

Landscaping



Creating a garden from scratch

Sylvia Fallows offers some tips on creating a garden to match your dream home.

A well designed garden can be the crowning glory of a new home, if enough attention is paid to the planning. This garden perfectly complements the lifestyle of the owners who like to entertain, yet also offers a place of peace and tranquility. See Case Study 3 (page 34).

It is never too early to plan your garden. Even though you may have only just acquired your plot and are eager to start construction, a basic garden plan at this stage can save you time, money and effort later on. There is a big difference between a plan and a design.

A plan is an overview of your long-term requirements for your garden whereas a design is a scale working drawing with each component detailed down to the last centimetre. With a plan you can prioritise areas to be completed first, and decide which areas may be safely left until funds are available to proceed to the next stage.

A good plan will provide a checklist for a detailed design, a 'shopping list' for materials, and needs no great artistic talent to produce. As long as your site measurements are accurate you have a good basis to work from. These dimensions can be used later by whoever draws your design and will be used if you contract work out.

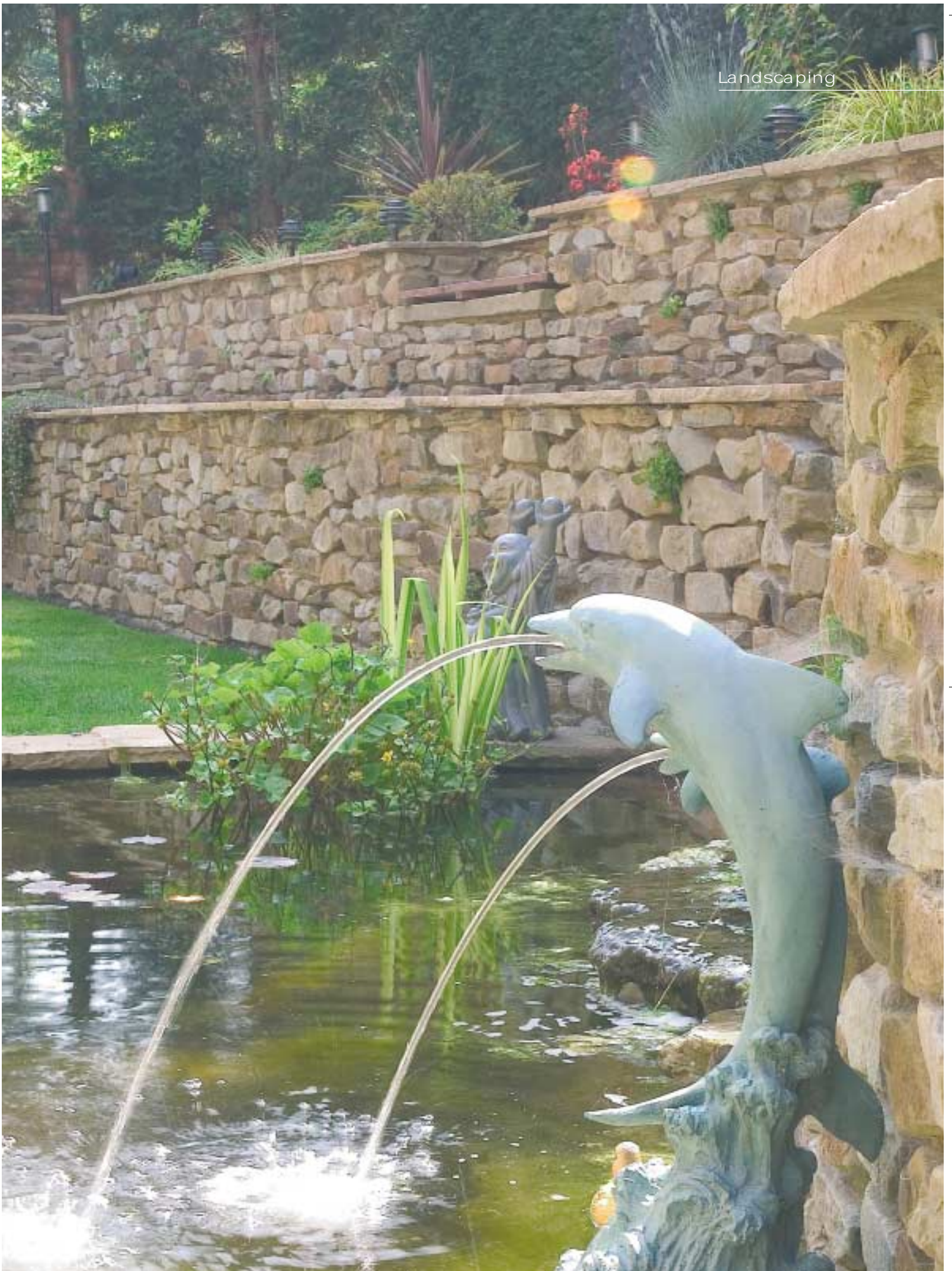
All you need is a sketchpad, a pencil, a 100ft tape – preferably with a willing assistant to hold the other end – a compass and the ideas.

