



A **focal point** draws the eye towards a specific point of interest. It is a special plant or object that is positioned to catch and hold your attention. It is important because of *what* it is and *where* it is placed. A focal point causes the eye to focus for a moment. It offers a resting spot for the eye.

Objects versus Plants

A focal point in the garden or landscape can be an object such as a statue, a bench or a boulder. Or it can be a plant, perhaps the best of focal points. The gardener, however, must make a choice between object and plant.

Objects Objects, especially man-made objects, tend to attract more attention than plants; our eyes are instantly drawn to them. When using such objects as a focal point, the plants should act as a backdrop. Objects successfully used as focal points should be special, harmonious with the garden and displayed appropriately.

The object should add to the beauty of the garden by blending perfectly with its scale and style. Some objects just naturally belong in a garden. A bench in the garden is always nice, even if no one ever sits on it. "It simply offers the possibility and it suggests that the garden is not merely to be looked at, but lived in," says Joe Eck, a well known writer and lecturer on gardening and garden design.

Plants If a plant is to be used as a focal point, it needs to look good throughout the growing season — or better yet, year round. Perennials and annuals planted in large drifts make wonderful seasonal focal points. However, if the plant is to be used as a focal point year round, it needs to be large enough to fill a prominent role. It should have excellent foliage, a pleasing shape, long lasting flowers and winter interest.

Any plant that is unique can serve as a living sculpture: a red-leaf Japanese maple in an otherwise green yard, the contorted twigs and branches of "Harry Lauder's Walking Stick," or a great old Burr oak tree. As Eck states, "Perhaps the best of all garden ornaments are plants themselves."

Where to Place a Focal Point

When making decisions on where to place a focal point, it is important to remember that the eye naturally follows lines, and strong focal points result where visual lines intersect. Obvious positions for placing a focal point are where the sidewalk meets the front porch, where a path disappears around a corner, or at the beginning or end of a path.

Perhaps the most obvious of all focal points is the front door of your house. The only rule to follow when adding a focal point is to lead the eye to the most attractive and away from the less attractive. The direct line between the viewer and the focal point shouldn't be the air conditioning compressor or the neighbor's compost pile. There are undesirable focal points!

The Golden Rule of Focal Points

The most important rule concerning focal points is that you must use them sparingly. As with most decorating plans, the golden rule is **less is more**. Here are some tips.

- Too many focal points confuse the eye. The garden becomes busy, not restful.
- Test the focal points in your own garden. Temporarily place all your points of interest in their proposed location, then leave your garden and do something else for an hour. Walk back into your garden and notice where your eyes settle. Were your eyes drawn to one specific spot or area? Or, did they dart around trying to take in several different focal points at once? If you couldn't decide where to look, you do not have a strong enough focal point or you have too many conflicting points. Rearrange your points of interest (or remove a few!) and try the experiment again.
- When you can walk into your garden and your eye is drawn to a single spot, you have achieved your goal.
- If you really want several focal points, make sure each one is visually separated by neutral plantings or open space so your eye can only see one at a time.

Is It a Focal Point or an Accessory?

Gardeners sometimes confuse focal points and accessories. An accessory is something extra, something that is added or secondary. Many objects placed in a garden are really accessories, not focal points. A garden is personal, the product of the gardener who made it. Every gardener wants to personalize their garden by furnishing them with something of their own. Such objects can be worked easily into a garden without becoming clutter if, as in a well-decorated room, these interesting treasures work with the chosen focal point. A simple stone used as a marker on a path, a birdbath placed under a Japanese maple tree or a watering can placed beside a bench — all can serve to accessorize the garden, focus a view or emphasize a favorite spot.

And Finally . . .

Never underestimate the value of a focal point! Focal points speak volumes and are an important aspect of a garden. They create personality. Just remember — simplify! When carefully planned, focal points can provide maximum effect, contribute character and make even the most mundane garden unique.



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