



PLANTING PLAN DESIGN



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HOW TO COMBINE PLANTS TO CREATE STUNNING PLANT BORDERS

Planting Plan Design - how to combine plants to create beautiful planting schemes for stunning garden borders

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Before we get going, we need to get the usual legal bits out of the way first.

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So now that's out the way, let's get going with increasing your knowledge about how to create the perfect planting design for your garden.

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Introduction

This book is all about the aesthetics of plant design. How you put plants together with one another is vital for creating attractive planting borders. This book does **not** focus on in what conditions plants need to grow (see '[How to Choose the Right Plants](#)' for that) but how to know which plants look good together.

It's all too easy to have busy-looking planting borders that don't seem to look right, no matter how

many wonderful plants you buy. This book will show you how to avoid the most common planting mistakes along with a step-by-step process you can use to choose the right plants for your garden planting scheme.

The book will also cover how to choose plants based on the style of garden you want to achieve. Want to know which types of plants to use in modern gardens, natural gardens, traditional formal gardens, and so on? This book will show you.



We will also take a look at how you can improve your existing borders, and how to choose the right plants to fill in any gaps.

OK, so let's get started and take a look at where most people go wrong with their planting schemes.

Part 1 – The Do's and Don'ts of Plant Design

Before we get going on the step-by-step process you can use to design the perfect planting scheme for your garden, I want to discuss where most people go wrong, so you can avoid making those mistakes.

I'm going to start by asking you a question. What is it that makes you buy the plants you buy? Think about that for a moment...

If you're like most people, it usually comes down to these two things: liking the flowers or the leaves of a plant. Now, that's fair enough, isn't it? You're hardly going to say, "I chose that plant because of its amazing root system!"

So, it is perfectly logical to choose plants that way and I certainly don't want you to discount that altogether but I do want to show you another consideration to the process of choosing plants.

In a word, **shape**. Now I know most books tell you to focus on the aspect and soil conditions and of course they are important but we are talking about aesthetics, specifically what makes plants look good together here.

The most obvious thing in the world when looking at plants are the showy bits, the flowers and the

leaves, but unless you take into consideration the overall shape of the plant, you'll never create a great planting scheme. Let me explain that a bit more and demonstrate this concept.

Everything in design is dominated by shape. Yes, colour and texture are important but number one is shape. If you just focus your attention on the plant's flowers and leaves then all you're able to do is have flowers that look nice together. Obviously that's better than nothing but have you noticed that despite your best efforts the plant borders just look either messy or lack clarity and definition? Or at certain times of year look dreadful?

Unless you are living in a tropical country, chances are that the plants in your garden spend more time without flowers than with them. So if you've just chosen a plant because of the flowers and 80% of the time they're not there, can you see how difficult it's going to be to have it look good all year?

Now for those of you that aren't particularly into flowers and prefer to choose plants by foliage, you are probably able to do a slightly better job. But again, unless you take into account the overall shape of the plant, you're not going to get clarity and you too can end up with messy looking borders.

So, to clarify what I mean by overall shape let's use lavender as an example. It's quite a roundish looking shrub. If we were to put lavender with Santolina (the cotton lavender) with yellow flowers it would be a lovely combination, yes?



Well, it would when they both flower but as soon as they've stopped they would look like roundish bushes with grey foliage - very similar. From a distance they'd start to blur into a mass of grey round blobs. Which wouldn't be the end of the world but what if the surrounding plants were also quite roundish in shape with small leaves?

If you've not considered the overall shape of the plants you could easily end up with a mass of similar shape and height plants all blurring into one big uninteresting mass when they weren't flowering. The exciting combination you thought you were creating would end up being duller than something very dull for a large part of the year!

Now if you were to put an Iris or other spiky shape plant in between the lavender and Santolina, then it would work really well because there would be a break in between the round shapes, bringing clarity and definition to the border.



So, shape is really the number one consideration when placing plants next to each other. Then height/ growth rate and colour come into the equation etc. I will cover exactly how to mix different shape plants together in Part 4. For the rest of this part we'll cover where you start and the steps involved before you get to the plant placement. There are quite a few things to take into consideration before you decide what goes where.

Where to Start with Planning Your Planting Scheme

The exact place you start will depend on the garden you have now. You might be starting with a blank canvas with virtually no plants or have quite an established garden with a few gaps that need filling and perhaps some borders that need re-working a little bit.

If your garden doesn't have a whole lot in it, great! It's much easier to start from scratch with a blank canvas. If you have some existing planting, you just have a few obstacles to work around.

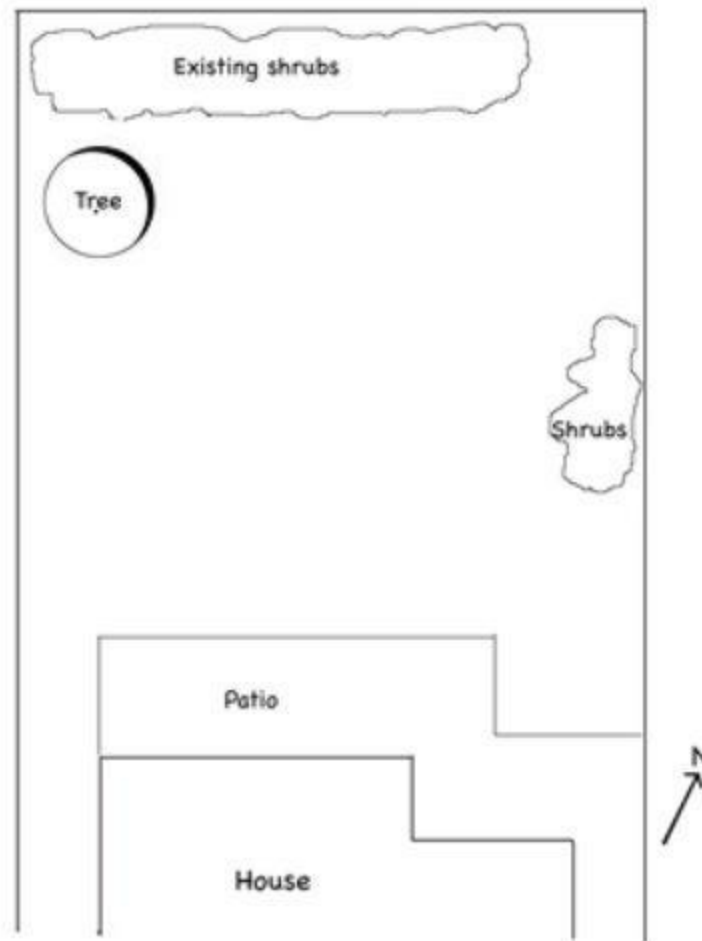
Think of your garden a little bit like a painting. With a blank canvas you are free to do big, broad sweeping brush strokes but with an existing artwork you have to make sure that what you're adding works with what is there now. You can of course paint over the parts of the picture you don't like in your garden by digging up and moving plants that don't harmoniously work with your desired outcome.

The following steps work with both a blank canvas garden and one that has existing plants. Before you dash off to the nearest garden centre or nursery, it's a really good idea to get your plant ideas down on paper to test they work.

STEP 1 – WORK FROM A PLAN

If you already have a scale plan of your garden, showing the existing plants and layout, wonderful! If not, I strongly recommend you do one, preferably to scale so that you can work out the exact quantities and placement for each plant.

Basic survey drawing



Plans take away the guesswork and enable you to see that your ideas work. In the long run, a plan will save you a lot of time and money. If you've never measured your garden and are put off by even considering scale, don't worry - it's really not as difficult as it sounds.

There are some free video tutorials covering the basics of how to survey a garden and draw a scale plan on the Successful Garden Design website. Just go to the [video tutorials](#) page. Or there's a Kindle [Survey book](#) as part of this How to Plan Your Garden series available on Amazon.

Even if you are someone that finds it difficult to visualise and you prefer to buy plants and set them out in the garden rather than working on paper, I would still advise you work from a plan. I will show you some cunning tricks on how to visualise how the plants will look next to one another when working on paper that anyone can use. And no, you don't need to be a talented artist for these tricks to work. I'll also show you a really simple trick that will help you see how large each plant gets and it will work out how many plants each area of your garden needs.

