

# Colorful, formal, stunning

**S**troll leisurely along this smooth stone path in the sunshine, enjoy the beauty of the colorful flowers and take a deep breath to enjoy the fragrance of roses and other sweet-smelling flowers. This is a garden you can enjoy with all your senses.

Formal gardens may have a reputation for being stuffy and dull but Mary Ellen Guffey's zone 9 California backyard uses the best of this design style and adds

a touch of cottage garden exuberance for a space that's beautiful in every season.

Maintenance here isn't a chore; it's an anticipated break from the work day, made easier by the design and hardscaping — smooth paths and a wall that cuts down on the need for critter control. Let's take a look at the details that make this garden so special and find some ideas that you can use in yours.

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## LONG-LASTING COLOR

You don't need exotic plants to get splashes of bold color — go with easy-growing annuals, like these petunias (*Petunia* hybrids) in pots and in the ground.







▲ Take a seat on the patio and you might notice that the lower terrace of the garden slopes away, leaving the fountain and borrowed view beyond the wall to take center stage.

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**Colorful layout** At about 50 by 70 ft., this isn't a large backyard, but the view from the back patio looking out over the garden in the photo above sure packs a punch. This sloping south-facing yard has a formal layout and was terraced to provide better footing and more planting area. A stately pergola and fountain help frame the view of the neighborhood's common meadow just beyond the gate.

Don't let the idea of a formal garden intimidate you. This isn't just an old-school style. It actually fits quite well into some contemporary yards, making your space comfortable and easy to navigate.

So what makes a garden formal? Its most obvious feature is a geometric layout along with straight lines, symmetry and maybe a few clipped shrubs. Now what's so great about these elements? Straight edges aren't boring: They're easy to mow around and maintain. After all, it's easy to run the wheel of your mower along the stone edging and path above.

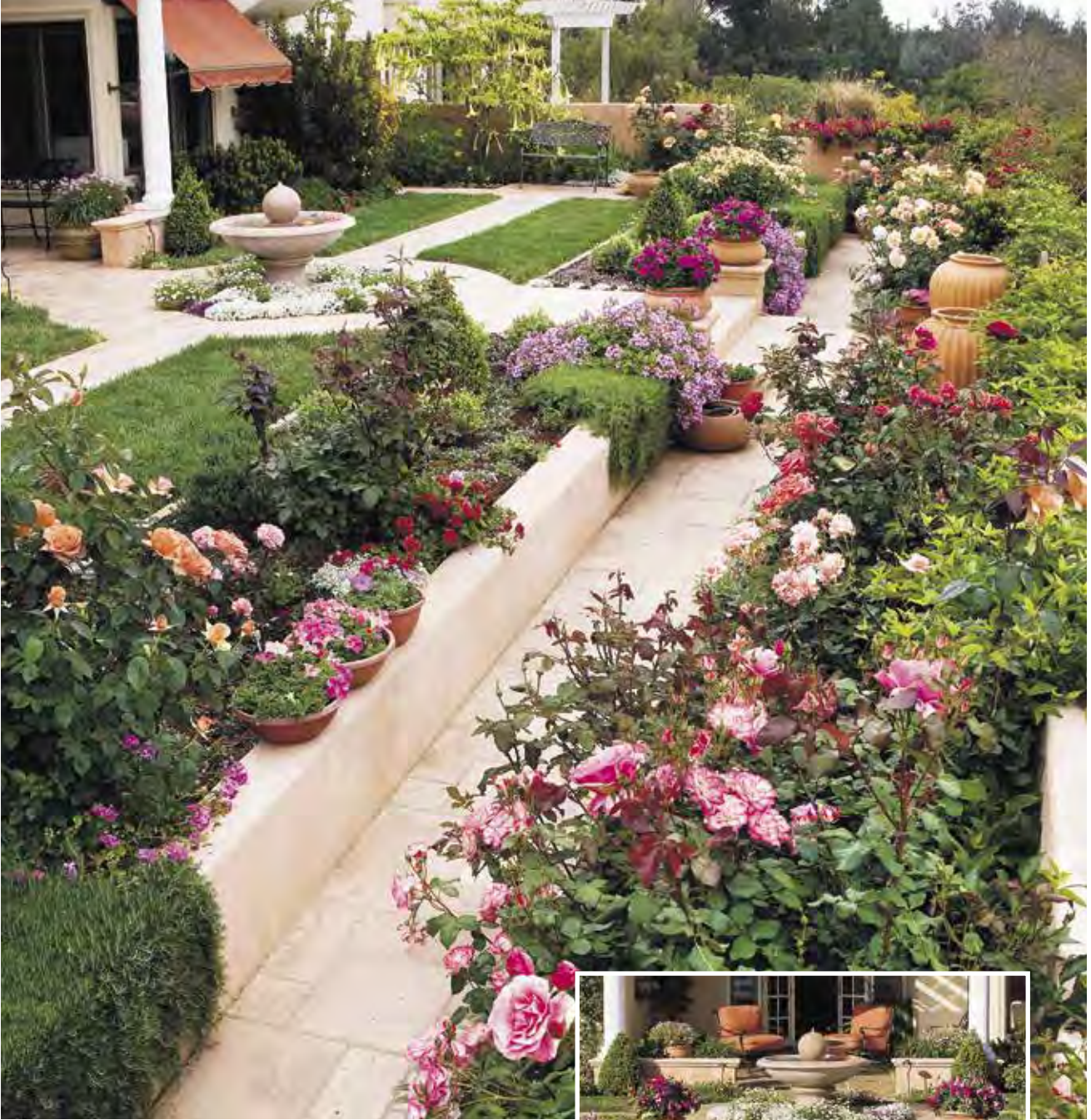
Most formal gardens have a central focal point. It can be anything — a specially pruned shrub, a large statue or a fountain, like the one here. While the place you're

