

# IT'S HIP TO BE SQUARE

## Why curves aren't always the answer

“When in doubt, round it out”: looking around today’s landscape, one must wonder if this is the designer’s mantra. Curves – you see them everywhere. I have sketched out my share of meandering, flowing lines for both beds and walkways. And meandering walkways and bed edges can indeed provide comfort to the visitor and soften the otherwise sharp edges of a built environment. The question is this: “Are curves *always* the right approach?”

## BASIC DESIGN THEMES

So many different methods of laying out a garden design exist that it might help to do a little refresher review.

The style of this home lends to an inviting entry courtyard. The plan view (right) illustrates the geometry of the space which is reinforced with bold, straight lines and right angles.

**ARC & TANGENT:** In this style the design begins with straight lines, which are later softened with arcs. These arcs have to be substantial though. They can't be small, token curves.

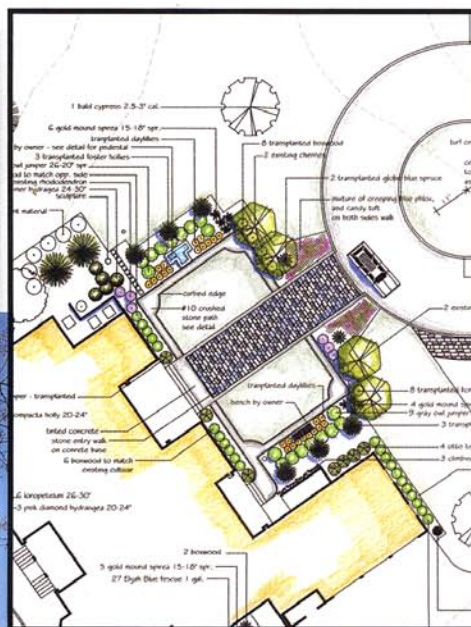
**CIRCULAR:** Using concentric circles radiating from specific points can create a dynamic, but still meaningfully designed space.

**ORGANIC:** You've heard the old adage: "There are no straight lines in nature." Directional lines and the spaces they create in an organic design seem to flow with the natural topography for a fluid, natural feeling.

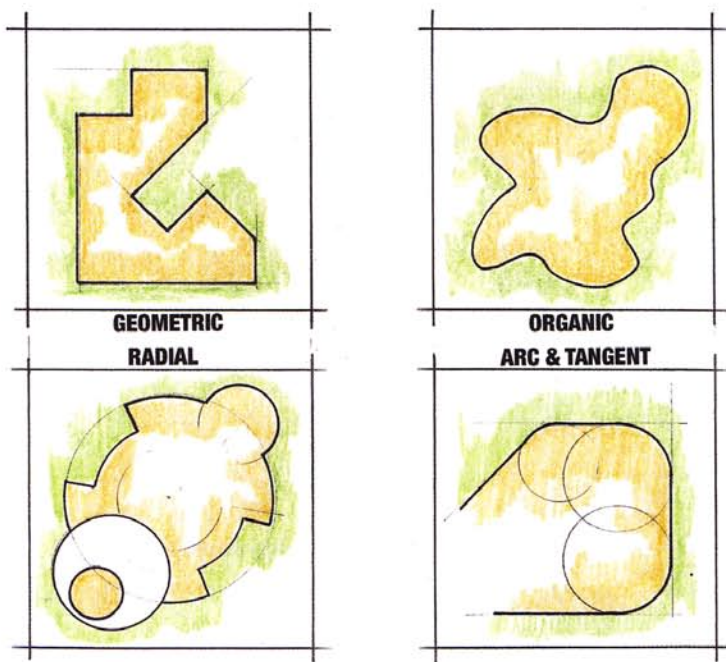
**GEOMETRIC (30-, 45-, 60- and 90-degree angles):** In this kind of design straight lines and angles create space and patterns not found in nature. This seemingly neglected style is the focus for this article.

## ASKING ARCHITECTURE

Just as you wouldn't want to put a formal brick walkway through a serene woodland garden, it would also seem a bit odd to encounter meandering, mulched paths in the area leading to your front door, unless, of course, you live in a woodsy, rural setting. Look around and see what the surrounding architecture tells you. In many instances, small entry courtyards are surrounded by the



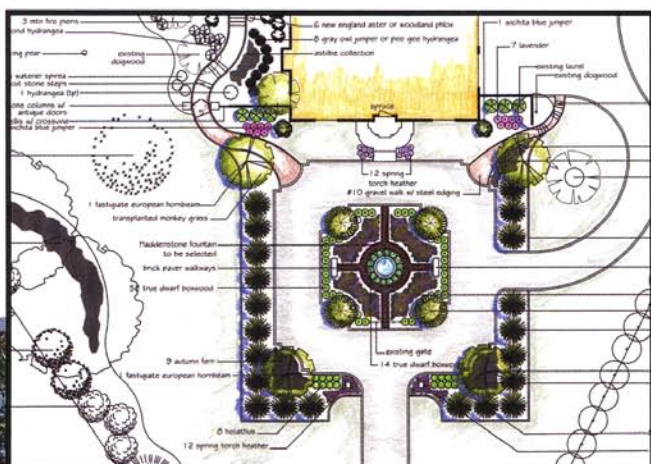




geometry of the adjacent street, drive and building. To overlay random curves and organic shapes on such a landscape invites a certain amount of conflict and tension. Scale is also a critical aspect of design. And in smaller spaces, where every inch counts, it is very difficult to superimpose natural free forms onto the design. Even placing a simple circle or ellipse might result in acute angles where curved lines touch other lines, and many of us know that acute angles are a big no-no in design.