STEP 2 – FIND OUT WHAT CONDITIONS YOU HAVE

Once you have your scale plan showing any existing planting, the next thing you need to do is make a note of which areas are wet or dry and which areas get sun and which get shade. Make a note of these on your plan. If you've no idea what soil type you have and how to analyse your garden conditions then get the [5 Minute Plant Expert](#), download the cheat sheets and go round your garden filling them in and watch the video tutorials to see what you need to do.

STEP 3 – WORK OUT WHAT YOU WANT

Before you get going too far into the process it's important to know what it is you're actually trying to achieve. Do you want to create a contemporary garden, traditional, natural, Japanese, exotic etc.? Look at pictures in books, magazines and online and make a note of the types of plants that are used in the style of garden you want. You don't necessarily need to know the plant names, just the types, so, for instance, natural looking gardens might use lots of grasses and wildflowers.

There are also [picture galleries](#) of gardens on the Successful Garden Design website you can look at for ideas.



STEP 4 – THE LIST PHASE

Lists will be your best friends through this process, making it much easier and quicker to create the perfect planting scheme. Once you know what soil conditions and aspect your planting borders have and you know the types and styles of plants you're looking for, the next step is to research which plants fit those criteria.

Regardless of how much you know about plants, the lists will be invaluable. If you can't tell a geranium from a globe artichoke, don't worry! To begin with just collect images from magazines or off the Internet of things you like. Then ask knowledgeable friends or local nurserymen what they are called. Once you know the name, then you can research them online or in books to see if they will grow well in the conditions you have.

Plant Choosing Tools

A great place to start is using plant suggestion apps or online software. I particularly like [Right Plant 4 Me](#). It's a free website with a plant database of nearly 4,000 plants with over 10,000 photographs. The database is searchable by height, colour, type, sun, soil conditions and many other search criteria.

If you have an iPhone or iPad there are many similar apps you can download/ The best ones you do have to pay for but they are pretty inexpensive and well worth the cost as, again, they are criteria searchable. One I've used is called [Joy of Plants](#) and that has over 7,000 plants in the database.

When making your lists of plants you like, I would suggest that you list shade and sun lovers separately. The planting plan design system that I'm going to show you in Part 4 will rely heavily on working from your lists and it will save you a lot of time if you have a whole page of plants that are suited to the conditions of each area of the garden you want to work on.

Having lists will also help you get the right plants in the right place. There's so much to think about when you do a planting scheme from soil and weather conditions to height and growth rate, colour, shape and texture that it can be so easy to forget the basic things that the plants need in order to thrive.

Think of doing a planting plan like planning an enormous, meal seating plan. It's really vital you put

the right people next to one another; putting two big sprawling loud-mouths next to a very shy, timid person would be smothering for the quieter one. The same with your plants; you need to not only think about the shape, height, spread, flowering-time. You must consider how each plant looks and works with the plant next to it. That's a lot to think about at once. So having your lists divided up into categories gives you less to think about and hold in your head.

When making lists it's very helpful to add the following information:

- ☐ Latin name of plant
- ☐ Evergreen or deciduous
- ☐ Height and spread
- ☐ Flower and leaf colour
- ☐ Time of year of interest - flowering or berrying times of year
- ☐ Overall shape of the plant

That does sound like a lot of information to put on your list but the more you can put on, the more it will speed up your decision making process when deciding which plant will be the perfect one for each allotted space.

If you really want to create the ultimate plant list, consider putting your list into a spreadsheet on your computer. You can insert pictures, all of the growing conditions etc. and then you can organise the information however you wish just by sorting by category. For instance, you could organise the list by the shade loving plants or evergreens, flower colour and so on.

You'll see why when you get to Part 4 and learn the planting design formula.

Plant Names - How to Easily Deal With the Dreaded Latin!

A quick word on plant names: most people have a strong aversion to using Latin plant names. Reasons range from finding them unpronounceable, difficult to spell, they bring back traumatic childhood memories of Latin lessons at school, or just preferring the prettier common names. Whilst the common names for plants do sound much nicer and are a lot easier to pronounce, it's still a good idea to make a note of the official Latin name for the plant because nurseries and garden centres use them.

Also the problem with plant common names is that they can and do vary from region to region. So to make sure you get the plant you want it is better to use the Latin name for it. Plus, if you can get yourself past the "Oh yuck, Latin" reaction, it can be very useful in helping you choose plants for your garden.

Latin is very descriptive. If you see a plant with the word 'glaucous' in the name then that means that part of plant is going to be a blue colour, usually the leaves. Rubra means red foliage or flowers, alba means white, and so on. The Latin name may also describe the leaves or growing habit of a plant. Longifolia means the plant will have long leaves (helpful info if you're looking at a list of plants you don't know). Pyramidalis means, yes, you guessed it, a pyramid shape plant. Horizontalis, yes, you guessed again - it's a plant that grows along the ground.

I've written a lot more about using Latin to your advantage in ['How to Choose the Right Plants for Your Garden'](#) - it's available from all the Amazon Kindle stores.

As far as difficulty with pronouncing Latin goes, initially, it can be quite daunting but if you look at the word and break it down into syllables it's actually quite easy. Then just pronounce each syllable

as it's written and you'll have a pretty good pronunciation.

Spelling is the same; if you can remember the sound and then spell it out in each syllable then you'll be fine. That's the beauty of Latin. It is pronounced the way it looks, there are no weird letters that are pronounced in a way that defies logic.

I was fairly dyslexic at school, so for me growing up, all words were difficult. So it made no difference if it was Latin or not. *Parthenocissus tricuspidata Veitchii* is no more difficult for me to spell than tomatoes!

Here's the method I use to get past my dyslexic tendencies which may help you get to grips with Latin words. Basically, I break all words down into bite-size chunks. I find as long as I can remember the first four letters of any complex word, then the rest follows. I break the words up into syllables that I say out loud as I'm writing them down and that helps me to spell the word correctly.

So let's break it down. Just say each section out loud: **Parth-en-o-cis-sus tri-cus-pid-ata**, then repeat it a few times quicker and you're there. The only difficult part is Veitchii because that's not traditional Latin as such, Veitch was the surname name of the man that discovered the plant, which is why it is capitalised and 'tricuspidata' isn't.

The method I've described above is how I have to spell all words. To this day I have to write words down so I can 'see' if they look right. So I can vouch for the fact that it is easier if you anchor the plant names in your mind by both saying them out loud and writing them down at the same time.

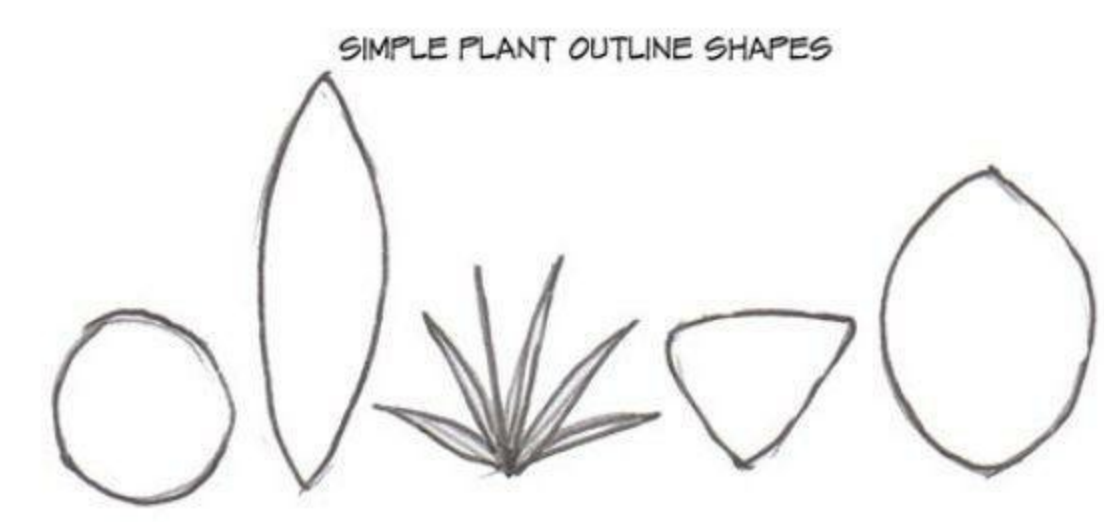
So I know if I can cope with Latin, anyone can. The thing is, though, if you can get close enough with your spelling and pronunciation, you'll be fine. Garden centres and nurseries are used to all sorts of misspellings and strange pronunciations. It's like being abroad and ordering food - if you can get close enough, they tend to know what you mean!

