



balancing act

*My husband wants a succulent garden, but I prefer a formal one.
How do we compromise?*



Text by Troy Bankord • Illustration by Clint Miller

Specimen plants such as agaves, aloes, cacti and succulents can be combined successfully with formal plantings. As you shape your garden, and as it evolves, you can strike a balance between casual and structured elements. Window boxes, for example, are charming and somewhat formal. Filling them with succulents makes for an exciting, “balanced” combination.

In order to better understand these two different styles of gardens, the characteristics of a formal garden need to be addressed. Roses, topiaries and hedges are common elements in formal landscapes. Hedges are trimmed in circular, square or linear patterns, while many other plantings are trained and trimmed into individual spheres, cones or cubes. In addition, symmetry often is present in formal gardens, with pairs of pots, trees, topiaries or espaliered plantings flanking doors and windows, and punctuating stairs, terraces and views.

To create a garden that will make you both happy, keep the following thoughts and ideas in mind:

- The front entry sets the tone for the theme of your home and garden. Therefore, framing the entry door with container plants helps make a statement. Consider planting matching topiaries in pots and then underplanting them with such succulents as elephant food, burro tail or ice plant. English ivy and geraniums can be intermixed as well, as they also like to dry out between waterings.

- Use the contrast between formal and informal plantings to create drama. Try lining a walkway or driveway with clipped hedges and planting a row of aloes or agaves in the foreground. Or, simply grow succulents in formal ornamental planters to achieve the same effect.

- Larger gravel, such as three-quarter-inch or 1-inch decomposed granite, will give a garden a more formal feel, as opposed to half-inch or quarter-inch pieces, which lend a more organic, or natural, feel.

- To create continuity, the casual and formal qualities of the garden should flow into outdoor accessories as well. When it comes to patio furniture, for instance, choose bulky iron pieces with clean lines, then utilize cushions with a dual stripe or formal floral print in jewel or earth tones, rather than pastels.

Succulents appreciate afternoon shade and light daily waterings in dry summer months. During monsoon season, water every two to three days, depending on temperature and humidity levels. Also keep watering schedules in mind when intermixing succulents with formal plantings.

It's important that each of you enjoys your garden, even if you have different tastes. By maintaining a balance between the different styles you each prefer, the result will be a harmonious one. 🌿

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