

DESIGNING YOUR GARDEN

SKILL LEVEL



INTRODUCTION

A well designed garden, tailored to your own particular needs, will not only be beautiful and productive, but will give you and your family pleasure throughout the year.

You don't have to be a design wizard - or even particularly artistic - to create a beautiful garden. The concepts of good design are simple to understand and straightforward to put into practice.

Whether developing a new garden from scratch, or reshaping an existing one, understanding and developing basic design skills will help you achieve good results, and more importantly, develop a garden with exactly the layout that is best for you.

Changes in your garden's design need not be profound. Repositioning a tree, for example, erecting a screen, or changing one of your garden surfaces may be small adjustments, but each of them can have a profound effect on the overall appearance.

2 - Decide what you want out of your garden

The first and most important step is to decide exactly what your garden means to you, and what you expect from it. You may want:

Somewhere to sit. Examples might be a terrace or patio.

Somewhere for children to play. Sandpits, swings and climbing frames could all be incorporated into your garden's design, perhaps to be altered later, when they've grown up.

A source of food. More and more people want to grow fruit and vegetables. In a small plot, a kitchen garden can be beautiful as well as productive.

A special plant collection. A plant enthusiast's garden should offer different habitats including hot dry spots and cool shady ones.

A showcase. Why not enter your local 'Best Front Garden' contest?

A wildlife refuge. With increasing threats to natural habitats, our gardens are becoming important sanctuaries.

Never be afraid to borrow ideas. Visit other gardens - there are thousands open to the public nowadays. Look at books and magazines and consider how features that appeal to you could be adapted to your own garden.

3 - Assessing what you've got

Once you have decided what you want from your garden, the next step is to assess what is already there:

Surrounding influences. Features of the surrounding landscape will influence your design. Objects of beauty - a church spire, perhaps - could become backdrops to your vistas; an ugly building, or noisy road will need concealing behind shrubs.

The shape of your plot. Your design must lie comfortably within the dimensions of your plot. If the area has a strange shape - a triangle perhaps, or irregular boundaries - make sure you use the space efficiently.

Soil, aspect and climate. The greatest enemy of any garden is wind. In an exposed area, therefore, your design must include shelter, such as fences, hedges or shrubs. Likewise, heavy shade, poor soil or a local frost problem will all influence your plans.

Existing layout and design features. You must decide whether to keep these and incorporate them into your new design, or whether to remove them and start afresh.

Make a list of your garden's strongest natural advantages - good soil, perhaps, or beautiful views. Your design should make the most of these advantages and thus help to neutralise any disadvantages.

4 - Setting up your basic design

Begin by making rough plans. Use graph paper and develop your plan to scale, but don't get too bogged down in the technicalities. Instead, plan a general layout and begin to arrange the various features within it, first on paper, then pacing them out in the garden. You can mark the areas out with sticks and string. Illustration (1) demonstrates an example garden.