So really don't let the strangeness of it put you off. Once you start using the Latin names, you'll probably start to recognise a lot of the words, especially if you speak any of the Mediterranean languages, as they are all based on Latin. I promise it's not nearly as horrible as you think it is.

Final Key Element to Put on Your Plant Lists

As we touched on in the beginning of this book, shape is one of the most important attributes of a plant when it comes to situating them next to one another. It's obviously not the only factor but from now on it needs to be the first thing you think about when choosing a plant.

On your plant lists, draw an outline of the plant shape next to the plant name to help you visualise how it looks. Keep the shapes really simple, like circles, ovals, spiky shapes etc. as shown below.



This might sound like an awful lot of work to put into a list, and it is, but it's also really important to do. It's like decorating; the real work goes into the preparation, actually applying the paint is really quick if you've done good preparatory work.

Your in-depth lists will be used like cheat sheets specific for your garden, tastes, style and conditions. It's because they are so tailored to your needs and the garden conditions that **you** need to do them. The perfect planting scheme for your garden isn't in any book, or on the Internet.

The planting plan system that we're going to cover in Part 4 will get you thinking about plants in a different way. You're not going to just be thinking about what flowers or leaves a plant has but its shape first.

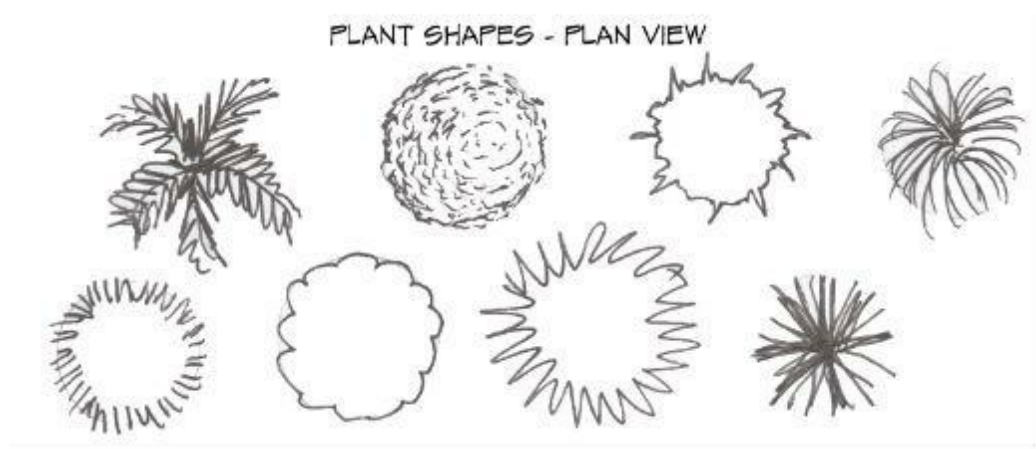
So, instead of thinking "I'd like a plant with pink flowers here," you're going to be thinking "I need a small, round shape plant with pink flowers that likes full sun, is evergreen and flowers all summer" That's a lot to think about, especially if you don't know many plants. The lists will enable you to see at a glance all the plants you like that fit those criteria. Then you just get to pick the one you like the most from your list.

A good list will make choosing plants quick and easy. It frees you up so you can concentrate on which plants will look nice together (which after all is the main point of doing this) rather than getting bogged down every time you want to put a plant somewhere, then having to do all the research to see if it's appropriate for that location. Or doing what most people do and give up and bung in the plant they like and hope for the best!

It's quite hard to hold in your mind how one plant looks next to another, let alone a whole plant border, especially if you can't visualise. When I first started out as professional garden designer, fresh from college, I could only just about imagine 2 or 3 plants together. As soon as I added a fourth or fifth plant to my mental image, I found the first ones dropped away. I felt it was like trying to visualise through frosted glass - impossibly frustrating.

To be completely honest, after over twenty years doing this, I doubt I can picture more than about six or seven plants together in my mind. If that's not sounding terribly reassuring for you, don't worry; I've developed a method that takes away the need to visualise. Actually, there are three tricks I use to get around this issue.

This is one of the aspects where the lists and planning on paper will help you. The first trick I use is to put the plant on paper showing the main characteristic. For example, if a plant has spiky foliage, I draw a spiky shape as shown below. So that allows me to see at a glance what shapes I've already used.



The next trick is similar to the first but a lot more effective if you don't know many plants. Draw a 3D

sketch of the border with the shapes you've used. If you have no artistic ability whatsoever, that's not a problem, just trace over a photograph of the border and draw in the simple shapes like circles, oval etc. to represent your plant choices. You'll soon see if your ideas are working well.



The final method I use will be covered in Part 4 because it's part and parcel of the planting plan system, which you're no doubt chomping at the bit to find out about, so let's head towards it now with learning about the attributes you need in your planting schemes, then we'll look at how to put them together artistically (even if you're not an artistic person).

PART 1 – QUICK REFERENCE RE-CAP

SHAPE is the most important factor to consider when choosing plants

Create a scale plan of your garden showing the position of the existing plants

Write on the plan which parts of the garden are in sun/shade and which areas are wet/dry

Work out what it is you are trying to achieve, look at garden pictures for inspiration and guidance

Make a list of plants you like, if you don't know the names, collect pictures and ask someone knowledgeable to identify them.

Include information about each plant's height, spread, favoured growing conditions: if it needs sun, shade, wet or dry, flower type etc.

Also add to your list the overall shape of the plant. Keep it simple: round, oval, flat topped, spiky etc.

Part 2 – Key Elements in Stunning Planting Schemes

There are 5 keys to a successful planting plan (other than getting the plants in the right conditions, that's a given - you've got to get the right plants for your garden's conditions).

1 SHAPE

2 POWER PLANTS

3 QUANTITY

4 HEIGHT AND SPREAD

5 COLOUR

The other given is that you need to create a scheme that looks good all year. You may well choose to have a seasonal focus but regardless of whether you're only in your garden in the summer months or you love autumnal colours, your planting scheme should still have some all year round plant structure and form to it.

So let's go through the list in more detail.

1 SHAPE

We've already covered the WHY of plant shapes, now let's look at the HOW.

There's one main rule I have for this: Put different shape plants next to each other to create clarity and definition in your plant borders. Yes, that is it! That's the rule. I did say this is simple to do and it is. But before you shake your head and think to yourself, "Really? Is that it?" it's actually much harder than it sounds to do it.

You'll find as soon as you get going with your planting plan that you'll get so caught up with all the wonderful plants that are available, with their beautifully seductive flowers and leaves, that the whole shape thing will go right out the window.

You have to be really disciplined to create a great looking planting scheme and how many of us like discipline? Precisely. But although it's hard to be disciplined, the end results are well worth it, I promise.

If you find yourself getting carried away and deciding shape isn't that important just take a look around you and answer this question honestly: how many people do you know have a stunning garden? Not just gardens that look nice in the summer, real stunners that look amazing no matter when you visit.

I'm not talking about nice gardens. I want you to think stunning. That's what we want to create here. Set the bar high. I'm betting not many gardens around you fall into the 'stunning' bracket. Even ones that have been professionally landscaped don't always look that great afterwards if the landscaper or designer hasn't used the design principles correctly and has not been disciplined enough to focus on shape with the planting.

So say it with me: "The number one key to creating a great looking planting scheme is the overall **shape** of the plants I choose."

OK, good, top marks to you, I can tell you're going to be good at this, so let's now look at the next one on our list.

2 POWER PLANTS – THE STAR PERFORMERS

To really create impact with your planting plan you need to repeat certain plants around your garden. I call these the star performers or 'Power Plants'. How many you choose will depend on the size of your garden. **Do** have at least one plant that you repeat throughout your garden as it will unify your design and give it a lot more visual impact. I'll show you how often to repeat the star performers when we get down to the planting plan system in a little while.

If you're a plant connoisseur or collector and currently like to only have one of everything so you can get as many different plants into your garden as possible, it may feel like a horrific act to waste space by repeating a plant when you could have used that space for something else. I assure you, though, it's not. Repeating key plants will lead the eyes round the garden and creates a stunning impact of colour and unity in your planting scheme.

Repeating key plants also helps bring clarity to your garden. Having recognisable elements throughout your planting borders, especially dramatic looking ones with a big impact brings the whole garden together in a way that's hard to put into words.



Lavenders repeat planted throughout this communal courtyard



Red geraniums repeat planted throughout this modern urban garden

What Qualities Make a Power Plant?