If your plot is bare then you should have no more work to do than if you have acquired a plot with existing features, such as hedges and trees. In all cases you should look at factors affecting or limiting the horticultural potential of your garden. Geographical location, the position of your house within the plot, soil type, water table, microclimate, prevailing wind and changes in ground level will all need to be taken into consideration before planting begins, although none of these are insurmountable, with a little forethought.

Choices

Personal choices are very important – what type of garden would you like, who will use it, how and when? Does it need to be child or pet friendly or suitable for the less able-bodied? How much time, effort and money will be available to maintain it when it is ▶

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The area is prepared for the slabs



Hard core is laid over drainage



The base is tamped down level



Slabs laid roughly into position



The slabs mortared onto hard core



A dry mortar mix is applied to gaps



Hard Landscaping

BUILDING A TWO-TIERED PATIO

Most selfbuilders are capable of laying slabs for terracing, though obviously it will look more professional if done by tradesman.

Specialist companies such as Top Pave supply special patio packs which contain enough slabs to lay a basic design, though if you prefer you can ask for a design pattern,

based on your dimensions using computer software. Key things to consider when laying slabs are to work off a square, make sure your patio is at least six inches below your damp course if it adjoins the house, and prepare a good base – Top Pave recommend using a MOT type 1 base, then tabbing the corners with mortar.



If you haven't got access to natural stone, pre-formed blocks are available which can be used for walls or for raised beds and planters.

The blocks are profiled on both sides so there is no need to build a double skin wall. This makes it the ideal choice for low walls and decorative features.

These blocks from Bradstone are available in grey green and weathered limestone (pictured). Coping and edging are also available.



finished? Do you need a labour saving garden, a garden to relax in after a hard day's work and a place to entertain in? Or can you not survive without getting your hands mucky in a vegetable plot?

Get the family involved, let them make suggestions for features they would like to see and use, they may even be inspired to give you a hand with the construction – although in my experience this is, unfortunately, fairly unlikely.

Once you have a list of all their requirements – lawn, flowerbeds, rockery, greenhouse, patio, water feature, pond, sand pit, decking, pergola, arbour, barbecue, seating area and so forth, you can then add the boring but essential utility items you may need, such as a shed, oil tank or coal bunker, clothes line, compost

bin (for those veggie peelings and grass cuttings) or a discreet shelter for the dustbin. So you see the check list is getting longer and longer but this will be invaluable when you come to prioritise work in order of importance. If you have children, a large lawn might take precedence over a water feature, if you love entertaining then patio and decked areas will come first on your landscaping list.

Groundworks

A bare plot may need drainage or the site levelling. Both of these tasks could be done by your groundworkers while they are on site, saving you time and money later, not to mention hard labour. A cultivated site may contain a tree which you think is in the way of your grand design and you may be tempted to ask the guy with the excavator to pull it out, but check first with your local council to ensure that it does not carry a tree preservation order (TPO), is not in a conservation area or has any planning condition preventing its removal, or you could be in trouble.

