

An introduction to your garden

If you are a serious gardener looking to see what specialist plants you can find, how to get rid of noxious weeds or deal with plant diseases, this is not the place for you.

There are many good books on gardening and garden design. They are full of masses of information and assume a high level of commitment. My children, and their spouses, are like most young couples, struggling to bring up their children and pay the mortgages. Whilst they enjoy their gardens they don't have the time for the intricacies and complications of full scale gardening.

Over the years, as both a landscape architect and messing about in my own garden, I have learnt that it is not really as complicated as people make out. You can achieve a lot with a small amount of work and, as everyone starts from zero, the knowledge builds up. Working in the garden is not as serious or complicated as it is made out to be.

Once you start thinking of your garden as just another room that needs to be decorated, but one with such tremendous possibilities and which changes and grows with you, the experience can be life changing. Nobody told me this when I was younger so as a result my children lost out. This is my gift to them now.

*What is it that is so special about a garden?
Is it the fact that we can sit outside with the sun beating down? (In Scotland?).*

*Is it the sense of our own piece of countryside outside our front door?
Is it our chance to sit in a warm room and watch the squirrels and birds cavorting about in the rain or freezing cold?
Is it the chance to amaze our neighbours with nice neat rows of multi-coloured flowers and a neatly clipped lawn?
Or is it the chance for a bit of concrete where we can keep the car and perhaps a caravan?*

In fact it is probably bits of all of this, and maybe a bit more, depending on our lifestyle and character.

There is one thing to remember when starting to think about your garden:

It is your own piece of open space and Mother Nature wants it back.

The weeds will come and over time, without help, even the concrete will

surrender. What is euphemistically called 'Maintenance' is actually a fight against nature. So you need to decide what you want to use the space for and how much you want to fight. The great joy of gardening is when you and nature have reached an agreement that you are both happy with (or at least prepared to accept.)

A 'low maintenance' garden can be achieved when you have bludgeoned nature with concrete, stone and gravel and chemicals so that it has little energy left for the fight (but it will come back!) or when you and nature have reached an amicable agreement. (I once had a tutor who spent three days a year maintaining his five acre garden, but it was all woodland.)

So gardening is about knowing what you want to do with the space, building the garden and then protecting it. This brings me to the other special thing about gardens: Time. Because Mother Nature is in there, working with you or against you, the garden is always changing. The plants grow (hopefully), the weeds come, the flowers (and the weeds) die back and then the flowers and the weeds all come back again.

And the weather... We can generally rely on the rain but that means that in Scotland things grow much quicker than you might think. Once in a while we get a drought so while we enjoy the sun the poor plants are desperate for a drink. Then frost. Nothing is guaranteed to kill off plants like frost. But, come the summer and like Lazarus most of them rise from the dead.

One way and another there is a lot going on in this garden and that is why, if you let it, it will become part of the family. Your kitchen will stay the same until your cooker blows up or you get over the cost of initially installing it and in a moment of blind optimism try again. Your living room will always reflect all the curios you bring back from exotic places or drunken parties but your garden will listen to you. If you are good to it and come to an arrangement with the forces of nature it will be good to you and provide you with some of your best times. It will set you up for the day and sooth your troubled mind at the end of the day. It will educate your children and give you a sense of tranquillity in your later years.

If you ignore it, it will be a pain both physically and metaphorically.

The noblest warriors of the garden fraternity are the farmers. They know what they want from their land and they use all of the skills and weapons at their command to fight nature to get it. Mostly they win but sometimes they lose and they do all of this against a frightening economic background.

We can deal with the economics on a much simpler basis so we only need to

know what we want and what we are prepared to do to achieve it.

But if you know nothing about plants how can you face a new garden? In the words of Corporal Jones (from the old tv series) "don't panic". Although plants are important this is all about the space. Your garden should be your friend and, like your friend, you gradually get to know it over the many years that you are together.

You start with working out what you want from it. Is it just something pretty to look at or will you be in there drinking wine and playing with the kids. Chances are the washing will be hung out. What about the barbecue? Do you want to grow fruit and or vegetables? (Bear in mind fruit and vegetables are also attractive to a wide range of pests and diseases so this could mean serious war).

Having got yourself excited about the range of possibilities, come back to earth with the size of your plot. But don't get too down. Even the smallest corner can generally take a table and chairs and some pots. (A nice wine, the smell of the open air and the sound of birds.)

If you have a table and chairs, sit out in the garden with a piece of paper and play with the opportunities. Walk about the garden and see what was there before. Did the people who had your garden before have any good ideas or plants that you want to keep?

Don't worry about the plants yet. Think of what role this garden is going to play in your life. Next month we will start thinking about the design.