The main qualities of your star performing power plants are impact and longevity. Liken it to movie stars, you can tell at a glance who the A-listers are. Power plants have that certain something that makes you stand back and admire their beauty and presence in the garden. With A-list movie stars, the thing that makes them special might not be immensely showy, it can be a subtle quality that shines through when combined with the rest of their personality.

So beauty alone isn't enough. Your power plant can't be a one hit wonder. You need to choose something that will both flower and have interesting foliage for as many months as possible. For example if I had to choose between a Japanese Peonies and lavender as a power plant, I would choose the lavender in a heartbeat.

Initially you might think lavender is quite a common plant that's in a lot of gardens so it's not a star performer whereas the Japanese Peonies have the most amazing flowers - surely that's the star?

You're right about the Peony; it does have amazing flowers, for a week or two, if you're lucky. The slightest bit of frost, wind or rain and the flowers are gone. They also die back in the winter months so all you're left with are a few sticks. Lavenders flower for months, sometimes twice if you prune them and they have a nice compact evergreen form so there's something to look at in the winter months.

Now with that example I'm assuming the garden had the perfect growing conditions for the lavender. Like any plant, if you grow lavenders in conditions they're not suited for, then they won't look good or grow well and can end up looking unsightly.



Lavender and Peony

So continuing to use our lavender example, imagine a big clump of them with their soft, silver-grey foliage and intense purple-blue flowers in groups throughout a garden. The repetition of them throughout the scheme enhances their qualities - think strength in numbers.

Actually, think Riverdance! For those of us that saw Riverdance for the first time at the interval in the Eurovision song contest (before you ask, I was forced to sit through it) they started off with just a couple of people. Then as the music continued the numbers grew and grew into something that was breathtaking and went on to take the whole world by storm.

Now imagine if Riverdance had just stuck with the two people at the beginning. Would that have wowed the world in the same way? I suspect not. The original two were very good dancers but it wasn't until you saw them en masse that the impact really took hold. That's when they became star performers. Don't know about you, but I got goosebumps watching their performance. Imagine if you could do that with a planting scheme.

So the point I'm trying to make here is the power plants you choose for your garden don't need to have enormous flowers or the largest leaves - showing off is not a sign of power! The truly powerful plants and star performers are the ones that are good all-rounders and that work well as a group (we'll talk more about planting in groups in just a moment).

I'm going to share with you some of the plants I consider to be star performers to give you an idea of the types of plants that you can use. Before you add them to your list, do check they are suitable for your area. Stipa grasses, for instance, if they are too happy will seed themselves everywhere. Thankfully, where I live, the wet and cold weather slows them down and keeps them in check nicely.

My list does change quite frequently but here's my current top 5.

[Stipa tenuissima](#) – It's a grass that moves like hair in the wind and you just want to stroke it, and it's great to show off other plants around it. And I think it looks fantastic planted in big bold groups.



Stipa tenuissima

Agapanthus – Blue, purple or white flowering varieties are available. The flowers last a fair while and the semi-evergreen, strap shaped leaves make this a good plant to have, in my book.



Agapanthus

Perovskia Blue Spire – The Russian sage has white stems with greyish/blue foliage, which are scented, and stunning purple/blue flowers. I use this plant more at the middle to back of borders as it

can get 'leggy' and need other plants for support. Planted in big enough groups, you get clouds of blue in late summer.



Perovskia

Sedum Purple Emperor— The deep purple foliage and pink flowers are a good combination. It's a good plant to show off other plants around it – the flat-topped flowers make a good change of shape in the border. Although it's not evergreen, the dried flower stems look great in the winter months.



Sedum Purple Emperor

French Lavender – I love to see lavender planted in clumps and repeated around the garden, especially when used with grasses and more upright plant forms. When choosing French lavender, it's best not to go for the *Lavandula stoechas* but a named variety of it (there are loads to choose from). The original variety is a bit messy can get leggy more easily than some of the newer varieties.



My list does change from garden to garden, depending on the style and conditions, though it actually doesn't change that much by the style of the garden, more the conditions. That's because it's amazing how versatile a lot of plants are. Lavenders, for example, can be used in cottage gardens, formal and modern contemporary gardens - it all depends on what you place next to them.

For instance, if you place an Old English Rose next to lavender it is suitable for a cottage style garden. However, if you were to then put a Box hedge in front of that combination it will look very formal.

Take away the Rose and the Box hedge and place ornamental grasses next to the lavender and it would work in a modern or quite natural design, depending on the surrounding plants and landscaping materials.

I will cover how to create certain styles with your planting in more detail in Part 4.

So when you're making your lists of plants that are right for your garden, put an asterisk next to ones you really like, that are suitable to be your star performing power plants. If you find yourself putting an asterisk next to nearly everything on your list, then refine it down to the shape. Plants with a really clear outline are better choices for power plants as they'll help bring clarity to your scheme.

A plant that's very loose and grows all over the place isn't going to look as good as something that's has a defined form like our lavender example (unless you want to create a very wild and natural looking scheme). Once you've got a list of potential power plants, when we get to the planting plan system, I'll show you how to refine it and choose the best power plants for your scheme.

3 QUANTITY

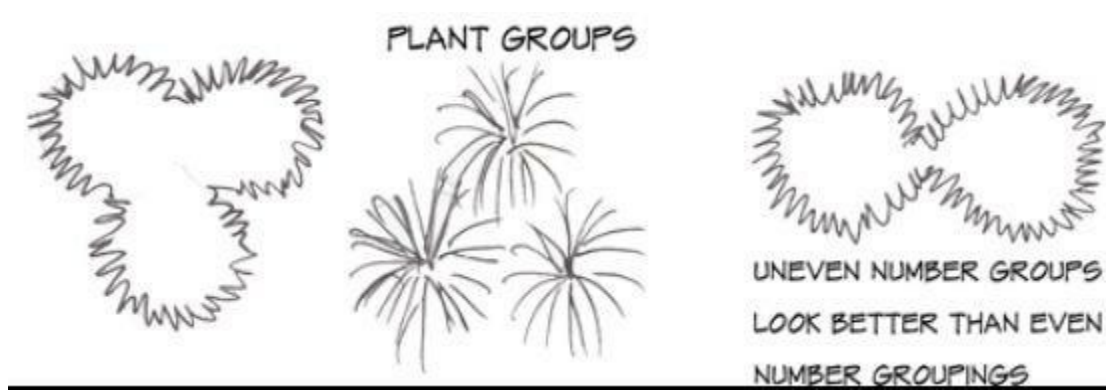
Here's another one to potentially upset the plant connoisseurs and collectors. Planting in groups. Yes, I know if you're a plant collector you want to have as many different plants in your garden as physically possible but in all honesty that just makes a plant zoo, not a great looking garden border.

Why Should You Plant in Groups?

The short answer is that when you plant in groups of three or more, the plants grow together into one mass and it makes your garden look more established. It also helps bring clarity into the borders because it's easier for the eyes to identify larger groups than picking out single plants.

Planting in groups also creates a lot more impact than just putting in a single plant. The Riverdance example we mentioned earlier applies perfectly here. One lavender is nice but a group of three, five, seven or more can look spectacular.

Now notice I didn't say two, four or six lavenders. I use odd numbers for a reason. A group of three plants grows into a nice even shape. Just plant two of something next to each other and they'll look like they are on sentry duty. They will look odd because you've used even numbers.



Now if you were feeling slightly alarmed at the thought of planting a garden using seven of something, that's usually only for larger areas. Though having said that planting in larger 'drifts' can be incredibly effective. So don't feel scared to have a really simple planting scheme with large numbers of plants but only a few varieties.

Good design isn't about cramming in as many things as possible. That somewhat irksome phrase "less is more" is a good one, as far as garden design is concerned.

So if you're someone that doesn't know many plants, thank goodness! You'll probably end up doing a much better planting plan design than someone that knows hundreds of different types of plants.

If you are that someone that does know hundreds of plants, it's going to be hard for you to restrain yourself. It's very challenging when you know there's thousands of amazing plants out there and you have to limit your choices. I do sympathise - it's like being in an enormous sweetie shop and being told you can only sample one per cent of what's on offer.

I face this dilemma every day as a designer. I will admit it's easier to be disciplined with other people's gardens than it is your own but even so, it has to be done if you want good results.