Underground services (electricity cabling for water features, ponds and lighting) or soakaways should be located at least three metres from an existing tree.

If you intend to have a pond or water feature, or any lighting, even some time in the future, suitable cabling is best laid before starting any landscaping. It is much

Doing the heavy work

Landscaping usually involves moving a considerable amount of spoil, so it is best done when plant equipment is on site during the groundworks phase of your build. A JCB will move in a day what it takes a month to do with a wheel barrow.

If you weren't that organised at the time, you can hire a mini-digger and dumper truck for serious digging. Mini diggers don't require a special licence if operated on your property, though it will take a couple of hours to learn to operate one efficiently. A dumper truck is also essential for moving dirt. An alternative is a Muck Truck, which is a motorised wheelbarrow with a quarter tonne capacity. This can be manoeuvred through doorways and even into skips.

Muck Truck: www.paulhelpslandscaping.co.uk



A JCB can make short work of major landscaping.



The Muck Truck, which can move up to 250kg at a time.



easier to leave it capped off than dig up half the patio in later years!

Try to create a basic framework for your garden as early as you can, remembering that trees and shrubs can take many years to mature and grow to full height. Do not underestimate the benefits to your site of tree planting.

Trees and shrubs are useful in many ways, not just as an attractive vista. They make a more effective windbreak than a fixed fence, as wind filtered through a hedge or trees causes no turbulence within the plot.

On the other hand, if wind hits a fence or wall it will be deflected up and over the barrier, leaving a metre or so immediately on the garden side sheltered but causing turbulence further into the garden as it turns in on itself.

Trees and shrubs also absorb noise and airborne pollution, provide shade, shelter and food for wildlife and reduce the risk of waterlogging in damp areas. Most of all they add colour, form and texture to your garden and can conceal or lead the eye away from undesirable views.

Try to combine a mix of evergreen and deciduous types to give year round colour. Be careful, though, with how close you plant large trees to your house as they can affect your foundations, especially if you have clay soil.



Orientation

The orientation of your garden plot is of vital importance and this is where the compass comes in. Once you have determined the orientation you can consider the best places to position your planting – and the best positions for seating to catch the most of the sun. If you do not have a compass, use the fact that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west to mark your plan. It is also useful, if you have the time, to make a note of where shadows fall from existing trees or structures as this will also affect planting positions.

Strong prevailing winds are more common in coastal and rural areas than in built up or suburban

Basic landscaping such as terracing can make a newly completed build look tidy, but it will take several years for a garden to take shape.

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Garden structures



Garden structures come in all shapes and sizes: a bespoke architect designed summer house (above and left), The Curve studio (above right) a garden office (right), a gazebo from Scotts (below right) and a pergola from Forest Products (below).



Check out your new neighbours' gardens to find out what thrives in the local soil – you may even acquire some clippings and seedlings.



areas but need to be factored into your plan, as they can deflect rain as it hits a wall or your house, causing dry areas in the lee of the obstruction. As a general rule most of our rainfall in the UK comes in from the



west, consequently in a fenced garden the wettest side will be the eastern side, and more suitable for moisture loving plants.

The water table will also affect any planting scheme and may have been changed simply by the building of your home. A high water table equates to waterlogged ground and a low water table means dry ground unable to sustain plant growth.

You can easily determine the level of the water table by digging a hole in the garden and going down until you see the water rise to the bottom of the hole. As this may be a long way down it might be better done at the same time your foundations are dug out.

You should consider drainage to combat a high water table, but a low water table will mean ▶



Pictures: Timber Decking Association

Decking



According to the Timber Decking Association (TDA), an estimated £120m was spent in the UK in 2004 on decking across the domestic and commercial sectors, and this year looks set to bring a further 10% growth. It seems we just can't have enough! Timber is the most popular choice of deck though composite systems are also available (see below). Because timber is so easy to work, practically any shape, size or style of structure is possible. To ensure a trouble free life decking needs careful planning and design as well as good quality materials. The TDA has an excellent web site which offers guidance on deck structures, approved sources of materials, and professional contractors.

www.tda.org.uk

Environmental Composites Ltd offers what it describes as an eco-friendly low-maintenance alternative to traditional timber decking. It uses the composite CorrectDeck boards system. www.correctdeck.com



Build your own

Installing a timber deck requires less muscle than for many other garden surfaces, but a reasonable degree of DIY competence is required. Straight forward simple decks are sold in packs by garden and DIY outlets. For anything more ambitious it is worth consulting the TDA web site (see left) for advice on planning and building control issues.

