

'Formality is not my scene at all'. This is such a banal and boring remark that it hardly registers with us when we hear it. We all like 'natural', don't we? Of course – it sounds healthy, good and well, natural. It's what people say, and we hardly notice they've spoken.

In this instance the speaker went on to describe his natural garden, which comprised lots of rockeries (natural in the Alps?). If such a thing could ever be possible, this is a rather old fashioned kind of natural. More recent, contemporary natural comprises things like Teletubby annual meadows, naturalistic or ecological gardens and prairie gardens (natural once upon a time in parts of America, as long as the indigenous population set fire to them regularly).

I think this preoccupation with natural is also why we get those dreadful wiggly edges to borders of randomly planted flower beds and why I originally planted our orchard trees in a random scatter which has made mowing the orchard a nightmare. Indeed, I think it's why I mowed a rather wiggly line as a path through our meadow, until I saw that what was actually needed was a path straight down the middle, edged with clipped trees.

So, I have to accept that this is a confusing and almost meaningless term in relation to gardens, but I think in most people's minds it means not formal. The very idea of formal represents straight lines (horrors!), perhaps foreign (Villandry!?) and regimented (very unsexy). Nice people like cottage gardens and wildflowers, and are far too uninhibited and spontaneous to ever embrace formality. Which is all very strange when you



# Frightfully formal

**Why are we so against formality, wonders Anne Wareham?  
Maybe we need to think about it differently to appreciate it fully**



**“Pattern and symmetry cover a multitude of sins and provide an immediate impact”**

consider how we also love pattern, and how satisfying symmetry is to a great many people. Even those who decry symmetry will often delight in a balance between the 'weight' of different objects in relation to one another.

I recently visited a recreation of an Elizabethan garden at Kenilworth Castle. A particularly good

aspect of this garden, rather like the similar one at Aberglasney, is the viewing platform – a terrace that provides an overview of the entire garden. The garden is not especially wonderful; the 'marble' obelisks are painted and the paint is decayed and peeling, the beds feature rather tatty plants sitting bleakly in the usual depressing bare soil, and you rather wonder what the joy in wandering the gravel paths was ever supposed to be. And now, in a plant obsessed era, most people must regard it as a total waste of time. Nothing unusual or even (hurray) labelled here.

But the view from above was

instantly pleasing. This is the ideal way to see most public gardens, perhaps, where inspired planting and careful maintenance is rare. Pattern and symmetry cover a multitude of sins and provide an immediate impact; and, with that, a reminder of how enjoyable a straight line, repetition of design elements and plants, a sparse plant palette and a predominantly green colour theme can be. Then just add a few fun elements like a fountain which depicts scenes which led spectators to be so 'hot in desire' as to require a surprise soaking from the fountain to calm them down (don't get excited – it's a few nudes).

I had never seen so clearly before what a multitude of sins formality can make forgivable. Poor planting and messy gardening in a muddled design is miserable, no matter how many unusual plants you may get to add to your ever lengthening list. A touch of formality and pattern does at the least offer one real pleasure.

## ABOUT ANNE WAREHAM



Anne Wareham's book, *The Bad Tempered Gardener* is the story of the creation with her husband, Charles Hawes, of their garden in the Welsh borders, the Veddw. Anne also writes for the Telegraph, garden magazines and her own blog on the Veddw website, [www.veddw.com](http://www.veddw.com). She is editor of [www.thinkinggardens.co.uk](http://www.thinkinggardens.co.uk).