Think of creating a planting scheme like cooking a great meal. We all love hundreds of different foods and flavours but we all know that you can't cram all those flavours together in one meal. There is a limit to the number of taste sensations your palette can cope with in one hit. There's also a limit to how much your eyes can take in in one go before everything blurs into a messy mass of plants.

If you're beginning to think that I'm a party pooper and it's no fun if you can't have everything you want, don't worry. The method I'm going to show you in Part 4 will take all the pain of choosing which plants to have out of the process.

So, when it comes to compiling your lists, I want you to go for it; put as many plants that are suitable for your garden onto them. Then when you come to use the planting plan system you'll find that choosing which plants to have will be easy. Because we work with shape first, then colour, height and conditions, you'll find that the plant you need for a certain location will be so specific that only a few will meet the criteria, then it's just a matter of choosing your favourite.

When you plan your planting scheme this way round, finding a plant to do the job you need it to, rather than choosing the plant first, then trying to locate it somewhere, you'll find it a much simpler process and you'll be really glad about having an extensive list to work from. It will also be obvious which plant you need to choose.

It's true that you may not be able to put in every last plant you thought you wanted at the beginning, but the plants you do choose will be so valuable to you because they fulfil a certain role that you'll know you've made the right decision.

You might be feeling a little sceptical at this point but once you've seen how to put plants together in

combination, you'll see the value of both repeat planting and planting in quantity.

Not Everything is Suitable to Plant in Quantity

Now, having said planting in groups is a very effective way to plant a garden, you don't have to do it with every plant you put in, especially if your garden is quite small. The plants I tend to plant in groups are smaller, compact plants like our lavender example.

If you have a large shrub like a Buddleia (the butterfly bush), there's really no need to plant more than one because it gets so big so quickly. So always make the decision of how many based on the growth rate and eventual size of the plant. With *Viburnum tinus*, I would only plant one because it can get quite large. *Viburnum davidii*, however, I often plant in groups of three or five depending on the size of the garden because it is much slower growing and more compact.

If you don't know many plants, it can be quite tricky to judge a plant's growth rate. Unfortunately, you can't rely on books alone for this because they usually give the eventual height for a plant. The *Viburnum davidii* is a perfect example of this. It can reach over 6ft (1.80m) high but I know it's very slow growing and will probably take twenty years to do it. So, in my mind, I allow it to be between 3-4ft high and it can be pruned back to make sure it doesn't get taller.

So if you're not sure about a plant size, ask in a good garden centre or nursery and they should be able to tell you. Or you could always hire an hour or two of an expert's time to look over your planting plan, to make sure you've got everything in the right place in the right quantity.

Research is an important part of the planning process. In the first garden I ever designed, before my professional training, which was for my brave parents, I planted a nice large group of seven *Physalis* (the Chinese Lantern / Cape Gooseberry). Very pretty plant in the autumn with the bright orange lanterns and edible fruits in the centre - shame I didn't find out it grows like a Triffid until it was way too late! Frankly, one would have been more than enough but seven of the things was a nightmare.



Cape Gooseberry

Please don't let that story put you off the value of group planting. Done correctly, it's one of the main

tricks to creating stunning planting schemes. It does however lead us nicely onto our next key to creating the perfect planting plan.

4 HEIGHT AND SPREAD

It's an obvious one, I know. You already know you have to plant the tall plants at the back and small ones at the front of your plant borders but unless you really know your plants, it's actually surprisingly difficult to do with no experience.

I've already admitted to one mistake I made in my parent's garden. I feel I should say at this point that I hadn't been to college to learn how to do garden design properly when I did theirs. Designing my parent's garden was the test run to see if it was something that I liked and might be a career choice.

My main criteria for choosing plants for their garden were the colour and height of the plants (no, I didn't take into account the shape, which is how I know how important it is to get right!).

So I dutifully looked up in books all the plants I didn't know and made a note of how tall they got and when they flowered. I did a really good job on it. Except, I didn't.

The problem I found was the book would say something got between 40-60 cm tall so I would put it in a suitable location only to find that the actual plant bit (where the leaves were) was as flat as the proverbial pancake and the flower stems were the only parts that got that tall.

So I ended up with plants I'd chosen for their attractive leaves being completely obscured from view, only to be seen for the three weeks they flowered for.

I spent the first year and a half constantly moving plants back and forth because they didn't do what I expected them to do. It was very annoying after all the research I'd done.

These days, we have the magic of Google. So what I suggest you do is put the name of the plant you want to use and search Google Images for it. Seeing several photographs of that particular plant will enable you to see how it looks at different times of year. Then you can make a better judgement call on placement than I could over twenty years ago from a single tiny image in a book.

Also check how much a plant spreads, not just the height. That will help you avoid the mistake I made with the Chinese Lanterns /Cape gooseberry. You will undoubtedly come up with one book or online resource saying a plant gets to one height and spread and others saying something completely different. That's where Google Images helps you get a better feel for the plant.

Different locations will affect how large a plant gets, as well. We can grow many things in the UK that are considered invasive plants in the USA. Our wet weather and winter temperatures keep a lot of things in check. So when you are researching, make sure you're on a website that is relevant to your area.

A good double check to do if you're living in the USA is check the website of your State or look at the list on this website <http://www.invasive.org/species/weeds.cfm>. They will have a list of invasive plants to avoid putting in your garden.

I don't know about you but I don't have an excess of spare time. Actually, any spare time, now I think about it. So my style of gardening is to choose plants that will live happily in the conditions I have in my garden without becoming invasive.

I also try not to force things that don't have a hope in hell's chance of surviving. I do not want to be

spending time babysitting precious plants because they aren't suitable for my soil. So if you've got an alkaline soil and desperately want to grow acid loving plants, put them in raised borders or pots where you can control the acidity levels.

I've written a lot more about this in [How to Choose the Right Plants for Your Garden](#).

Going back to the Chinese Lanterns fiasco, I spent every year for the ten years we were there pulling them out, digging them out - I even used weed killer on them. I won eventually but it took me years. Good research will help you avoid these types of mistakes and make gardening easy for you in the future.



My parent's garden – before and after

Our final key for a successful planting plan is much more fun than reading up on height and spread of a plant.

5 COLOUR

For me, colour along with the shape of a plant, is what really makes a planting scheme come alive. You can do so much with colour, from monochrome planting schemes to mixing vibrant, strong colours together, or soft, subtle shades. The choice is yours and the combinations endless.

There are a few tips I can give you about how to get the best from your colour combinations. The first is that hot, bright colours like red and orange are better situated closer to the house and softer paler colours further away, especially in smaller gardens. That's because the vividness of the colour pulls the eyes more and will make them feel closer. So if you use pale colours at the end of the garden it will make the area look further away and create the illusion your garden is longer than it is.

The second tip is avoid clashing colours together, so pay particular attention to the reds. There are two types of red; orange/red and pink/red. So if you're creating a hot border with deep orange, yellow and red, the last thing you want is a red that's come from the pink spectrum. It will totally spoil the effect.

When you're choosing plants from books it's not always easy to tell what type of red a flower is, that's why a search on Google Images is helpful as you can compare lots of images with one glance. Also some flowers fade from red to pink as they age. Again, this can really spoil a scheme if you were aiming for a hot, fiery red!

Notice in the picture below how the first rose works with the orange-red Kniphofia but the scarlet red which is from the pink spectrum clashes.

AVOID CLASHING REDS

ORANGE-RED



SCARLET-RED



Red clashes with the pink in the next border

The thing with colour is although there are rules you can apply, what it really comes down to is personal taste. My father, for instance, loves bright pink, yellow and orange together. For me, that combination is an insult on my eyes! If you're living with someone that likes equally vivid combinations but you don't, all is not lost - you can add a 'pacifier' to the mix to make it work.

Pacifying colours are colours that work with anything because they don't clash. Blue, white, green and purple can work wonders for harmonising the clashers. If you put a blue plant in between or very close to the pink and yellow, the blue is strong enough to be the dominant colour and it works with both pink and yellow.

Another trick is to have the bright pink flower and a very soft yellow and then add other colours around it. The gentleness of the yellow works with the pink because it's closer to the white spectrum than the yellow.