### THE NATURE OF THE SITE

Designing with geometric lines works best on level ground. Perhaps that is why we see curves in so many gardens in east Tennessee. If your site is relatively flat or urban, in which case it is also likely flat, try a creative, geometric approach. Here is a trick you can experiment with on sites which are long and narrow, especially backyards. Try creating a long axis between opposite corners (see design illustration). By doing so, you are taking advantage of the longest possible measurement, thus creating the illusion of more space. In addition, you might also be creating some very cool alcoves and niches that could be developed into smaller, sub-spaces.



The quick diagrams (upper left) illustrate the basic differences in simple design styles. This home's entry drive is flat and wide giving a perfect opportunity for simple formality.



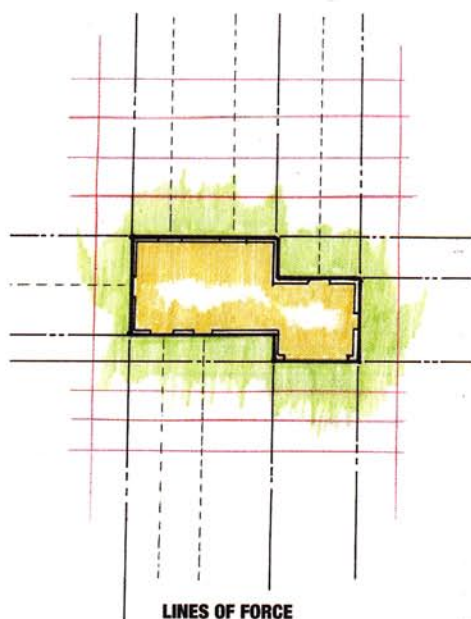
## THE ALL IMPORTANT EDGE

The beauty is in the details. With garden design, the attraction is not only in the plant material but also in the edge. Unfortunately, those crisp lines on the designer's paper don't always translate well onto the actual site. Yet, when employing geometric shapes, it is especially critical that all edges are well defined. Certain materials for bed edging are more appropriate than others. Brick, steel or a quarried stone will look much better in the landscape than irregular field stone or a natural, trench-type edge. A contrasting or defining band along walkways and other hardscape elements will also do much to reinforce a strong direction or shape. Laying out the garden with stakes and string will prove much more reliable than just eyeballing and whipping out the marking paint.

## THE GEOMETRIC GRID

An easy way to begin any garden design is to lay out your base plan and immediately overlay some tracing paper. There are prominent lines which make up the house or structure. Projecting these lines outward into open spaces will guide you in creating spaces that make sense. The lines projecting from perimeter walls are called major lines of force, and those lines which may extend from windows and doors are called minor lines of force.

Begin by using lines perpendicular and parallel to the structure for one concept and then try rotating those lines of force 30-, 45- or 60-degrees to create a totally different design. The geometry that results from this design approach can be very appealing and yield a professional appearance which might not be possible with free form, organic shapes.



LINES OF FORCE



"Lines of Force" (upper right) show how one may get some help laying out a garden from the existing structure. As this newly installed landscape matures, the strong bed lines will forever define the shape of the lawn.



A couple of great design books will help you appreciate the grid overlay concept. One is *From Concept to Form in Landscape Design* by Grant W. Reid, ASLA. The other is a little more comprehensive but also does a great job in directing the reader toward good design: *Residential Landscape Architecture* by Norman Booth and Tony Hiss.

No matter how you approach garden creation, design is about experimentation. There is no doubt that technology can greatly improve the way we work and design. However, I still believe in the creative connection that exists between the hand that draws and the brain that conceives, a connection that just might be lacking when a designer relies only on the click of a mouse and a screen. But that's another article.

My point is, this: don't be afraid to tape down some of that good old tracing paper over your base map and quickly try some different design approaches. Whether your edges and hardscapes are curved, angular or create 90 degree turns, eventually the light bulb in your brain will spark and you'll see the solution. Just as the pleasure from any

trip can be in the journey, design is a profession where you should enjoy the process as much as the end result.✂

HAPPY GARDENING!

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These before and after photos show how the existing deck and steps are used to shape the new hardscape. While the shapes of the paving stones are very irregular, they are installed in a clean geometric fashion.

Photos and sketches courtesy of Garry Menendez.

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