standing in a garden can make a difference in determining what that major point of interest is, this backyard is small enough that the fountain captures your attention no matter where you are. In fact, all the paths in the garden lead back to the fountain and it's the main focus from the patio.

Walk through the gate and turn around to catch the colorful view in the photo at right. This greets neighbors as they stroll along the path through the common area. Mary Ellen tried gardening without a wall when she first moved in, but the rabbits and gophers that live in the meadow were determined to make her garden their buffet line. A wall surrounding the property was the best solution to this discouraging situation. Gophers' tunneling was a special problem and Mary Ellen was concerned that they would make their way under the wall. That's why hardware cloth extends 2 ft. into the soil at its base. It's done wonders at controlling the digging.

Keeping plants looking this good isn't done in a day or even one season. Starting with the soil is the best way to get long-term results you'll love. The clay soil here needed some serious amending before it could be a good home for





▲ Roses line this path for a fragrant welcome into the garden. When the roses are between blooms, plenty of other plants step into the limelight.

all the roses in the photo above. Adding compost during the construction phase was the easiest route to take. If you don't have a big project planned, you can still work on your soil. Every time you plant, add a shovelful or two of compost. Or apply an inch every fall as mulch. It will help keep soil temperatures even, so plants won't heave out of the ground in late winter in cold climates, and provide nutrients as it breaks down in spring.

But what's a garden without plants? Turn the page to find out about what's growing here and how it's put together.

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▲ This simply styled gate is made of western red cedar. The sun can really take a toll on it, so an annual light sanding and coat of clear polyurethane sealer keeps it looking polished and new.





Rosemary

Boxwood

Pittosporum

**ADD STRUCTURE TO FLOWERY BORDERS**  
Straight edges look neat and tidy against the bountiful mix of annuals. Pruning the shrubs in geometric shapes adds structure, interest and keeps with the formal style of the hardscaping.