Using pacifying colours is a good idea anyway as there will be times as you walk round the garden that you end up seeing a mixture of colours that you didn't plan for, purely because your vantage point

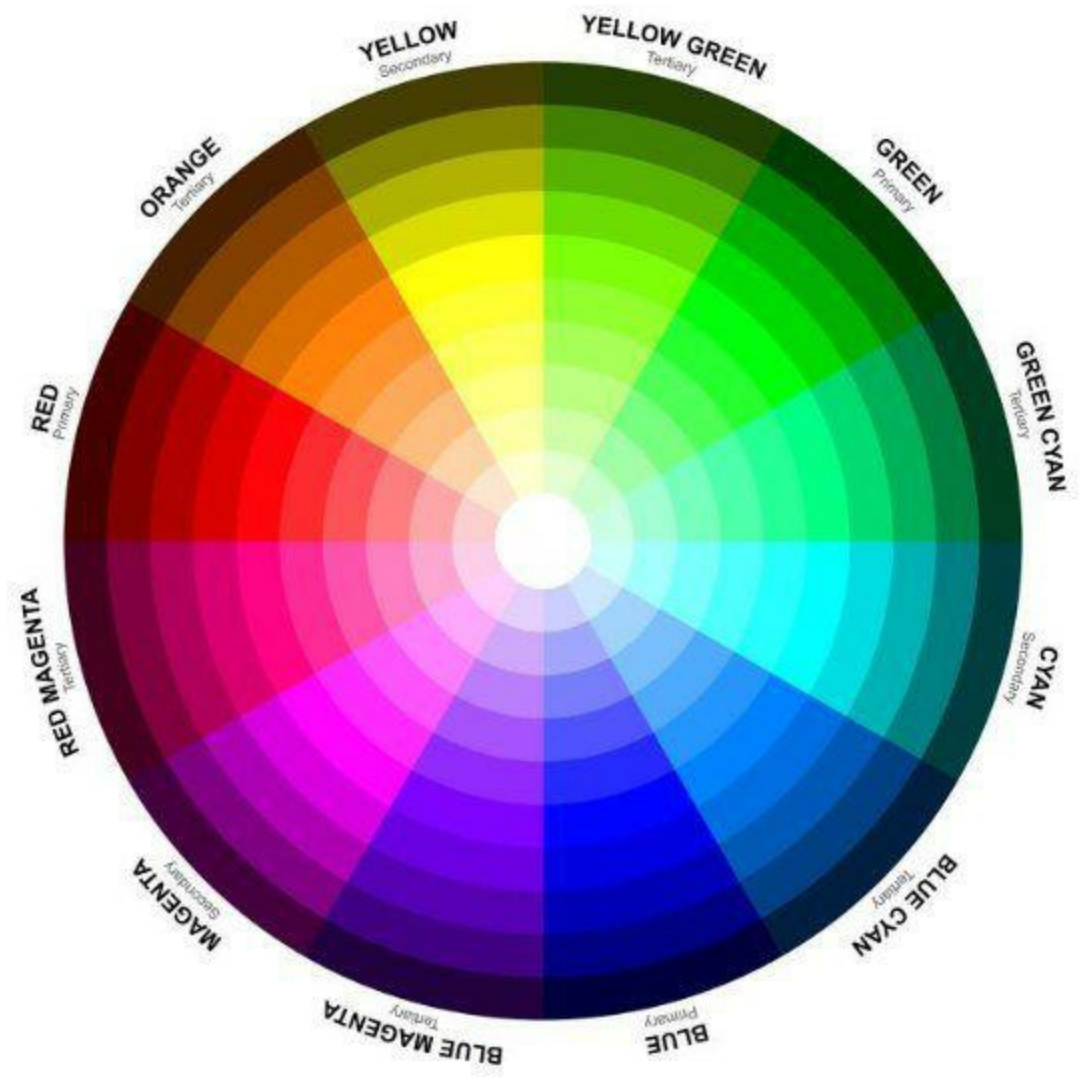
has changed as you've moved round the garden. If you've used a good sprinkling of blue, white, purple and green then there won't be a problem of clashing combinations.

There is one clash (my personal bugbear) that a pacifier won't save you from - the variegation clash. Variegated leaves tend to have a white variegation (area round the outside of the leaf) or a yellow variegation. Putting two different varieties of variegated plants next to one another never looks that great but it looks even worse if one has white margin to the leaf and the other yellow. So keep those two variegations as far away from one another as you can.

AVOID CLASHING VARIEGATED LEAVES













Continuing on with the variegation issue. It looks much better if you have a border of silver, white, grey plants to add a white variegation because it's on the same colour lines. White variegations also look nice with pink. The yellow variegation, not so much - it's too strong for the pink. So always keep in mind when using variegated foliage plants whether the variegation is in the white spectrum or the yellow and use accordingly to work with the rest of your colour scheme.



Do experiment with colour combinations and don't be scared of putting strong colours together. A particular favourite combination of mine is to use deep blue with scarlet red with purple foliage. Print images of plants and then you can cut them out and make an image board, trying different combinations.

You could also use a spreadsheet for this. If you've done your plant lists on a spreadsheet, just make the cells larger, add an extra column and add an image. You will need to click on the image properties and choose move and size with cells so it moves when you shuffle them around.

CLOSE UP	PHOTO	PLANT NAME <small>Please note: Height and spread will vary depending on conditions. All pictures and information to be used as a guide only.</small>	Type	Flwr colour	Foliage colour	Any other features	Season	Flwr time	HEIGHT	SPREAD	SOIL	ASPECT (pice)	Hardiness
		Allium Sphaerocephalon	Bulb	Pur	Green	Foliage in mid-winters		Su May - June	.60m	.15m	well drained	Sun - full to partial shade	very hardy zones 3 - 8
		Gaura Crimson Butterflies	Hp	Pink	Pur	Foliage		Sp / A	.45m	1m	most tolerates poor, dry soils	Sun - full	hardy zones 6 - 9
		Lavandula Munstead	EvSh	Blue	Grey / green	Foliage	Y Foliage	Su	.60m	.60m	well drained	Sun - full	zone 7
		Echinacea purpurea 'Magnus'	Hp	Pink	Green			Su	.60m	.30m	moist, drained	Sun - full	very hardy
		Stipa tenuissima	Grass	Whi	Green	dried stems & flower heads		Su July - Aug	.45m	.30m	most well drained	Sun - full to light shade	hardy

Spreadsheet plant list example

Don't Forget Green!

Green is everywhere in the plant kingdom, so much so that it's easy to forget that it's a colour in its own right. There are lots of shades of green, from the soft lime green of *Alchemilla mollis*, to dark glossy green of the laurel family. So it's not just a plant's flowers that you need to take into consideration. Also think about the impact the foliage colour will make.

ALCHEMILLA & LAUREL



Another tip for using colour is to be aware of sun and shade, as it will impact your choices. If you have an area of the garden that's in really deep shade, planting something with dark leaves and dark blue flowers isn't going to work because you'll never see them. White, yellow and soft pink are about the only colours that will be bright enough to be seen from a distance.

My final colour tip has nothing to do with plants but paint instead. In a house, using white makes a room look larger. Use dark colours and the opposite happens. In a garden, however, that is reversed. Black, green or brown colours blend into the natural landscape. White, on the other hand, leaps out and shouts "I'm here, notice me!" which is why the barns in the English countryside are all painted black and not white!

So if you're planning on painting fences, pergolas etc. be really careful with the colour you use. There

are lots of lovely shades to choose from; soft sage greens, to purple, midnight blue and beyond. Just be aware when you're choosing whether the colour comes from a white spectrum base or a dark one. Sage green has a lot of white in it and that will jump forward even though it's green. Painting a fence black (sounds awful but it can be very effective) would be less intrusive than the sage.

That's not to say you should never use sage green paint. I have, and it can look great. You just have to use it with care. If you have a large garden, it won't impact on it too much.



Sage green painted fence

You also need to take into consideration the colour of your planting border whenever you paint a fence. Make sure nothing clashes. Green can be a particularly difficult one to paint with because it looks so artificial when placed next to plants. If the green has enough black in it, there'll be no problems.

Getting back to plants, when it comes to doing your planting plan, it's a good idea to know which colours you want where in the garden. Some of that will be dictated by the light levels as only certain plants will grow in shade and this restricts what you can put where. For example, a lot of shade-loving plants have white flowers.

It's a good idea to get inspiration by looking at books and pictures of gardens. There's a free [garden ideas gallery](#) on the Successful Garden Design website that will help you. Also, look through books and magazines for ideas. If there are other people living with you in the house, get their input too.

Once you know what colours you like, then it's just a matter of working out the best place in the garden to put each colour combination. Whilst you're doing this also factor in your room decorations. If you always have orange-red accents in the room you view the garden from the most, having bright shocking pink in the flower borders will be a constant clash - even with pacifying plants!

