

Use creative design and plant selection to infuse gardens with a sense of movement and vitality.

creating a moving experience

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
KAREN BUSSOLINI

SOME GARDENS are gorgeous to look at, yet static and devoid of energy, like an attractive stage set before the actors emerge. Others entice you with an almost magnetic pull, an invitation to enter and explore. They have a palpable sense of motion, offer cues to the pace of your passage, and keep you wondering what you'll find around the next corner. Even a small garden can be dynamic both to look at and to move through. From my experience, the most exciting gardens employ a combination of plants that move in the wind or have a lively habit and design elements that provide a sense of flow.

DIRECTING THE FLOW

Like the art of dance, gardens and landscapes are three dimensional; they unfold over time and have rhythm. But in order to visualize how the components of a garden direct us through that space, I find it helpful to first think in two dimensions, like a plan view drawn on paper.

The primary lines that direct us through a landscape are made by paths and edges, by walls, fences, and other built structures, by massed plantings, and by the boundaries between positive and negative space, especially lawn. It's easy to see that a hard-edged path is a strong element leading through a landscape. Straight paths are going somewhere in a hurry, the shortest distance between two points. For example, the sidewalk leading straight from street curb to front door leaves no doubt about where a visitor should go.

Landscape designers often use perspective—narrowing paths or spaces to funnel the view—as a means to entice visitors into and through gardens. A well-known example of this is the main axis of the garden at the Palace of Versailles outside Paris, which is a precisely delineated opening about the width of a football field set



between parallel walls of trees. When viewed from the palace, the axis appears to narrow into the distance. The eye is naturally drawn to that far away point and the feet want to follow.

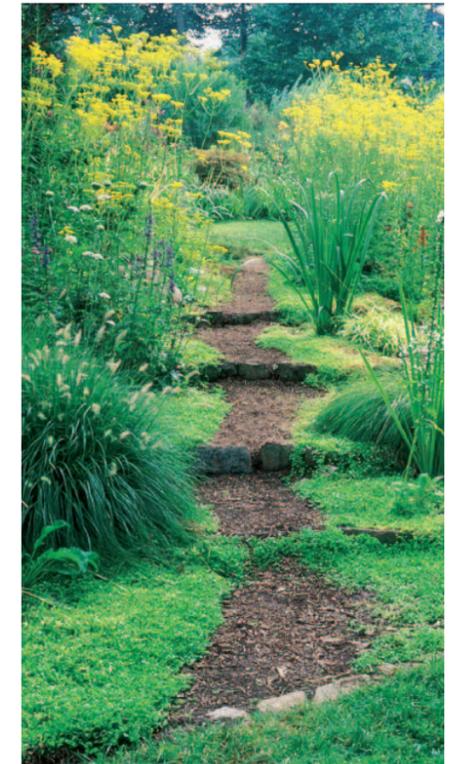
Different kinds of lines move us through space in different ways. Edges—of beds, paving, structures, and other features—can be soft or sharply delineated, built or planted, meandering, offset or

strongly directional. They can disappear and reappear farther away, leaving us to connect them visually, or direct us where to go and then change direction. Diagonals always seem more dynamic and exciting than straight-on axial paths and borders. Curves create an appealing sense of flow, inviting us to slow down and look at the garden. Curves often follow or enhance topography, and they can be used

to conceal what lies ahead, so our curiosity keeps us moving.

How quickly visitors move through a garden can be influenced by the size and shape of the curves. Pamela Frost edged her Vancouver, British Columbia, backyard with deep, curving beds of perennials stepped up to shrubs stepped up to trees on the property lines. The beds' long, slow curves define a lawn that flows

like a wide, lazy river looping on and on until it goes out of sight beyond a bend. The powerful flow of the grass river is irresistible. Taller plants concealing what is around each bend make you want to drift downstream to see what garden wizardry is just out of sight. This strong motion and concealing of boundaries makes the small property seem larger and enormously intriguing.