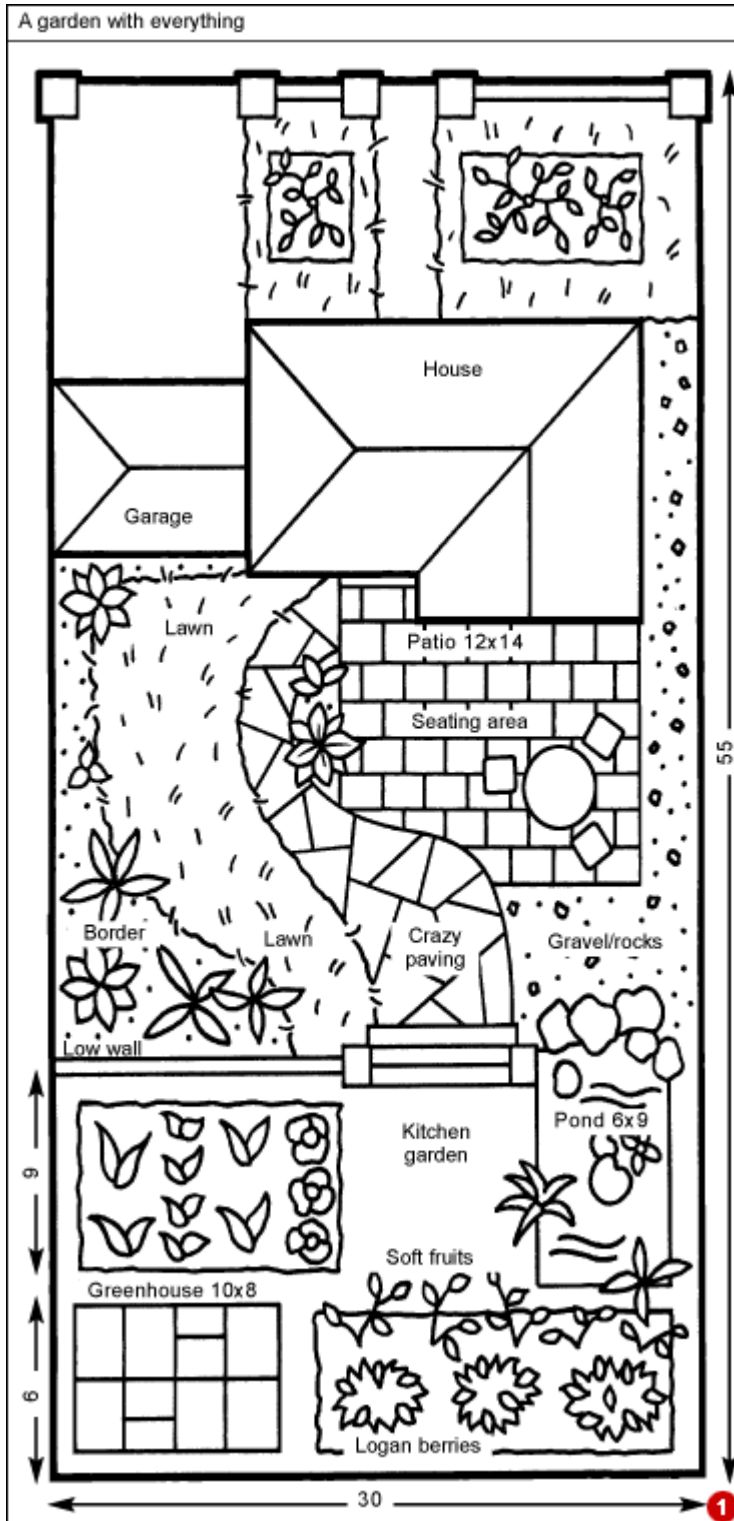
Prioritise your features in order of desirability. There may not

be room for everything, so decide which to sacrifice, or which are to be scaled down.

Try to think of trees and shrubs in terms of their final size, rather than a couple of seasons after planting.

If you have access to a photocopier, draw a general plan to scale, and make a number of copies. This will give you plenty of scope to experiment with different layouts.

A garden with everything



5 - Creating a framework and forming the layout

It is important, when designing your garden, to consider the area as a whole, and to mark out a general framework. The dimensions of a whole plot will make up a main frame, almost like a picture frame, and within that, you must decide on important factors such as internal divisions, pathways and entrances.

Try to arrange for several interesting vistas, since these will make your garden a pleasure to stroll around, as well as providing optimum views from the various key points.

Some aspects of your framework will be pre-decided, and you must work with them: the position of the house, the main gate, where the doors and windows are situated etc.

Final layout will depend on these, and on existing conditions. You will probably want your sitting area, for example, in sun, near the house, but with maximum privacy.

Within these constraints, position such key features as archways, ponds, a lawn or borders where they will create the most pleasing effect.

Never underestimate the importance of a view through the window - especially a window frequently used. Pathways that lead into the distance, attractive borders that change through the seasons, a thoughtfully sited pond - all are examples of garden design that can be enjoyed every day from indoors.