Or if you know you'll be re-decorating soon, factor that in as well so the view from house to garden is harmonious and pleasurable.

What if you have a fairly established garden?

If you have a lot of existing plants, do the colour combinations work for you? If not, think about moving things to work with the new scheme. If there's no specific colour combination to think of, just a mix of colours, that's also fine, just make sure that anything you add works with it and enhances the existing planting. We'll cover more on how to do just that shortly.

If you have really established borders and moving things around isn't an option, don't worry. In Part

5, I will show you some clever cheats that will enable you to quickly and easily rectify any messy planting schemes without moving a single plant.

So now you know the components of the creating the perfect planting plan you just need to know which style of garden you want and the system that will enable you to do it.

PART 2 – QUICK REFERENCE RE-CAP

SHAPE – always put different shape plants next to one another for clarity in your design.

POWER PLANTS – choose some star performers to repeat in different locations around your garden.

QUANTITY – planting in groups is visually more effective than single plants and will help the garden to look established quicker.

HEIGHT & SPREAD – research how large things get but also find out how quickly they grow so you can ascertain which plants are suitable for planting in groups.

COLOUR – choose colours that suit your tastes, inside and out. Use pacifying colours like blue, purple, white and green to help avoid colour clashes. Be careful with red – find out if it is a pink/red or an orange/red you're using.

Part 3 – How to Create Different Garden Styles with Your Planting Scheme

Before we launch into specific garden styles, I think now would be a good time to look at what makes for a good garden plant overall, regardless of the particular style you are wanting to create.

Choosing plants

I used to be a plant connoisseur, so I fully understand the drive to grow unusual and rare lovelies but they don't always make for the best looking garden. Your first criteria for choosing a plant should be shape, not how rare it is. When I was learning about design, the first book I ever read was by John Brookes and he very firmly put me in my place about choosing plants for their obscurity rather than by what they actually give to a planting scheme.

A lot of the horticultural curiosities are fascinating, especially if you've read about them in the RHS magazine where they tell you about the intrepid explorers that rescued the plant from the brink of extinction in the wild, but that doesn't necessarily make them garden worthy.

What makes a worthy garden plant?

Any plant you put in your garden must fulfil a purpose, aside from the fact no one else in your street has one. Each plant must earn its place based on the shape, colour, size and longevity of the prized attribute: be it attractive leaves, flowers or berries. If you've chosen some obscure thing that was discovered in the Himalayas and you need a magnifying glass to see the leaves and flowers, that doesn't cut the grade. Sorry, but it doesn't. Not if you want to create an attractive planting scheme.

Now, if you are living with someone that collects plants, it's their hobby and passion, then it's going to be a bit tricky. You'll have to find a way of reaching a compromise that allows your partner to

collect and not have it impact the garden too much. You can do this by either having allocated areas for their prized specimens or at least insist that the main view out of the windows you look out from the most has an attractive planting scheme.

When each new addition to the collection arrives, you can try to help place it near plants that will help accentuate its attributes with their shape and colour.

Combining Plants to Suite Your Style of Garden

The wonderful thing about plants is their versatility, especially when combined properly with one another. They give you the ability to create any type of scheme you desire, from formal to natural, and everything in between. It is the combinations that give a planting scheme its flavour.

For example, foxgloves (*Digitalis*) are often associated with cottage gardens, especially when combined with irises, lavenders and roses. But if you combine the foxgloves with grasses you can create a natural meadow effect. Yet, if you were to add a group of tightly clipped box globes with the foxgloves and grasses, behind a low rendered wall, then suddenly you have a contemporary feel to the scheme.

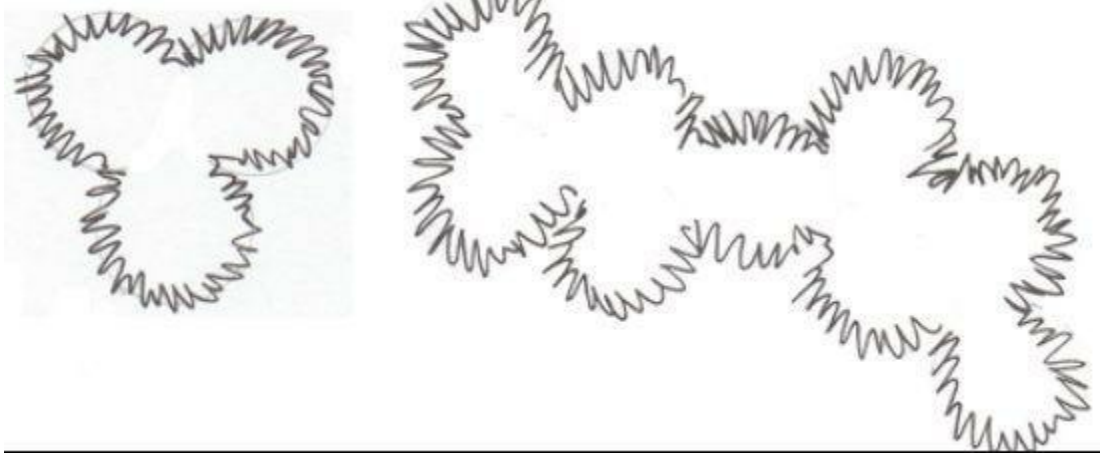


It's not just the plant choice that creates the style; it's also to do with how you plant. You might plant in the groups of 3,5,7 etc. that we've already mentioned or you may decide to plant in large drifts that flow like streams into one another creating a river of plants.

So what is the difference between a group and a drift of plants?

It comes mostly down to the quantity of plants you use and the shape as illustrated below. If you are planting in groups of three then you end up with a triangle of plants that eventually grows into one large round mass – that's a group. With a drift, it tends to be larger than five of something and the shape is more linear. Now I don't mean planting in a straight line, I mean the overall shape the plants make together isn't round like our group example.

GROUP & DRIFT PLANTING



When choosing the style of planting you wish to create, first ask yourself the following questions:

1. Does the look you like work with your home and existing style of garden?
2. Will that style of planting work with your climate and conditions?
3. How much maintenance is the style you like the most?

If you have a beautiful modern designer home, cottage style planting really isn't going to do it justice. Now, that's not to say you can't litter the garden with foxgloves and lavenders - you absolutely can - you just need to balance it using more architectural plants and complimenting materials.

If you live somewhere really cold and want to create a Mediterranean style of garden, it's going to be tough to achieve, though not impossible. There are fairly hardy plants that look exotic that can be used to create the feel of the garden style you want, though you may have to wrap them up in the winter months to help protect them from severe frost.

If you have decided to go for exotic looking plants in a frosty area, are you prepared to spend the time adding winter protection to keep them alive every year?

Now you've had a look at what you really want and what it will take to achieve it, are you still as enamoured with the idea? If not, pick a style that does suit both your home and lifestyle. It will be much easier in the long run. If you are determined to create a tropical garden somewhere highly unsuitable, you still can - you just need to do so by carefully choosing plants that have the highest chance of survival.

My personal preference is to make life as easy as possible. I don't have time spare to be playing munn to a garden full of high maintenance plants so I choose things that can take being neglected and suit the conditions I have in my garden.

Let's now look at some key characteristic of different styles of garden. The plants listed here may not be suitable for your part of the world, so use the pictures as an example and then find similar looking plants to suit your corner of the globe. Now, it might be that you're not looking to achieve a particular garden style, you just want an attractive planting scheme. Still, take a look at the style guides as you might see things that inspire you in a way you might not have thought of.

STYLE GUIDE

The following section is going to go over the key elements that make each style distinctive. There are many plants that can be used in each style. The ones listed here are the core ones that define each

style for me. There are, of course, crossover elements; you'll see some plants listed in multiple sections. This is because landscape design, like anything, has evolved and each style is often based on another.

If you can, use the plants in the list, and then choose other plants you like to go with them. That way, you'll achieve the style you want in your garden. If the plants listed aren't suitable for the conditions of your garden, then go along to a good local nursery or garden centre and ask them to suggest alternatives that will grow in your area.

ISLAMIC GARDEN STYLE

ISLAMIC GARDEN – These were among the first gardens to be documented in the history books that functioned for their beauty rather than purely to grow food and medicinal plants. The element of water and symmetry play heavily in this style of garden. The Alhambra garden in Granada, Spain, is probably the most widely known example of this style of garden in Europe.