Left: Long curves and stepped-up plantings create a strong, smooth flow in Pamela Frost's small Vancouver, British Columbia, backyard. **Above:** This narrow dirt path at Chanticleer garden in Pennsylvania entices visitors with its childlike whimsicality.

By contrast, a narrow dirt footpath squiggling down a series of inclines and stone risers at Chanticleer garden in Wayne, Pennsylvania, was so whimsical that it made me want to giggle and skip along its short passage. Upslope from this lighthearted path, a wide bed of thyme calmly arcs across and down a steep hill. The bed's strong, clean upper edge emphatically moves the eye along the downward curve, calling attention to the curve of the hillside above.

MOVEMENT THROUGH MATERIALS

Creative garden designers often use different kinds of stone or other materials in gardens as cues to direct where and how fast visitors move. For instance, you can

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walk anywhere, look up and enjoy the long view from a grass path because you don't have to think about your feet. But crossing a stream on individual stepping stones or walking a path of uneven stones or pavers that skitter off sideways requires more deliberation. Surfaces and patterns that signal you to slow down this way invite you to experience the garden more intimately and notice finer details.

The varied patterns in Japanese gardens and Chinese scholars' gardens paved with stepping stones, river rocks, and roof tiles set on edge keep you meandering. Walking barefoot, you can literally feel the direction signals as you go. A stone path with grain lines running the long way—or a gravel path raked down its length—will exert a stronger pull than one in which the grain runs crossways. Laying long, thin stones in the direction of the path accelerates movement; setting them crosswise slows the pace. Varying the pattern by doing both is a playful way to visually enliven the surface and set the feet

Resources

Home Outside: Creating the Landscape You Love

by Julie Moir Messervy. The Taunton Press, Newtown, Connecticut, 2009.

"Paths of Discovery" by Kris Wetherbee. *The American Gardener*, Volume 86, No. 1. January/February 2007.

way seem more like a garden terrace, it still leads directly to a double-wide garage door. The owner, who loves Japanese gardens, interrupted the driveway with an irregular stream of gravel running across the front of the house. This cross-current diverts attention away from the garage and gently sweeps you into intimate garden spaces alongside and behind the house.

A gardener I know in Connecticut similarly directs traffic from house to garden by breaking up the grid of a bluestone ter-

forms, colors, or plants—keeps the eye leaping along. A colonnade marches in a regular progression, while trunks of limbed-up trees along a woodland edge might dance to an irregular beat.

Repeated colors or plants—soft mounds of silver plants, patches of eye-catching gold, or zingy red blossoms scattered throughout a long border—encourage visitors to connect the dots and move on at a more leisurely and irregular pace than evenly spaced boxwood balls or urns that march in orderly procession.

Contrasting elements can also trigger movement. We want to move from darkness into the light, from enclosed spaces to open areas. Warm colors in the distance pull us away from cool colors around us, and active textures are enhanced by the contrast with still textures. Focal points direct our attention, as do framed views and borrowed views of scenes outside the garden. Even sound (the splash of a fountain) and scent (the aroma of pine trees on a warm summer day) invite us to move on to find the source.

PLANTS THAT MOVE

We think of plants as being stationary, but there are lots of excellent plants that overtly offer movement in the garden, from tall ornamental grasses to weeping willows. Plants that provide motion are particularly valuable in winter, when we are most in need of interesting elements to make up for the absence of bright colors and other sensory pleasures.

I could spend all day watching the dainty seedheads of *Deschampsia flexuosa* bobbing or the flowers of poppies (*Papaver* spp.) and gaura (*Gaura lindheimeri*) dipping and swaying as they catch the breeze. Mexican feather grass (*Nassella tenuissima*), fine as baby hair, and delicate love grass (*Eragrostis* spp.) appear to constantly undulate even when it's difficult to detect any wind. In southwestern gardens, the long leaf blades of Mexican grass tree (*Dasyllirion longissimum*) and some yuccas (*Yucca* spp.) remind me of kinetic sculptures. (For a list of additional plants that add life to gardens, view the web special linked to this article on the AHS website at www.ahs.org.)