Most timber decks are constructed from highly durable pressure-treated softwoods and it is advisable to seek out materials that carry the DeckMark quality stamp.

Decking specialist ArborDeck offer the following tips:

- Ensure the site is clear of vegetation. Lay a weed suppressant membrane and cover with 50mm of gravel.
- Allow 24 hours for concrete around support posts to go off.
- When attaching decking to a house, leave a 10mm gap for drainage.
- If there is not room below your damp proof course to build a deck without excavation, consider a freestanding deck, leaving a gap to prevent water splashing against the wall.
- Ensure all cut timber is treated with a timber preservative.
- For decks higher than 600mm above ground level consult an installer or constructional engineer for advice.

www.arbordeck.co.uk

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Special features

When it comes to creating garden features, you are only as limited as your imagination. While many features such as pergolas, trellis, obelisks and garden furniture can be purchased from garden centres, you can create your own topiary, such as The Queen Mum's Hat (below) with just a little flair and careful clipping. The more ambitious, can create their own water feature, complete with bridge.



Picture: Timber Decking Association

watering plants frequently or even installing a simple irrigation system.

Soil types

The soil on your plot will determine what you can grow. Broadly speaking, it consists of layers; humus (grass or other organic matter) on the very top, fertile topsoil to a depth of around 30cm which contains the nutrients, bacteria and insects necessary for vegetative life, subsoil and bedrock which are incapable of sustaining plant life. A simple, easy to use soil test kit can be obtained cheaply from most garden centres and samples of soil should be taken at random intervals along the area of the plot to determine the level of acidity (pH scale). The majority of plants are happy with a pH level of 6 to 6.5. Structure of soil is also important. A clay soil is usually fertile, moisture retentive and has a balanced pH.

The downside is that unless organic matter is added and the soil treated to a dressing of lime every two to

three years, it is heavy to work, slow to warm up, sticky when wet and hard when dry. Sandy soil warms quickly, is quick draining and easy to work. Its disadvantages are that it has low fertility, dries out quickly and may be acidic. The ideal soil is loam, as it has a dark colour, good structure, is easy to work, free draining and fertile.

Of course, you could always dispense with the scientific bit and look around the neighbourhood to see which plants are flourishing. It could also be a good way to get to know your neighbours, as most people like to talk about their gardens, and you may even end up with cuttings or plant divisions to start you off with your planting scheme. At least you know that these plants will flourish and this will help you to avoid expensive mistakes.

Garden centres are wonderful places to see a wide variety of plants and it is easy to fall in love with something growing beautifully in a pot, only to find that it withers and dies after a year or so in your own



Swimming pools

A swimming pool may be a tempting idea, especially if you do a lot of entertaining. But with Britain's unpredictable and often chilly weather, a cover may be a good idea. This is one of the pools offered by Self Build Pools, a company which offers the opportunity to build your own pool at a reasonable cost and with minimum hassle. Another popular option is the ubiquitous hot tub which can be used all year round, making a mid-winter dip a more pleasurable experience.

www.selfbuildpools.co.uk

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Fences and walls



A smart wall will give your new home instant kerb appeal, and can hide a multitude of sins while your garden takes shape. The most popular choice and least expensive is brick which can usually be built at the same time as the house. Fences are a cheaper option, and can be built on dwarf walls as seen here.



watch, you can't expect to have all the knowledge and experience of a garden designer who has spent years at college, but you can produce a working plan with a little effort. On the other hand, you might prefer to jot your ideas down on paper, draw the plot as accurately as possible, and contract the actual design and construction out. Again, it comes back to how much time and money is available. Remember, if you do contract work out, it will be difficult for contractors to give you an estimate for work if they do not have an accurately measured plan to work from. Good design is not difficult; factor in all your requirements, make allowances for the conditions prevailing in and around your plot and take your time creating your design. Don't try to cram in too many features – a simple design has more cohesion and can give the illusion of more space. All gardens are different; long, short, narrow, irregular in shape and level, with good views, bad views or a mixture of both, and there is a design to suit and enhance every one.

