

Delivering the Dream

Jane Allison of Mayfields on the difficult task of the garden designer



Photo: Rob Potterton

My horticultural year is split into three activities: growing and selling my large selection of bee and butterfly friendly perennials for Plant Hunters’

Fairs, giving my horticulture talks to garden societies and U3A groups, and spending hours at my drawing board creating garden designs which hopefully fulfil my clients’ wish lists.

In my role of garden designer, I work closely with my clients to create their vision of what they would like to see when they look out of their windows and into their garden space. Quite often, however, this vision is only partly formed and they will be unsure how it can be achieved. Some will only require me to walk round their garden with them and advise them on how a border shape could be changed, or the planting made better, or where they could site a pond etc. Some will want a detailed planting plan for an existing border and a list of plants which can be disposed of or re-sited. What many cannot face is a complete make over (probably influenced by the antics of ‘Ground Force’!) This latter group probably accounts for 40% of my clients, but the other 60% comprise those brave souls who want to take that complete leap of faith with you, and hold onto it even when the mini-digger comes in!

Creating a garden’s genius loci (spirit of place) is very important. A garden is closely linked to our emotions, and I always start with the question ‘What is Your Garden For?’ Do you want it to be a relaxing and contemplative space? A protective space where grandchildren can play? A showcase for unusual plants? A private haven where you can sit beneath an arbour and read the gardening section of the ‘Sunday Telegraph’? A ‘homage’ to a beloved late parent? I have been asked to design all these. No matter what the dream is, the designer must create something harmonious, using a combination of hard and soft landscaping, with different planting colour palettes. The golden rules all designers work with are Balance, Unity/Harmony, Rhythm, Line and Proportion.

A vital first decision the client makes is whether they would prefer a formal or informal style or a careful mixture of both. This determines the use of line: i.e. symmetrical planting and linear lines or asymmetrical planting and curved shapes. Then there is a decision to make about the planting: do they have favourite colours? (I was once asked to use only black and white flowers and foliage to reflect the decor of the house! The planting plan included Viola ‘Molly Sanderson’, Anemone ‘Honorine Jobert’ and Ophiopogon planiscapus Nigrescens). Using an ‘oceanic’ palette of blues, whites, purples and creams can create a very restful space. Using only hot colours, however, can be challenging to the eye and the emotions (Christopher Lloyd understood this emotional language of flowers very well).

Sometimes a client’s wish list can be too full and complex for the size of the space (e.g. a feature to entertain a very young god daughter, a herb garden, a water feature, a pergola, a rock garden, a herbaceous border like Arley Hall’s and something to reflect their interest in railways—all in a small rectangular space!). This requires delicate negotiation to prevent the common mistake of trying to squash too many features into a small space thus making it look fractured and claustrophobic.

Client budgets will, of course, vary from, say, £10,000 to design and put in a sloping, terraced woodland garden which is also a haven for wildlife, to £600 for a new rockery in a paved front garden. Generally, the more hard landscaping you have the greater the expense. Paths are vital in design, but they don’t have to be constructed from Indian stone or have complex rope edging. Using a simple combination of grey flagstones with recycled or engineering bricks can be much cheaper and extremely effective. If you visit Great Dixter and Sissinghurst you will see this in action. And the simple tile-on-end designs of Edwin Lutyens are easy to create using kit packs.

I always encourage clients to do a simple zonal plan of their garden with me, or tackle one on their own, which is a very satisfying way of ensuring they feel that they are a vital part of the process. Testing the Ph balance of the soil together, looking at levels, areas of damp ground, working out the compass points and the direction of the prevailing wind. This determines the plants and their positions, the groundworks (such as vital drainage), the type of fencing.

Working to a meticulous Client Brief, which is arrived at after much consultation, usually means you can avoid the necessity of providing lots of preliminary sketches, and making major alterations to the master plan drawing later. Taking the time to work on that and the Zonal Plan often means that (for example) a shed, a greenhouse, a sunny patio, a winding path, a small retaining wall, a water feature, will practically locate themselves on the Design plan.

The style of the garden needs to be in harmony with the house, and constructed from materials which are unified and kept relatively simple. Using local stone and matching brick and flag colour to the house and to each other are important considerations when constructing a patio and a path. Then there is the issue of the lawn: how much do you want? Can it be situated on the flat and with easy access to the mower (there is no point in having the lawn on the most sloping part of the garden, with the mower located in the garage at the top and miles away). Cottage gardens with their riotous planting of fruit, vegetables and flowers, and gently curving paths look well with older properties and a more 'rustic' approach to hard landscaping, while a more linear approach with definable beds, ornamental walls and edged paths tend to suit newer properties.

For example: my most recent design was for a young man's first home on a new estate, which had a medium-sized rectangular garden plot. The soil was, of course, an appalling mix of builders' rubble and cinders topped with two inches of poor quality topsoil. His 'wish list' was simple: a shed, a small patio, and some plants which would 'look after themselves' because he was away a lot, and Astroturf instead of lawn. Privacy was an issue (it was overlooked on three sides). We constructed three raised beds following the lines of the perimeter and filled them with good quality topsoil and all-year-round-interest shrubs such as Ribes sanguineum 'Pulborough Scarlet', Ceanothus 'Puget Blue', and Philadelphus Aurea. His small shed was situated out of direct eye, and a rambling rose (Rosa 'Rambling Rector') planted to grow up and over the trellis fixed to the shed sides. A mountain ash (Sorbus aucuparia) was situated in one corner, and a nine-bark (Physocarpus opulifolius 'Lady in Red') in another, where the garden was most overlooked. Neither of these trees grow to a great size, which would make them out of proportion with the space. The patio area was dictated by the maximum number of people he thought he would be entertaining at any one given time and made up about a third of the total space. Very simple. Very functional. Very low maintenance.

My first design next year is for a large Provence-style garden, complete with lavender parterres, roses, small statues and a linking water feature. My second is a miniature formal garden for medicinal and culinary herbs. Both will be a joy to do, and hopefully I will 'deliver the dream'!

Jane's tips for dealing with a long, narrow space.

"The best thing long narrow gardens have going for them is the perspective, so throwing up barriers such as trellises or ornamental walls which will make the eye stop dead and foreshorten the view is inadvisable."

Far better to create a little mystery with a small pergola to start the journey through carefully placed areas which could perform different functions like herbs, cut flowers, vegetables, etc towards a strong focal point such as a brimming urn water feature or a stand-alone specimen tree like a weeping pear."



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Photos: Iain Jeffrey