Less obvious sources of movement are what I call "gestural" plants, which look like they are moving even when

they're not. Some are strongly directional and can be used to enhance a sense of flow. For instance, the graceful Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra*) aligns itself in a way that evokes water streaming downhill—or cascading like a waterfall as it does in the Elisabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden in Seattle, Washington. Its cultivars 'Aureola' and 'Albovariegata' have racing stripes that heighten the impression.

I've found it instructional and kind of fun to try to imitate with my hands the actions plants seem to make with their forms. I started doing this impulsively one evening while strolling around Chanticleer garden. First I encountered a pot of floppy elephant ears (*Alocasia* spp.) with blooming papyrus (*Cyperus papyrus*) that shot up into the air and reminded me so much of exploding fireworks that I expected to hear a loud "ka-pow." Next was a roiling sea of prairie dropseed grass (*Sporobolus heterolepis*), which required two hands to mimic.



A cross-current of gravel through the stonework guides visitors in this Austin, Texas, garden.

moving. A jazzy syncopated or undulating paving pattern in a terrace might move without actually going anywhere at all.

Changes in material, pattern, or direction cue us to move in different ways. An Austin, Texas, garden I admire has a short driveway composed of exquisitely fitted irregular limestone slabs. Although the artistic stonework makes the drive-

race with a diagonal swath of randomly laid stones. (For more on use of different materials and styles for paths, see "Paths of Discovery," in "Resources," above.)