First draw an outline of your plot, marking in the position of the house and any outbuildings which impinge upon the garden. The position of the house will affect the growing conditions around it. North facing areas are in the shade for most of the day and do not retain residual heat. South facing areas catch most of the sun and retain the warmth, but for this reason are not entirely suitable to have conservatories built onto, as they can become too hot for comfort.

Use the position of the house as a starting point, measure the walls accurately and make the corners of the house fixed base points (mark them with letters of the alphabet). These can then be used, if necessary, with temporary base points, usually posts fixed into the ground (mark with numerals,) to measure existing features on your plot, or undefined boundaries, by triangulation. (See diagram). Any drains or inspection covers should also be shown on your plan. Note the direction of flow, so that you can avoid planting deep rooted vegetation on top of the pipe.

Now you have your outline you can start to put your design onto it. This may be a good time to take a break and consult those garden design manuals or surf the internet looking for inspiration. Bear in mind that basic design principles dictate that your garden complements the design of your house, is in character with the surrounding environment and uses local materials where possible. ▣

Figure 1
(Undefined boundary)
To get boundary measurement measure from base point A to temporary point 1. Measure from base point C to temporary point 1. Set compass to scale on ruler and draw arc from base point A to temporary point 1. Do the same from C to 1. Where the arcs cross denotes boundary.

Figure 2
(Fixing point of existing feature, tree, etc)
Follow instructions for Figure 1.

garden, or, alarmingly, grows to such an extent that it threatens to take over.

Features

Now that you have covered the basic planning and horticultural requirements of your particular plot and decided which features to incorporate into your plan, you can get down to the fun bit. Putting it down on paper.

No matter how many books or articles on garden design you read, or garden make-over programs you

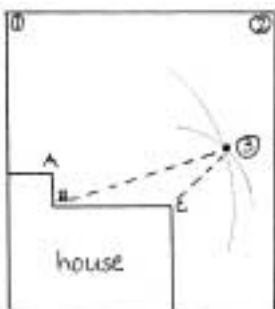


Figure 1

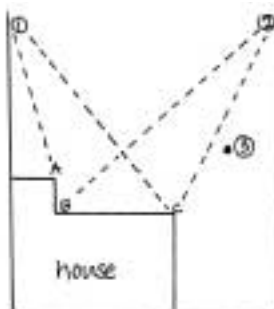


Figure 2

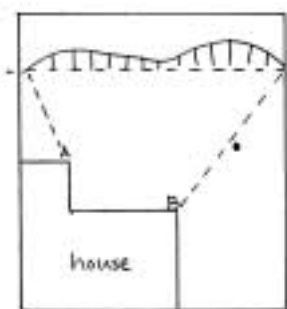


Figure 3
Measurements taken at 90 degree angle from temporary baseline. Take at regular intervals along curve.



Calling in the professionals

Inspired by TV makeover programs, more and more selfbuilders are turning to professional landscapers to come up with gardens to suit their particular tastes and needs. Though relatively expensive initially, a professionally designed garden can prove surprisingly cost effective when weighed up with what it costs in the long run for the average garden, which will probably be changed many times over its lifetime, yet never quite satisfying its owner. Earth Designs came up with this garden for an owner who was concerned with privacy, as the houses on the opposite side of the road overlooked the front of the garden. In creative terms, the client wanted something contemporary and stylish, low maintenance, with ample space for entertaining. www.earthdesigns.co.uk



Try not to be swayed by the latest garden crazes unless you are planning a modern minimalist garden; a huge monolithic stainless steel water feature is perfect in a modern setting but out of place in a traditional cottage style setting. Decide if you want a formal or informal garden and consider themed gardens such as a Japanese gravel garden, which are both restful and extremely low maintenance.