6 - Making internal boundaries

Internal divisions and screens can be as important as boundary fences, since they divide up parts of the garden for different uses and allow for changes in mood and style from one to another. Surprises are valuable in a garden's design. Route pathways round corners or through mysterious archways, leading them to a hidden feature - a rustic seat, perhaps, overhung with a fragrant climber.

7 - Disguising unsightly objects

Eyesores can be disguised in various ways. Often, designing a prominent vista so that it leads the eye away from any unsightliness will be enough to effect a disguise. Screens, especially those that can be furnished with growing plants, work well, as do hedges.

Grow low shrubs or trailing plants over manhole covers, or create a special manhole cover feature.

Fuel tanks, or other large objects need hiding. Make the screen a feature in its own right, however, rather than simply erecting it directly round the object.

Unsightly gaps between buildings can be disguised with trellis.

Hide awkward paving or ugly concrete with a layer of gravel, arranged with containers full of plants.

Long grass, grown for wildlife or meadow flowers, can look untidy without a close-mown boundary around its edge. The neatly-mown strip will create a pleasing, contrasting line. You could even close-mow pathways through long grass.

8 - Extra styling

Once you have developed your garden's basic design, you may want to develop some special styling. Here are some simple ideas:

Soften hard edges. Plant alpines or dwarf shrubs at wall bases and in paving cracks; allow perennials to spill over onto paving. Permit some plants to seed in pathways.

Make sure you've maximised opportunities for climbers and wall plants.

Keep adding containers to your garden. They do so much to enhance its interest.

The garden floor - be it lawn, paving, concrete or gravel - is an important part of styling your garden. Gravel and grass allow for a very naturalistic approach, but with old stone paving, or perhaps wooden decking, you could develop a stylish garden surface which is both useful and beautiful.

9 - Water features

Water, though not essential, can be the making of a good garden design. As well as providing a beautiful and restful focal point, a water feature changes the light in a garden, is wildlife friendly, opens up opportunities for entirely new kinds of planting and is a constant source of fascination. Whether large or small, formal or informal, still or moving, a water feature can be the most valuable asset your garden has.

If children or pets are likely to use your garden, you must consider their safety before deciding on a water feature. Unfenced pools of water are particularly hazardous, but a raised pebble pond, in which the stones protrude above the water, is usually an attractive and far safer alternative.

10 - Blending functionality with design

With the limited size of most gardens, it is important to put every square inch to good use. Apart from main beds and borders, there will be a whole range of other planting opportunities:

The centre of a driveway can carry a good selection of low, mound forming plants.

Your patio will look best if it is generously furnished with containers, not only of summer flowers, but with others, planted more permanently, for winter interest.

Ensure that your fruit and vegetable garden is planted as attractively as possible, with plenty to fill gaps made by harvesting crops. Flowers among the vegetables can be welcome additions. If these are yellow, they will help to attract beneficial insects.

11 - Planting as part of design

Specific planting is discussed in other B&Q gardening leaflets, but here are some general rules when selecting plants for your newly designed garden.

Only select plants that look attractive for much of the year. A spring-flowering tree should also have good autumn leaves, and perhaps a crop of colourful berries. Repeat-flowering shrubs, such as roses, have more to offer than short-lived species like Forsythia. Evergreen shrubs are prettier, in January, than most deciduous ones.

Plant for structure. Make sure your borders carry a good arrangement of structure plants - trees or shrubs - which will give the garden its backbone, winter and summer.

Try to achieve a changing picture. Spring bulbs will ensure a cheerful beginning. Early summer perennials like Lupin and Poppy should give way to later displays of Phlox, perhaps, and Penstemons. Aim for a final climax in autumn, with Dahlias or Michaelmas daisies, and be sure to include winter treasures such as Witch hazel or Snowdrops.

Plants will grow, so space them with the future in mind. Trees may need to be 20ft (6m) or more apart, shrubs up to 10ft (3m), if they are large and vigorous. Perennials can be more crowded, because they can be lifted, divided and replanted every few years.