SMALL GARDEN DESIGN FORMULA

HOW TO DESIGN ANY SMALL GARDEN, NO MATTER WHAT SIZE OR SHAPE

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SMALL GARDEN DESIGN FORMULA

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## SMALL GARDEN DESIGN FORMULA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 1 - The Magic Ingredient to a Great Looking Garden</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where to Start With Your Garden</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden Types</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Critical Key to Success</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 1 Quick Reference Re-cap</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2 - How to Design Your Garden</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ‘Shape First’ System Formula</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to Give an Existing Garden a Makeover</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2 Quick Reference Re-cap</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 3 - Designing Different Shape Gardens</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long Narrow Garden Formula</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wide Garden Formula</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Square Garden Formula</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awkward Shape Garden Formula</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L-Shape Garden Formula</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Clothing’ Your Garden - Choosing the Right Landscaping Materials</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## SMALL GARDEN DESIGN FORMULA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part 3 Quick Reference Re-cap</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 4 - Small Garden Design Tricks</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planting proportion</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planting</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Illusions of Size</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in Level</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Level Changes</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Vertical Interest</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 4 Quick Reference Re-cap</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 5 - Adding the ‘WOW’ to Your Garden</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Interest by Mixing Materials</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paving Patterns</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Paving Pattern Example Ideas</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Paving Pattern Examples</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adding a Feature Section</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Built-In Planters</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Features</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting Your Garden</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 5 Quick Reference Re-cap</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHEAT SHEETS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHEAT SHEETS</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You have a small garden - that’s great, rejoice! Small gardens are wonderful, you can do so much more with them than most other garden types. I know that may sound like an outlandish thing to say but I assure you it’s not.

If you’re feeling a little sceptical on just how wonderful small gardens are, let me explain. Large gardens tend to visually need large areas of open empty space so that they don’t look too cluttered. Intricate design details tend to get lost in large open areas. In a small garden, though, you can often put in a lot more design details because everything is so close at hand.

Now, as much as I dislike the over-used term ‘outside room’, for small gardens it is appropriate. So rather than being daunted by designing a small garden, just view it as decorating another room. That subtle shift in mindset will help you tackle it more easily because room decorating is already something you’re familiar with and can do. By the way, for our American readers, when I say ‘garden’ I mean your whole backyard, not just the plant borders.
CAN ANY GARDEN BE MADE BEAUTIFUL, NO MATTER HOW SMALL IT IS?

In a word, yes. Size actually isn’t as important a factor as you may think it is.

The most important part of any garden design, regardless of the size or shape of it, is how you arrange and utilise the space. We’ll cover this in detail later but basically you need to create design shapes that link the entire garden together in a way that makes it look and feel larger and more interesting. In a small garden, this is even more critical to do.

In the rest of this guide I’m going to show you how to utilise every last square inch of space, including vertical space. We’ll also look at how to create extra space with different levels as well as ways of using the right building materials to accentuate the space still further.
WHAT CONSTITUTES SMALL EXACTLY?

No two human beings have the exact same concept of what small is because everything is relative. A small garden to someone living in a rural area may seem massive to a city dweller with only a few square metres of roof terrace.

So, included in this book are a variety of different size and shape small gardens. If some of the example gardens are larger than your plot, you should still be able to adapt the ideas so to work with the size garden you have.

“THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF ANY GARDEN DESIGN IS HOW YOU UTILISE THE SPACE”
The mistake that most people make with their garden is to focus solely on the plants. The plants, though, are the very last thing you should think about in your garden.

Yes, I know it goes against everything you know about gardens. In one sense, you’re right - gardens ARE about plants. Garden design, however, isn’t solely about the plants.

Successful garden design is all about how you utilise the shape and space in the garden. Obviously plants do come into it, but only at the end. Think of it this way, “Plants are the icing on the cake, NOT the cake itself.”

“THE MISTAKE MOST PEOPLE MAKE WITH THEIR GARDEN IS FOCUS SOLELY ON THE PLANTS.”
WHY IS SHAPE SO IMPORTANT?

I’ve touched on this briefly in the introduction: the concept of correctly using the space in your garden. Now, at this stage, that might just sound like an awful lot of ‘designer babble’ and, yes, it is, so let me now explain what on earth it is I’m talking about.

The way you view a garden is basically the route your eyes take as you look at it. If you try to take in the whole garden with one glance, chances are it’s going to be quite boring. Ideally, you want to be able to go from one point of interest to another and experience an interesting visual journey. I know that may sound hard to achieve in a really small garden but, don’t worry, I’ll show you exactly how to do it.