Try to create unity in your design by using materials which co-ordinate the house with the garden. Colour of brickwork could be picked out in pavers, steps, built-in barbecues and garden walls. Pergolas linking house and garden could be colourwashed to match other woodwork in the garden.

A pergola can also be used to draw the eye into the garden and away from, say, a view of next door's extension. There are ways of dealing with bad views such as creating focal points away from the view or obscuring the view with taller vegetation. A group of taller trees strategically placed will help to balance out a tall neighbouring building and bring scale into your garden.

It is important to plan for changing needs. You may have young children who need an area for play

equipment or a sandpit, which can be converted at a later stage into a pond or raised bed. They may want an open area to play in now which needs to be in view of the house. This can easily be converted into an area for entertaining when they are older. Try to create an



The secret of an interesting garden is to create visual focal points, and divisions that create 'rooms'.

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Hedging *your bets*



Hedges offer a natural and attractive barrier or division in your garden, though be warned they take a while to grow, and can then be much bigger than anticipated. Faster growing varieties such as leylandi have been the subject of court disputes, but even species such as laurel (right) can require constant trimming. Bear this in mind and choose carefully. Plants for hedges are best bought as young plants.




air of mystery in your garden by having paving leading out of sight round behind trellis-work, or an archway affording a glimpse of statues or a pond. Look at garden layouts in your local garden centre. You will often find that they have constructed garden 'rooms' around a water feature or seating area.

Once your design is finalised the hard landscaping can begin. As a general rule, rectangular shapes work better nearer the house, curved shapes will create a feeling of space further down the garden. As always you can either do the landscaping yourself or employ a contractor. Again it depends on time and funds available and personal preference.

Shop around for materials and use the internet as well as garden centres to source features such as arbors, pergolas, and water features, but bear in mind that some wooden structures are made to order and so not available straight away. A well-stocked garden centre should have a comprehensive range of all these features plus hard landscaping materials in a variety of colours at competitive prices and, in my experience, staff will be only too pleased to help you and show you suitable materials and brochures.

Once the hard landscaping is in place, use plants to create structure in the garden, both horizontally (ground cover and grass) and vertically (trees) and to screen unsightly features from view. They can frame views, create divisions within your plan, conceal boundaries and provide focal points. Specimen architectural plants such as those of the Yucca family and the magnificent *fatsia japonica*, well known as a house plant but equally at home as a hardy garden plant, attaining two metres or so in height, will give immediate impact to your design. Plants give colour, contrast and texture as well as providing a backdrop for your hard landscaping features. Birds, butterflies and bees will all be attracted into your garden if you choose suitable plants. Keep strong colours near the house and more delicate, paler shades towards the rear of the garden.

Know your plant – how tall will it grow, is it invasive, does it need a lot of maintenance? How broad will the canopy on your tree become, how far are the roots likely to spread? Read the labels on unusual species at your nursery or garden centre, and, if the information is not there, ask! A good nurseryman will be able to give you all the info you need to ensure that your plants survive and thrive. This will save you from making expensive mistakes and being disappointed with a plant that does not settle well into your environment.

Above all, remember that your garden is there for your enjoyment and relaxation. You should never be too busy working in a garden to sit and relax in it. Take your time over your plan, prioritise tasks, do your research then put your plan into action. In other words, apply the same principles to your garden that have brought you a successful self build, then sit back and enjoy it, in the company of all those birds, bees and butterflies, your grateful family and the odd glass of wine (or two). 

Garden *paving*

While you have the brickies on site for your new home, why not employ them to lay your patio, terrace or driveway. Brick paving can be used in a variety of styles and patterns to blend in with your house. To break up large areas of paving, holes can be made for plants and shrubs to add instant interest. This award winning garden (right), designed by Ian Shooter for Baggeridge Bricks at this year's Chelsea Flower Show, features floating box globes planted into the paving.