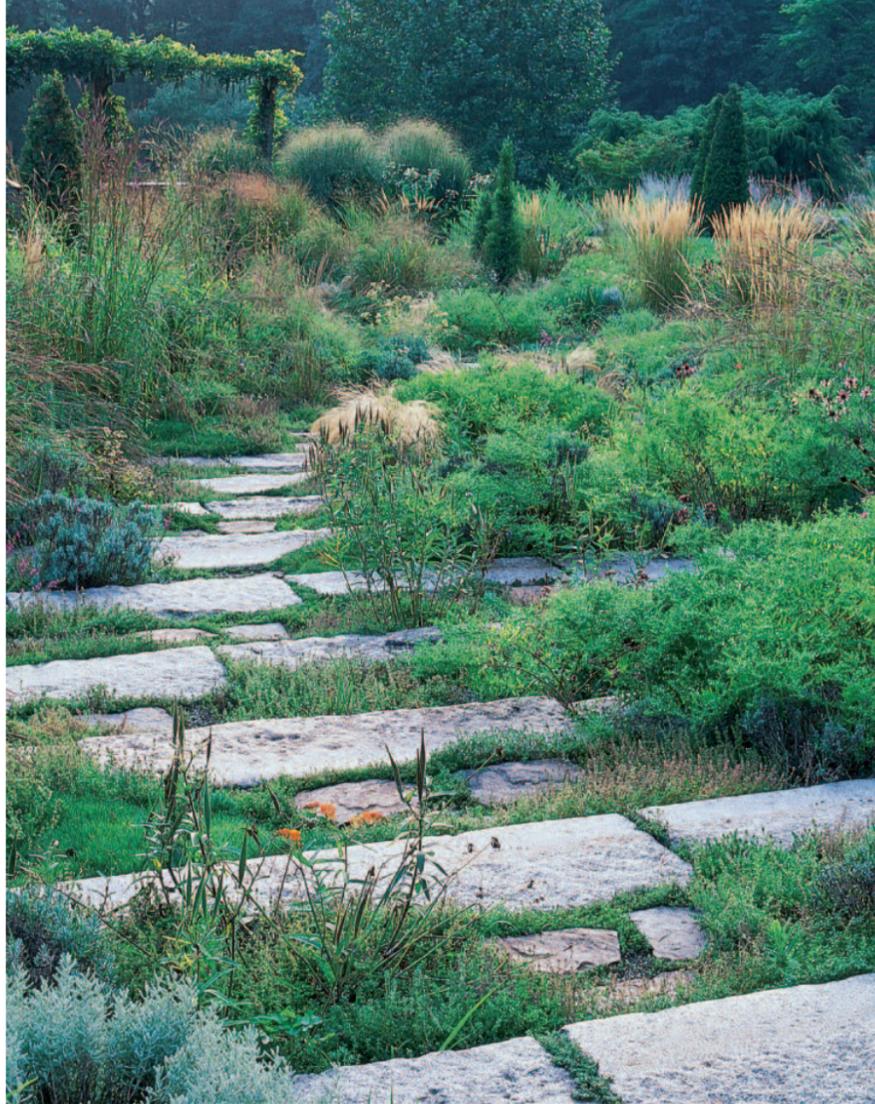
MORE WAYS TO MOVE

Many other design devices and sensory cues enhance a sense of movement through space. Repetition—of shapes,



Top: Wind transforms Mexican grass tree (*Dasyllirion longissimum*) at Peckerwood Garden in Texas into kinetic sculpture. Above: A waterfall of Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola') at the Elisabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden in Seattle, Washington.

Observing energetic plants makes me appreciate their expressive qualities. Japanese roof iris (*Iris tectorum*) isn't just fan-shaped, its leaves fan out actively, positively rocketing from the base. Corkscrew rush (*Juncus effusus* forma *spiralis*) isn't just curly-looking, it coils, springs, and almost goes "boing." Maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*) swirls, *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus' erupts like a fountain. Others remind me of dance movements. Tiger-eye sumac (*Rhus typhina* 'Bailtiger') recalls a sideways-slashing leap across the stage, an old leaning apple tree with branches extending horizontally suggests balletic movement, as do Japanese maple trunks or branches of *Fagus sylvatica* 'Dawyck' as they sinuously weave in and out.



Above: A strong diagonal line toward framed and concealed views pulls you on, but the syncopated beat of stone steps and stepping-stones requires deliberation and attention to intimate plantings at Chanticleer. Left: To the author, *Rhus typhina* 'Bailtiger' evokes the motions of a dancer.

Water metaphors can be put to good use in the garden to encourage the feeling of motion. For instance, groupings of 'Grey Owl' juniper (*Juniperus virginiana*) recall a tossing gray sea, and masses of Siberian cypress (*Microbiota decussata*) interspersed with the white flowers and silver foliage of *Cerastium tomentosum* remind me of breaking surf around boulders or on top of a stone wall, especially when covered with dew.

CHOREOGRAPHING THE MOVEMENT

The evening stroll I took through the gardens at Chanticleer gave me a lot of ideas about movement in the garden. One particular section of the garden provided an inspired example of how design cues, materials, and plants can be combined to orchestrate movement and direct attention.

I started on a wide grass path beside a woodland garden, with trees tall and dark to my left. Shrubs along the woodland edge got progressively shorter as the path swept downhill and curved to the right. Open sky ahead and to the right provided additional impetus to move from dark to light, but tall swaying grasses obscured those views, except for distant tree tops. A series of curving beds to the right squeezed the path into a narrower strait, where it picked up speed and disappeared around a curve. Curiosity moved me on.

A completely different experience unfolded around the corner. Suddenly there were massive cut stone steps and stepping-stones in syncopated combination veering off across a steep grade ahead under an open sky. Various tall ornamental grasses obscured the top of a tall retaining wall below, while the open "window" of a per-

gola framed the now not-so-distant view of trees backing still unseen gardens at the very bottom of the hill. Throughout the passage, I got only tantalizing glimpses of the gardens and vistas that lay ahead, keeping me moving while at the same time appreciating all that was going on around me.

Gardens like that engage the entire body and all its senses. They move us, physically and emotionally, and transcend the ordinary, making the garden experience an adventure. Why be content with a static garden if you can create something that is alive and full of energy?

Karen Bussolini is a writer and photographer based in Connecticut. Her most recent book collaboration was with author Penelope O'Sullivan on The Homeowner's Complete Tree and Shrub Handbook (Storey Press, 2008).