With the right use of the space and the shape, you can control how the garden functions and looks. You can create lots of interest, make the garden feel bigger, and create a sense movement from one point to another. With really tiny gardens, creating a sense of movement may not be possible but you can certainly make the space look larger and more interesting.

So now that you know just how vital a good design shape is, even in really small gardens, let’s now get going with what to do with your garden.
The first part of the formula is to work out exactly what it is you want. If you’re muttering under your breath, “A bigger garden!” that’s fine; add it to your wish list. The point of the wish list is to find out what you really, really want. Whilst achieving everything may not be possible, you’ll be surprised how much you can achieve with a few cunning design tricks that I’ll show you later on in this course.

You might really want a half-acre plot where you can grow fruit and vegetables and have a secluded seating area for sipping your favourite beverage in. Your actual garden might be only a tenth of that size but that doesn’t mean to say you can’t achieve all of the things on your wish list, just on a much smaller scale. The point I want to make here is not to discount what you want just because your garden is small. In the rest of the Small Garden Design Formula, I’m going to show you how to utilise every last square inch of space, and achieve amazing results no matter how small your garden is.

Obviously if swimming pool and tennis court are on your wish list, that may be a tough one to do, but who knows, perhaps a hot tub and table tennis set will work instead!

“THE FIRST THING YOU NEED TO DO IS WORK OUT EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT.”

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I want you to allow yourself to fantasise about your dream garden. Let your imagination go and play with it. This is a creative process as well as logical and it’s important you allow it to happen. As adults we can often block creative processes with lists of why things can’t be done from lack of space, time, budget, expertise constraints to a whole host of other ‘can’ts’.

As children we were all creative beings, even if you’re silently telling yourself, “I wasn’t”. Trust me, you were. Designing your garden using nothing but logic will work, but it will be a million times better if you can let your creativity off the leash. To do that you need do what comes naturally to children - play.

If you’re shifting about uncomfortably in your chair now, don’t worry, I’m not suggesting you go outside with a bucket and spade and find the nearest sand pit. The play I want you to indulge in is the fantasy world of ‘What if I did this’... kids do this all the time. The world in their heads is much more interesting than what is actually around them and that’s the creativity I want you to tap into.

We will also cover practical and logical design techniques in addition to the ‘play’ part. A logical approach is as important as the creative one. No point in designing something ‘really creative’ that can’t be constructed or is totally impractical for everyday living.
GET INSPIRED

If you have no clue about what you want, it will help to look at some pictures of gardens. So, look through books and magazines and start a folder of gardens you like. Don’t limit your choices to the size garden you have. Just collect images that you like. You’ll often find that the elements or essences of what you like can be translated into a smaller form.

So, for the time being, just find what you like and make a note of it. There are also some picture galleries on the ideas page on the Successful Garden Design website you can view.
GARDEN TYPES

Now you’ve got an idea of what you like, you need to get specific and narrow down precisely what it is that draws you to certain gardens.

Is there a particular garden style that you like eg. modern, formal, cottage, natural, etc?

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NOW WHAT YOU WANT YET?

Now, at this stage, please don’t worry if you don’t know every last detail of what you want your finished garden to look like. You may have found that you liked lots of different styles of garden and didn’t have a particular ‘type’ that leapt out and said, “This is the one for me!”

Designing effectively is a bit like cooking. Some people will have a specific result they want to achieve, like a lasagne. They will find out which ingredients they need and then read up on how to put them together to get the desired results. That’s all fine and good, and works well.

However, there are those of us that like to do more experimental cooking. We like a lot of ingredients and are willing to mix and match, experiment and play with them a little. Now obviously we need to take a bit of care not to shove every last one of our favourite ingredients into the pot at once - a little restraint is a good thing here - but we can still create a wonderful end result, even if we didn’t know precisely what we were aiming for at the beginning.

The experimental cook gets away with their creative meals because they understand the principles of cooking and combining foods. The aim of this book is to give you an equally good understanding of how design works so you can emulate our creative chef’s skills with your garden. For those that like to follow recipes, don’t panic. The formula I’m going to teach you will be step-by-step, just like a recipe, and then you can decide how much you play with it to suit your needs.
THE CRITICAL KEY TO SUCCESS

If you’ve been skim reading up to now, apply the breaks and read this:

Regardless of the type of garden design you want, there is one thing that will really trip you up if you don’t get it right. Not working to scale. I know that may sound terrifyingly technical, but I promise it’s not.

