

Basics of Flower Arrangements and Artistic Plantings

(A Beginner's Guide)

Anonymous, AV Magazine May/June 1991

Space

A design should visually fill the space contained by the niche by rising 3/4ths to 7/8ths of the height of the niche. If the niches are 24 inches high, the highest point in the arrangement or artistic planting should be from 18 to 21 inches above the top of the table.

Line

Line is the source of visual motion and is the foundation around which the rest of the design will be built. The most common line shapes used by designers are the crescent and the Hobart or "S" curve. Both of these shapes convey a restful feeling of motion to the viewer. Strong vertical, diagonal or horizontal lines convey sharp and dynamic movement in interpreting your class in the schedule: decide whether your design should be restful or dynamic, soft or abrupt. Whatever shape you decide to use, lines should be simple and positioned to resemble natural growth habits. Do not try to force an unnatural shape on the plant material or the design will appear contrived and artificial. Mass arrangements were popular in the eighteenth century and do not emphasize line as the more modern arrangements do. They instead rely on variations in color or size of material for visual motion. They are the hardest style of arrangement to execute well. An unpracticed hand can easily result in a visual blob that has no movement or form. Only experienced designers should take on a mass arrangement.

Pattern

Pattern is the two-dimensional silhouette of the design. When you feel that you have an idea for an arrangement or planting, it is helpful if you sit down with pen and paper and draw a picture of what you want the silhouette of the design to look like. The type of line you will use and the basic shape of the design should be firmly in your mind before you begin working with the actual plant material. Although you need not be precise, you should try to illustrate to yourself the proportions of what you are trying to create. The silhouette drawing is an essential step in creating a well thought out design. It is much easier to modify your drawing than to try to rethink a design when the flowers, line material and filler are already cut. Neat little rings of foliage or blossoms look stiff and artificial. Keep the pattern as natural in appearance as possible.

Form

Form is the three dimensional shape of your design. Every design must have this third dimension of depth to complete it. If you choose to work with dried, treated or painted material, you will be able to make your design ahead of time and study it to ensure that it creates the effect that you want to achieve. Violet blossoms are small and delicate. Keep the arrangement and other material as light and airy as possible.

Texture

Texture adds interest to the design. It may be rough or smooth, coarse or fine. Plant material, containers, backdrops and accessories all have their own distinct textures. Avoid using strongly contrasting textures in your designs. African violets have an inherently velvety texture that works well with other matte finishes and slightly coarser materials. Shiny textured containers, accessories or backdrops such as glazed pottery or porcelain, polished metal, and satin or lame should be used with caution as the contrasting texture can clash with violets. Matte finished pottery works better than glazed; pewter and dull brass are safer than gold or silver. Substitute linen or jersey for satin.

Color

Color adds excitement to design. Refrain from using too many colors; white is “no color” and black is “all colors” and are usually okay to use. If blossoms are a color (remember white is “no color”) and some natural foliage or branch material is used, you are already working with two colors. It is acceptable to use different shades of the same color. Never use different tones of a color in a design as these can clash.

Tones

Red, maroon, wine, purple, indigo and blue are all different tones of the primary colors blue and red.

Shades

Deep purple, medium purple and light purple are all the same amounts of the colors red and blue with varying amounts of the “no color” white.

Preparation and Mechanics

Read the schedule thoroughly and be sure that you understand all of the requirements.

Try to interpret the theme of your class without being too obvious about it. Your design should suggest the theme without “beating the viewer over the head”.

Make your design at home and bring to the show. Add only the blossoms and finishing touches at the show. Anchor all holders firmly with sticky clay. All live materials must have a source of moisture to last through a two-day show. Pinholders, oasis, or the caps of hypodermic needles can be used to anchor plant materials and provide moisture. Picks can be used to raise plant materials to the desired position as long as there is a supply of moisture, and the mechanics is not easily visible from the front of the design.

Conditioning Materials

Violet blossoms should be plucked the night before the arrangement is made. Remove from the plant with as long a stem as possible. Then recut the stem on a slant and immediately place in tepid water. The blooms should be tented with a loose covering of plastic to keep humidity high. Other foliage materials should be completely submerged in water overnight if possible. Blossoms, lines, and other material look much better when shown in odd numbered groupings. When using three main lines, try for proportions of 100%, 50% and 25%. That is, the middle highest line should be $\frac{1}{2}$ the height of the highest; the shortest line should be $\frac{1}{2}$ the height of the middle line. These three lines will then form a triangular framework for the design. Keep other materials within imaginary lines between the ends of these lines. A tall container should not exceed $\frac{1}{2}$ the height of the arrangement. The tallest stem should be $1\frac{1}{2}$ times the width of a low container. Containers should be Blossoms, lines, and other material look much better when shown in odd numbered groupings. When using three main lines, try for proportions of 100%, 50% and 25%.

That is, the middle highest line should be $\frac{1}{2}$ the height of the highest; the shortest line should be $\frac{1}{2}$ the height of the middle line. These three lines will then form a triangular framework for the design. Keep other materials within imaginary lines between the ends of these lines. A tall container should not exceed $\frac{1}{2}$ the height of the arrangement.

The tallest stem should be $1\frac{1}{2}$ times the width of a low container. Containers should be a neutral color if you cannot exactly echo one of the colors in the arrangement. Clear glass containers require that the stems be attractively placed, and beginners should avoid them if possible.

Remember that these tips are important for beginners to keep in mind; an experienced, award-winning designer may not always follow these suggestions. Instead they may deliberately use stronger contrasting textures or colors which visually clash in order to more fully express their interpretation of the schedule.

You should, therefore, not regard anything as a "rule" that must be followed, but only as advice. When you begin to feel comfortable with your skill as a designer and have a few blue ribbons to your credit, don't be afraid to experiment and try out your ideas.

