

? going formal

I prefer a formal garden. How do I achieve this without it looking out of place in the desert?



Text by Troy Bankord • Illustration by Clint Miller

Living in the desert Southwest can be a challenge for those who yearn for a more structured garden. The hallmarks of formal landscape design include symmetry, even numbers, topiary, tiered fountains, ornamental iron, statuary, urns and pedestals, conical and spherical shapes, red brick, pots with decorative detail, and trees or clipped hedges lining walkways and drives.

Following are some ideas for incorporating these elements in a way that complements the desert.

- Incorporate earth-tone or stone vessels adorned with intricate leaves, garlands, lemons or roping. Pots such as these are both formal and organic.
- Place containers on either side of your pool or front door, or space them evenly around the base of a fountain or other water feature.
- Adding lush green grass and English ivy is an easy way to introduce formality.
- Cover walls, trellises and arbors with vines. Try Banksia roses, bougainvillea, climbing roses, fig vine, pyracantha or trumpet vine.
- Dress up patios and ramadas with curtains made of durable outdoor fabric. A two-tone striped pattern is an elegant choice. Swaths of material also can be used to frame windows and doors.

- Spheres, sundials and spiral-shaped plants act as sculpture in a formal garden.

Container plants that work well for a formal garden in the desert include: agaves, aloes, roses, succulents and yuccas. Soften these sculptural plants by adding dwarf myoporum, elephant food, lantana or verbena to the pot as well.

Many desert plant species can be trimmed and shaped into hedges and mounds for a manicured look. Consider dwarf bottlebrush, dwarf myrtle, dwarf olive, lantana, *Myrtus boetica*, rosemary and sage.

Walkways and drives lined with trees or shrubbery create linear flow and symmetry. Examples of desert-adapted trees that lend themselves to a formal garden include *Acacia pendula*, African sumac, citrus, date palm, fruitless olive, live oak, Mexican orchid, ornamental pistachio and Texas ebony.

Even when creating a formal garden space, it's important not to ignore the relevance of the desert. By following some of the ideas outlined above, it is possible for nature and formality to live side by side. 🌵

Principal of T.M. Bankord Inc., Troy Bankord is an award-winning Valley landscape contractor, as well as an environmental and interior designer.