A scale plan is just about getting your garden to fit onto a piece of paper in the right proportions. For example, if your tape measure says your left-hand boundary is 5.60m long, then at a metric scale of 1:100 you would draw a line 5.60cm on the paper. The imperial equivalent of that is 1/8" = 1’0”.

You might think you’re garden is so small that there’s really no point in measuring it, it’s a waste of your time putting it on paper properly. It isn’t. What will be a waste of you time (and most likely money) is not working from an accurate scale plan.

In a well-designed garden, EVERYTHING interlinks. If you change one thing, it will have a knock on effect to everything else in the garden. So, if, when you’re at the point of building the garden and you have to change something in order to get it to fit, the whole design will be affected (and not usually in a good way).

Working from a scale drawing allows you to check that your ideas will work BEFORE you build them. It takes the guesswork out of the process. If it works on paper it WILL work in real life. Trial and error gardening is an expensive hobby and very rarely brings the desired results.
So think of your garden like a living jigsaw. The size and shape of each piece from your patio or deck to lawn is critical to the success of the overall picture. You (hopefully) wouldn’t dream of hacking bits off some jigsaw pieces to ‘get it to fit’. The same applies to the elements of your garden!

OK, I’m nearly done on the importance scale, but there are two last things to mention. One thing that will come to light when you’ve measured your garden and put it on paper is the shape. You might think that your garden is a perfect square or rectangle but very few actually are. You’ll often discover angles that you never knew were there.

So you may well discover that one or several of your boundary fences are at an angle to the house. These will affect your design and needs to be taken into account whilst designing, no matter how subtle and unimportant they may initially appear.

The final thing I want to mention in favour of having your garden plan to scale is it will enable you or your landscape contractor to not only accurately build the garden but also order the correct quantity of materials because you can measure it straight off the drawing, rather than trying to guess how many paving slabs to buy.
I could fill this entire book with the mishaps I’ve witnessed when people either haven’t bothered to measure their garden or have measured it, but incorrectly. I’ve also had a few mishaps of my own; so I can speak from personal experience here.

When I was 19, before I trained to do this professionally, I designed my first garden (for my brave parents) and I could not be bothered to measure the garden because I was lazy and also didn’t know how important it was to do... Let’s just say on that one, please don’t be as daft/optimistic as that 19-year-old and go get a tape measure already!

Included as part of this Small Garden Design Formula is the ‘How to Survey Your Garden Mini-Course’. This will cover everything you need to know to correctly measure your garden and draw a scale plan. Go check it out now!
PART 1 QUICK REFERENCE RE-CAP:

1. Work out what you want – get inspired and don’t limit your ideas at this stage.

2. Measure your garden as accurately as you can.

3. Draw a scale plan of your garden – vital to do if you want good results!
People often feel stuck with one or several of the following issues with their garden: the size, the shape or the existing layout. Something that might surprise you is that none of those things matter. The garden design formula I will show you works regardless of those things.

In this part we’re going to look at exactly how design works. Then, later on in the design formula we’ll look at the specifics of how to modify it to work with whatever shape or size of garden you have.

As we’ve touched upon already, the real key to creating a great looking garden is how you arrange the areas of ‘empty’ space within it. By empty, I mean the areas you can walk on like deck, patio or lawn etc. Most people do their gardens the other way round. They start with the ‘stuff’ like plants and features; then the areas that are left are usually lawn or patio. In order to successfully create a great looking garden you need to shift your thinking 360 degrees and start by shaping the empty bits, then the areas that are left are where your plants and features go.

If you have a fairly established garden and are now wondering how on earth you can start afresh like this, don’t worry; we’ll cover how you do that as well. Like I said earlier, it really doesn’t matter what is in your existing garden now.

So I guess it’s now time I prove that and show you precisely what you do need to do...
Now I know you are keen to get going with your garden but you'll get much better results if you are prepared to have a few ‘test runs’ at designing first. So, to really demonstrate how design works I’d like you to grab a sheet of paper and a pencil and follow along...

No need to panic, I promise this will quick and painless and no artistic skill whatsoever required. On your sheet of paper draw a large box shape, either a square or rectangle - no need for it to be perfect. Draw it totally freehand and if it’s the worst drawn thing you’ve ever seen on paper, that’s absolutely fine!