Geranium

◀ Cascading geraniums (*Pelargonium* hybrids) cover the low wall, making sure it doesn't look stark.



▲ 'Just Joey' hybrid tea rose has huge fragrant blooms that illuminate bouquets.

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**What's formal?** When you think of formal gardens, do you imagine spending all your time pruning hedges? But there's not as much of that needed here as you think. The pyramidal boxwood (*Buxus* spp. and hybrids) at left does need to be clipped a couple of times a year. But its interesting shape is worth the effort. And if you live where winters are cold it might only need cutting once per season. If left to grow on its own, it wouldn't provide the structure needed to anchor this bed of flowers. You don't have to prune 'Golf Ball' pittosporum (*Pittosporum tenuifolium*) at all. It naturally grows into a dense mounded habit. While you might think that's a hedge behind those clipped shrubs, it's actually a trailing rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* Prostrata Group) neatly covering the retaining wall. Run your hand along the foliage and its fragrance fills the air.

And what would a formal garden be without roses? While this is a mild climate, roses still have to be tough to live in this garden. Powdery mildew is often a problem so Mary Ellen only grows resistant cultivars that bloom all season. If the disease does show up, she uses Neem oil to keep it in check.

Containers filled with annuals add color where it's not usually found — on top of the retaining wall above, for example, and along the path. Grow plants in plastic nursery pots to slip into the more decorative ones on the patio. Plant up a few extra pots and keep them handy in case some that are growing in the garden crash. Then you can pull the nursery pot out and replace it with a fresh bunch that will keep your garden looking good.

Turn the page for more formal garden tips!

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◀ This garden is filled with fragrant roses and has plenty of seating. This bench is situated in a little shade but is still close enough to enjoy the scent of roses drifting by on a warm breeze.

▶ Draw attention to your fountain with a carpet of colorful annuals. Here, cool-weather-loving purple and white sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*) and white creeping daisy (*Chrysanthemum paludosum*) thrive. When the weather heats up, petunias and other heat lovers replace them.



Sweet alyssum

Creeping daisy

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**Hardscaping matters** Keeping with the formal theme, straight stone paths surround the garden and meet in the center where they arrive back at the fountain. In this small space there's not a lot of room for winding paths. Want to take a break and enjoy the view? Take a seat on one of the facing metal benches like the one at left.

Practically speaking, mortared joints like this are easier to walk on in all kinds of weather. In areas where winters get below 0 degrees F, you'll need a good base of gravel or concrete below a mortared path to withstand the cycles of freezing and thawing. A money-saving alternative in any region is a gravel path made of limestone fines or decomposed granite.

Choose materials that fit your style and region. This path is made of rose travertine to complement the house and wall color and works well in the warmer regions of California. Travertine is a porous stone

that reflects heat so it's cool on bare feet. But because of all the tiny holes in its surface, it's not a great choice for areas where water can collect, freeze and cause cracking in winter. Bluestone, limestone and granite are all widely available and good for colder climates.

Fountains are pretty to look at but need some care to keep their good looks. Moving water will keep mosquitoes away and bring in birds for a quick sip. It's simple to keep this water feature in good shape during the growing season by keeping leaves and debris out of the water. Where winters get cold, drain the bowl, disconnect the pump and wrap the concrete fountain with a tarp. This will keep water from accumulating and cracking it in the freeze and thaw cycle of late winter.

Now that you've seen most of this lovely garden, it's time to turn the page and enjoy the view as you approach the gate leading to the meadow beyond.

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## FRAGRANT ROSE

Brandy™ hybrid tea rose welcomes visitors with its fragrant apricot reblooming flowers.







## DON'T STOP AT THE GATE

This bench offers passersby a spot to rest in the shade of the California pepper tree (*Schinus molle*) and enjoy the view of the meadow and ocean beyond.

PHOTO: Holly Lepere Photography, courtesy of Grace Design Associates, Inc.  
DESIGN: Grace Design Associates, Inc.