

## More on the Formal/Informal Garden Question

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In the article called '*How Formal Should Your Garden Be?*' Jeff Howes links the level of maintenance undertaken in a garden to "the degree of formality or neatness of the garden". I must say I'd never thought of formality in terms of maintenance, although I take his point that to some extent the neatness of a garden contributes to its manicured and formal appearance. I think that maintenance is needed in both formal and informal gardens but the maintenance regime will necessarily have its differences. Both gardens will need to be kept weed free but some kinds of pruning will occur exclusively, or almost exclusively, in a formal garden - and this type of pruning results in hedges and topiary.

Jeff Howes identifies something that gives an element of formality to any garden - lawn. Mind you if the lawn was replaced by paving or gravel then this would increase the formality as these hard surfaces are even further removed from what is naturalistic. Jeff thinks what happens where a garden bed meets the lawn - the maintenance of the edge of the garden bed - whether the shrubs are clipped to the edge of the lawn - is a "key factor" in how formal a garden is. To me what makes a garden more or less formal is the choice, and most particularly the arrangement, of plants in geometric shapes and straight lines. The pruning regime then assists in keeping the formal shape and order.

Formal gardens seem to be an extension of the built environment - they relate more to building structures than to nature. They are also generally simpler - usually there are fewer plant varieties used and there will be a great deal of repetition and massing of plants to achieve simple lines - straight or curved - and shapes. There is quite a static element in a formal garden which may in the best examples make a garden restful, in a Zen kind of way, but too often the designs are simplistic, the choice of plants predictable and the result is dull and boring. I often feel that once you have seen a formal garden you have seen it and there is no reason to go back for seconds as nothing will have changed.

For me it is really not a question of should we have formal Australian plant gardens as some people will choose to use Australian plants to create a formal garden. The interesting question is whether it is possible to develop an identifiable formal Australian design style, or will any Australian plant garden merely be imitative of e.g. an Italian garden style. Is it possible that our courtyard gardens, connected to inner urban living and outdoor eating/entertaining, are producing, or could produce, a unique Australian garden style - that is, if Australian plants are employed for the purpose.