For those of you who like to skim-read a book first, then come back and do this type of stuff later, I strongly advise you don’t do that this time. It will be much more effective if you do it now. Otherwise it’s a bit like reading the end of novel first - the carefully constructed plot isn’t nearly as effective when you know the ending. Entirely up to you, it’s your course after all, but don’t say I didn’t warn you!

Now in the square or rectangle you’ve drawn, I want you to draw 2 similar shapes that interlock as shown in the pictures on the next page. The shapes should be really simple, either box shapes or circles - again no precision whatsoever is necessary. Precision at this point is an impairment, not an asset, you'll see why in just a moment.
Now on your shape at the bottom of the paper, write the word ‘patio’ and on the other shape, write ‘lawn’. Then take a look at the spaces that are on the outside of your main shapes; these areas are where you put your plants and features.

If you are looking at your sheet of paper with a horror-stricken face because what you’ve drawn so far would never make a great design in a million years, don’t worry. It’s not meant to at this stage. What I want you to see is the reverse process of shaping the space before you even think about putting in plants or a pergola.

So far we’ve only covered one design principle: Shape. There are layers to a good design. One principle alone does not a good design make. The shape is THE most important one to get right but the other principles make it work properly.

So, let’s take what you’ve done and make it work better by adding another layer into the design process. For those of you that couldn’t help yourselves and did the exercise using a ruler, you’re now going to see why that wasn’t necessary!

“THERE ARE LAYERS TO A GOOD DESIGN. ONE PRINCIPLE ALONE DOES NOT A GOOD DESIGN MAKE.”
When I asked you to draw two interlocking shapes, one thing I did not do was to specify the size of the shapes. The reason is I want to demonstrate each principle separately and too much information in one go makes things much harder to learn.

Now you’ve had your first experience of shaping the empty parts first, you’re probably already seeing the impact the size of the shapes you’ve drawn makes.

So what I’d like you to do now is to look at the shapes you’ve drawn now that they are labelled lawn and patio (if your garden is way too small for a lawn, please still play along as this exercise will still be very relevant to you when you start to design). Now notice how much space is left for the planting.

Are the areas outside your lawn and patio shapes looking too big or too small in relation to the shapes you’ve drawn?

Don’t worry if you can’t immediately answer that question, I’ll give you a ratio to help you shortly. In the meantime, take an eraser and rub out the first shapes you’ve drawn and then experiment re-drawing them larger and smaller.

Now look at the drawing again and notice how the larger and smaller size shapes affect the areas on the outside that are left for the plants. Are you getting a better sense of which size worked the best?
Did a particular size look like or ‘felt’ like it worked better? If you’re saying, “Yes, the very first one I drew!” you’re a smart Alec, well done, you’re a natural when it comes to proportion! For the rest of us, though, it probably took a bit of tinkering with before it looked right.

“THE DESIGN SHAPES YOU USE MUST BE IN THE RIGHT PROPORTION TO EACH OTHER AND THE GARDEN TO WORK.”
WHAT IF NONE OF THE SIZES LOOKED RIGHT?

I’m going to give you that ratio I mentioned earlier. Now, this isn’t something that is set in stone, which is why I wanted you to experience the effects different sizes make before I let you loose with it. It’s not set in stone because different gardens and people have different needs, which we’ll cover later, but this ratio is certainly a good starting point.

As a guide, you need to allow approximately three-quarters empty space to filled areas. So your lawn, patio, deck and open areas of gravel should take up approximately three-quarters of your garden, the rest should be filled with plants and features. The illustration on the right highlights this proportion. Which looks right to you - A, B or C?

If you picked Option B, you were right. If you didn’t, take another look now that you know the proportion ratio. Now you know which one is correct, can you see it more clearly?

We’ll talk about manipulating that ratio to suit your needs later on when we look at small garden design tricks in Part 4.
ONE LAST IMPORTANT PART TO PROPORION

As well as the proportion of the overall size of your garden, each feature you add must also be in proportion to everything around it and in proportion to the people that use the garden.

For example, if you have a pergola, you need to make sure that it not only looks good in proportion with the garden but it also has to work with you. If you are six feet tall (1.80m) and the pergola is six-and-a-half feet tall, it’s going to feel very uncomfortable to walk under, especially when the plants start to hang down from the beams.

