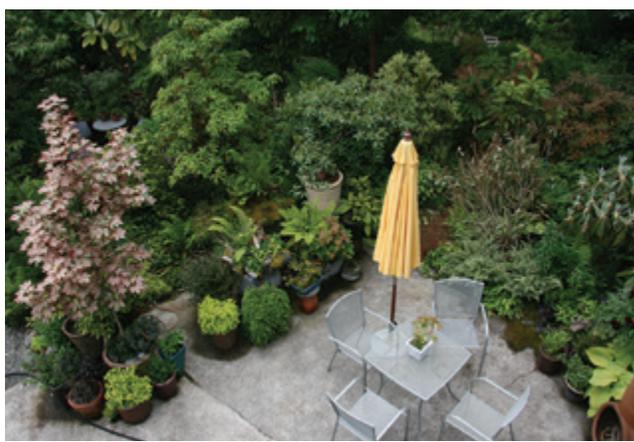
The challenges of scale and proportion will change from neighborhood to neighborhood, and from new gardens to mature gardens. Today's trend of a large house on a small piece of land leaves little space for the context of the surrounding landscape to relate to the structures. The house can appear domineering to the location, giving few options to make the proportions feel right.

The use of columnar trees and narrow, upright growing shrubs, offset with more rounded plants where space permits, can help soften an imposing structure. There are even narrow, vase-shaped trees that can fit into tight spaces, yet help provide the comfortable feel of a broad overhead canopy. You must be clever in these situations. Planters placed on pedestals, along with pruning and shaping, can be used to create the illusion of height and fill.

Manipulating Scale

Clever thinking makes scale and proportion as fun and interesting in the garden as more obvious landscape principles such as color or texture. One of the most dramatic experiences I have had with scale was on a visit to the Logan Botanic Garden in southwest Scotland, where I got to explore a tunnel carved through a fantastic, three-quarter-acre grove of gunnera. The enormous leaves of the gunnera loomed above my head on eight- to 10-foot-tall stalks with broad leaves stretching six to seven feet across. The

In my old garden, a lone stewartia to the left of the patio is proportionate to its surroundings.



change in scale made me feel like a tiny garden elf dashing through the perennial border.

Though we may not be able to replicate a gunnera grove in the home garden, we can use large foliage to skew the scale. Playing with foliage size can make spaces feel more intimate or create the feeling of distance. Bigger leaves make you feel like the plant is closer than it is, and smaller leaves register in our minds as farther away.

We can also manipulate the visual weight of plantings. We may need height and width in a location, but not want the planting to feel overwhelming. Plants with finely-textured foliage and open growth habits—as well as some plants with variegated leaves—can fill a space, yet provide an airy appearance by having less visual weight than many plants of similar size. Think about how you feel viewing a mimosa, *Albizia julibrissin*, with its fine, delicate foliage and broad open habit, versus an English laurel, *Prunus laurocerasus*, of the same size. The laurel with its large, dense, evergreen foliage feels like a lead balloon compared to the dainty mimosa. Using scale and proportion to enhance harmony and contrast can boost dramatic impact, even in small spaces.

Constantly Shifting Dynamics

Recently, I moved my garden from a quarter-acre city lot to a new 10-acre property. This has put scale and proportion to the forefront of my design development. As I look at all the plants I

On my much larger new property, I'd need to plant a grove of stewartia to achieve a noticeable impact.



moved to this new property, it has become clear that grander thoughts are in order for this enormous space. Where I once thought it would always be nice to have a lovely stewartia tree in the garden, I now see that it would be much more appropriate to add a grove of stewartias to have a noticeable impact.

This is what I enjoy the most about scale and proportion—the ever-changing dynamics. These are not static design principles, but rather the opposite, and they keep the garden fresh and the gardener's mind sharp. ♪

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