



Landscape Symphonies

A Garden of Reason: French Landscaping



Jacques Boyceau de La Barauderie wrote in 1638 in his *Traite du Jardinage Selon les Raisons de la Nature et d'Art* that, “The principle reason for the existence of a garden is the esthetic pleasure which it gives to the spectator.” While this was generally true, it was also specifically true that this sense of pleasure came from the experience of right order and man’s place in creating order in the universe. This special sense of ease was a direct result of the both religious and political belief that honoring hierarchy gave honor to the individual, no matter what the station in life.

The French formal garden, also called *jardin à la française*, strove to be a complete expression of both right order and man’s ability to create it. These were gardens based on symmetry and the principle of imposing order over nature. As the king ruled over nature, gardens not only recreated this domination, but were demonstrations of this power. It reached its apogee in the 17th century with the creation of the Gardens of Versailles, designed for Louis XIV by the landscape architect André Le Nôtre. The style was widely copied by other courts of Europe.

Regardless of our personal religious or political beliefs, the form of the French garden has given innumerable inspirations to landscaping since it’s time. As its form was largely fixed by the middle of the 17th century, gardens since have found their own ways of emulating the beauty and struggling with the meanings. These landscapes were laid out on an east-west axis, which followed the course of the sun, the central symbol of the French garden, and emblem of Louis XIV. A geometric plan using the most recent discoveries of perspective and optics was always employed in designing the landscape layout so that the views and perspectives, to and from the palace, continued to infinity. All vegetation must be constrained and directed, to demonstrate the mastery of man over nature. Trees were planted in straight lines, and carefully trimmed at a set height. The most elaborate parterres, or planting beds, in the shape of squares, ovals, circles or scrolls, were placed in concentric geometric patterns close to the house, to complement the architecture and to be seen from above from the reception rooms of the house. Bodies of water (canals, basins) served as mirrors, often doubling the size of the landscape.

Harmony is always a result of right relationships. In answering the lifelong question of our place in our local and global communities, the role of landscaping is an area for both inner reflection and outer action. Even if we aren’t landscaping a palace, there is inspiration to be drawn from the details of the French formal garden that can inspire our own outdoor living spaces. How would you include geometric forms in your garden? What would an interestingly trimmed hedge do to make the difference? How do you envision your harmonious relationship to your family, friends, or community? How can we help bring your landscape to life?

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