If you make the pergola seven feet high (2.10m), you also need to make sure it’s wide enough to take the height. For example, a pergola or archway that is three feet wide (1m) and seven feet tall (2.10m) would look too tall and skinny. Whereas a width of four to five feet (1.20-1.50m) would look more in proportion to the height. So bear this type of proportion in mind when adding any vertical features to your design.
It’s all well and good showing you how to shape the space when a garden is virtually empty, but what about gardens that do have existing plants and features?

If you are keeping your patio area and lots of plants in borders that are well established, but somehow the garden just doesn’t seem to work as well as you’d hoped, then what?

Well, the good news is everything you have learnt thus far is relevant; you just have a few more things to manoeuvre around.
In order for a garden to work well, it has to work as one whole unit. If you remember back to our very first design principle, Shape, we discussed the importance of viewing the garden as a whole entity. This is critical for any design. Just because you have existing elements in your garden doesn’t mean they should be in any way separate from the changes you make as the garden develops.

Survey the garden and draw up a scale plan. Then, once you have everything plotted onto paper and can see an aerial view of the garden, take a look at the empty spaces.

Are there clearly defined spaces, or an irregular smattering of plants and features dotted about? If you have lots of things dotted about without much clarity, you have half the answer. What you need to do is to work out how to bring clarity and balance into the garden.

You may see what needs to be done the moment you put it on paper. If that isn’t the case, try to detach from what is there now. Don’t think about all your favourite plants in the border on the right hand side that you do not want to touch.

Be objective - is what is there on the paper working? And if not, why not? You need to be honest with yourself first, then work out what you can do. If you are totally against moving something, that’s fine. Just because something isn’t working, doesn’t necessarily mean you have to move it; re-shaping and linking into other features often works well.
There are occasions when something simply is in the wrong place. Then it comes down to a judgement call; can and do you want to live with whatever the ‘it’ is that’s in the wrong place?

The example shown on the right is a simple makeover. The patio and main shrub borders have stayed in place. The lawn has been shaped and has a brick edge to define the shape. One shrub border has been trimmed back a bit on the right hand side.

A few stepping stones link the patio to the newly shaped lawn and a bench has been added as a focal point in front of the large shrub border on the top left.

At a later date, the patio could be re-done and perhaps a semi-circle shape could be cut into the lawn to add more interest and shape. But for a makeover which has only involved re-shaping the lawn, removing a few shrubs and adding some features, it’s totally transformed the look and feel of the garden.

It really can be as simple as re-shaping your lawn and borders that can create a dramatic improvement to how your garden looks. It’s easy to underestimate just how important shaping the space is, it really does account for 60% of garden design success, if not more.
The modern courtyard plan on the right shows how simple box shapes have created the design. The areas that are left either side of the boxes are where the plants go. In this garden, added interest is created by making the left-over shapes raised planters.

OK, what’s next? Well, you now know the first two big heavyweight hitters of garden design, ‘Shape’ and ‘Proportion’. There’s a third big bruiser called ‘Movement’ that will be your bestest buddy when it comes to making your small garden look and feel wider and longer.

The next part will demonstrate ‘Movement’ in action with a selection of small garden plans. The designs will also be ‘de-constructed’ so you can see the underlying shapes and how they affect the perception of space and create movement.

“IT’S EASY TO UNDERESTIMATE JUST HOW IMPORTANT SHAPING THE SPACE IS...”
PART 2 QUICK REFERENCE RE-CAP:

1. PRACTICE DESIGNING WITH SHAPES FIRST. USE SIMPLE GEOMETRIC SHAPES FOR THE LAWN / PATIO / DECKING & GRAVEL AREAS.

2. THEN GET THE PROPORTION RIGHT WITH YOUR DESIGN SHAPES - APPROX 3/4 ‘EMPTY’ SPACE TO PLANTS AND FEATURES.

3. INTERLINK SHAPES LIKE BOXES OR CIRCLES, EXPERIMENT WITH DIFFERENT SIZES & SEE HOW IT IMPACTS THE SPACE.
The overall shape of your garden isn’t as important as you think it is. However, what you do with that shape is. What I mean by that is don’t feel limited by the overall shape of your garden, it’s not an issue. If it’s long and narrow, we can make it look and feel wider. If it’s short and wide, we can make it look and feel longer. What’s important is how we go about doing those things.

In the last chapter I mentioned how important movement is to creating a great garden, and it’s especially vital in a small space. So what exactly do I mean by movement? Well, it simply means a way of using shapes and key features so that your eyes journey down the garden in a certain way, from one point of interest to another. This visual ‘journey’ can make a garden feel a lot larger because you’re not taking in the entire garden with one glance.

To show you what I mean, take a look at the plan pictures on the right hand side of the next page. The red line shows how the side-to-side movement from the arrangement of shapes, directs your eyes down the garden.
For the keen eyed amongst you, yes, this is the garden featured on the front cover. The square and circular paving sections make the garden look wider by taking the eye from side to side from one point of interest to another as shown by the red outline and ‘movement’ line down the centre of the garden.

In the following section are some more examples of movement and designing using simple shapes. I’ve divided the examples into categories of long, wide, square and awkward shape gardens. Next to each example plan is a deconstructed design with red lines showing the design shapes with direction arrows highlighting how the shapes affect the look and feel of the garden.
This small garden looks much larger because the paving pattern and careful use of rectangular ‘boxes’ in the design trick the eyes into thinking there’s more width and length in the garden.

The plants are quite ‘jungly’ looking but they are contained in quite narrow borders to stop them escaping and taking over the entire garden.

Rendering the small segment of wall at the end of the garden helps lighten that end and reflect light back. The wall mask makes a nice focal point on the cream wall at the end of the garden.

The red lines show how the design shapes make the space look larger and the visual route through the garden.
This small, modern town garden needed to look both wider and longer because it is viewed from two different aspects from the house. This was achieved with the use of carefully positioned rectangles of decking and paving. The direction of the decking made the garden look longer and the paving made it look and feel wider because of the direction the slabs were laid (this trick will be covered in more detail later in Part 4).

The raised rendered planters add height and interest and prevent the entire garden from being viewed in one go which also increases the sense of space. The built-in seating also functions as storage boxes with the deck slats on hinges for easy access.
Here are two designs for the same garden. Both designs lead the eye from side to side and have several focal points to create an interesting visual journey.

Small terracotta tiles, laid diagonally, also help make the space look wider and larger because of the angle and number of tiles. Large paving in small gardens will always make an area look smaller.

The mix of materials and upright structures make this small garden a lively and exciting space to be in.
This simple mix of rectangular paving with a central circle feature makes the garden feel both longer and wider.

The plants help screen the end of the garden and this inability to see the entire garden with one glance adds to sense of space. Partially interrupting a view will make the garden look longer than it is.
This free-flowing serpent shape makes the garden look wider by drawing the eyes to follow the shape around the garden. This curvaceous path leads to a secluded seating area and a slate water feature. The seating area is partially hidden by the use of posts curving around the decking. A slate drift path winds its way through the decking to the water feature, adding continuity and interest.
Two designs for this garden. The first one using terracotta tiles with the path on the left leading up to the shed and deck area.

The inclusion of a path does use up a lot of valuable space but with frequent access to the shed required, there had to be a compromise.

The lawn shape and path shape help steer the eyes towards the deck.

The second design is similar to the first one with the exception of the path on the right this time. The lawn is a simpler shape but the path shape helps create some movement in the design.

The small paving will help make the area look larger.
The landscaping the builders left, a plane patio and path, made this long garden look very narrow.

There wasn’t enough space to use a full circle or oval shape so this ‘D’ shape lawn and path was put in to lead the eye round the garden. The path is both functional and attractive to look at and makes the garden look much wider. Plants will soften the hard lines of the shape over time.
Thank you for downloading this sample of the Small Garden Design Formula. There's also a sample video that can be viewed on the website: http://www.successfulgardendesign.com/small-garden-design-formula-media-sample-page

The full content is 97 pages with four main videos, a photo gallery of small garden ideas and includes the How to Survey Your Garden mini-course.

If you have any questions about the Small Garden Design Formula or would like additional images, please get in touch with Rachel using the media contact page on the website: http://www.successfulgardendesign.com/media/

Please link articles to the main page on the website http://www.successfulgardendesign.com/small-garden-design-course/ or the website homepage www.successfulgardendesign.com

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BIO
Rachel Mathews has been an international garden designer for over 20 years. In that time she has designed every conceivable of garden. Rachel is passionate that the average garden can and should be so much more than average and teaches how people can transform their own garden at Successful Garden Design. She has created a range of easy to follow online garden design courses which help complete beginners as well as more experienced gardeners create their dream garden.

Rachel is also a best-selling author in the Kindle Store. She's written a series of garden design books that can be downloaded from most Amazon stores. Visit her Amazon author page to find out more.