The space in the garden was often divided into four main sections often with a central fountain or pool, which is the focus of the garden.

The types of plants used: palms, acacias, boxwood (box), rosemary and other scented plants

Materials: the use of tiles and mosaics laid in intricate geometric patterns help define the style of the Islamic garden.



Alhambra Palace garden – Granada, Spain



Alhambra Palace garden – Granada, Spain

FORMAL GARDEN STYLE

FORMAL GARDEN – There's one key element that instantly screams formal and that's clipped hedges. These hedges, most commonly box and yew are the backbone of the planting structure in formal gardens. Patterns also play a role, as does symmetry in design shapes.

There are different degrees of formality. There's the 'nothing but hedges, lawn and gravel type' that you often see around stately homes and castles and then there's the forerunner to the cottage garden style, which mixes exuberant planting with the tightly clipped hedges keeping everything neat and in place. There is careful use and control of colour in this type of garden. The Sissinghurst gardens in Sussex are a great example of this.

Key Plants Associated with Formal Gardens

Box hedging & topiary (Buxus)

Yew hedging & topiary (Taxus)

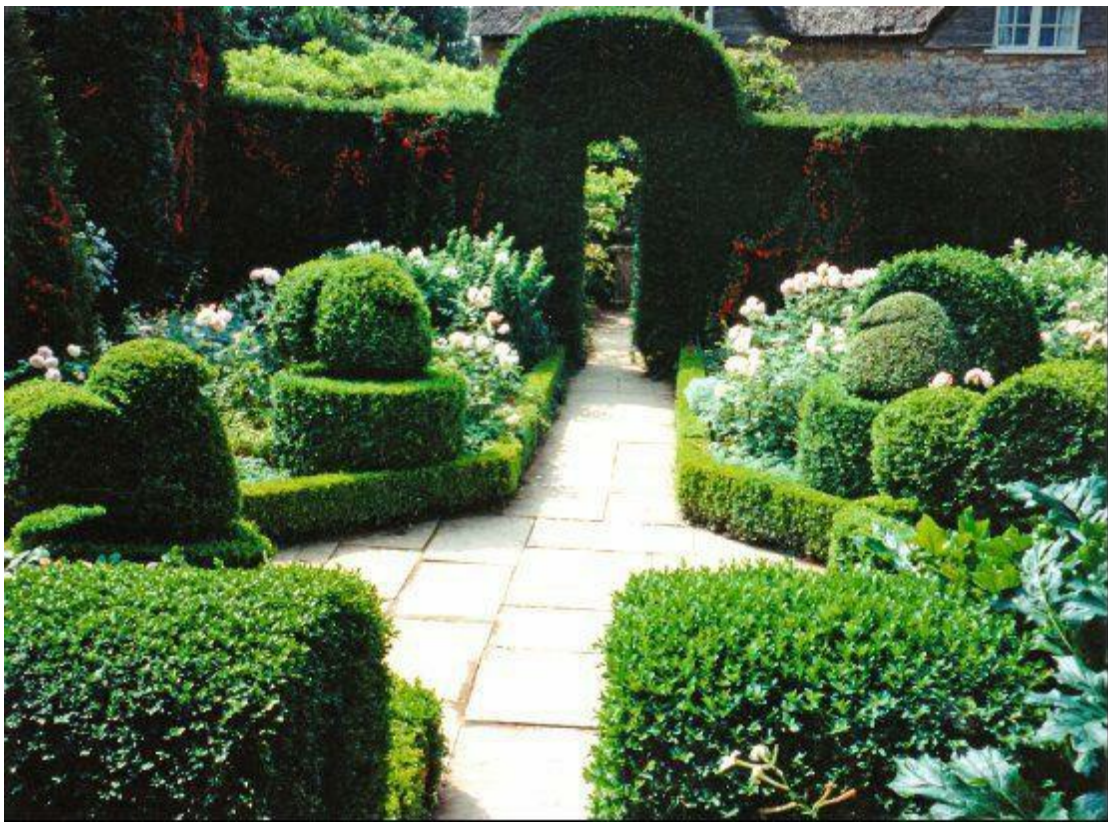
Roses, Lavenders, Delphiniums,



Sissinghurst Gardens – Kent, UK



Sissinghurst Gardens – Kent, UK



Hidcote Garden – Gloucestershire, UK

COTTAGE / ENGLISH GARDEN STYLE

COTTAGE / ENGLISH GARDEN – Take away the clipped hedging, mix and match the plant varieties and colour a bit more and intersperse with a few fruit and vegetables and you have a cottage garden.

There are a lot of flowers in the cottage garden style. Everything grows into one another and colours are all mixed together like a paint-splattered canvas. Without the box hedges holding everything in place, plants flop over paths and lawns and this creates a very relaxed and gentle looking scheme.

Don't be fooled by the relaxed planting. Underneath all those plants doing whatever they like is a very formal design structure. Paths and lawn shapes are still very traditional geometric shapes like rectangles and circles. There is still plenty of order in the design. It's only the plants that are allowed to be in seeming chaos.

Whilst the formal clipped hedges have gone in cottage gardens, there is still the occasional bit of topiary. This does help add a bit of clarity to the planting scheme. Also, you might see a path with a box globe either side of it at beginning and end which links back to the Cottage Garden's formal ancestry.

Cottage gardens are absolutely glorious in the summer months when everything is in flower but they can be quite messy and empty the rest of the year. So instead of using annual plants that are only in existence for one year and die off as soon as they've flowered and produced seed, use plants that look similar but have a longer life cycle, like biennials (two year life cycle) and herbaceous perennials mixed with some shrubs for structure.

Key Plants Associated with Cottage Gardens

There are flowers of all shapes and sizes in cottage gardens but there is often a predominance of very

tall flowers, like delphiniums, hollyhocks, foxgloves, lupins etc.

Then there are the old favourites of traditional roses and lavenders. There are also a good selection of 'flopplers'. That's my term for the plants that flop over paths and lawns like Red Valerian (*Centranthus ruber*), Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*), Catmint (*Nepeta*), Russian Sage (*Perovskia*). These help add the softness to the planting scheme.

Even though the cottage garden style is very relaxed with the planting, you still need to take into account the shape and height etc. of each plant. I tend to create a modern version of this style of garden by including shrubs at the back that help set off the colour of the flowers and add structure (like *Berberis purpurea* and *Ceanothus*). This enables the look and feel of the cottage garden in the summer when everything is in flower but it also allows the garden to continue to look good at other times of the year.

Repeat planting is a must in the cottage garden as it helps to make it look like plants have seeded their way round the garden. You can mix the groups more so that there are two plants in a group rather than just one. That adds to the wilder feel of this style of garden because in nature things don't grow in perfect groups; they randomly appear wherever they like. So, for example, you could have three irises and three *Alchemilla mollis* together in a mixed group at various intervals around the garden.



Chelsea Flower Show Garden



Chelsea Flower Show Garden

NATURAL GARDEN STYLE

NATURAL GARDEN – for me, the natural garden is like a stripped back cottage garden (blasphemy for nature lovers, I know) with the addition of grasses, wildflowers. and trees. The reason I think of it still as based on the cottage garden is the looseness of the planting. Yes, obviously its aim is to mimic the best of nature and provide habitats for wildlife but it does still need some design elements to be thought about.

With a cottage garden, everything grows into one big mass and this certainly happens with a natural looking planting scheme but even more so. With the cottage garden, I recommended having two different plants mingled in the planting groups but with a natural garden you want to stretch that even further with having four or five different plant varieties in large groups or swathes of planting. Basically you are creating a meadow of plants with strategic access routes cut through to get from A to B and create views where you need them.

It's also nice to have the occasional tree rising up through the swathes of plants. Trees like Silver Birch (*Betula*) are good for this and even work in smaller gardens if you are tight on space.

If your garden is small and a wildflower meadow isn't possible but you love the feel of one then you can still create the feel of it by blending three or more plants together in groups. The trick is to keep the quantity of different plants quite low. So in a cottage garden you might have fifty or more different types of plant but in a natural garden you probably want to slim it down to less than twenty different types of plant. Now, of course, the exact number will all depend on the size of garden you have but that's to give you an idea of reducing the number of different varieties.

In natural environments, you often see just a handful of plants dominating the area, so you need to recreate that concept in your garden. Now, natural doesn't have to be a wildflower meadow; that is just what I'm most commonly asked for when people say "I want a natural looking garden".

Natural can mean using plants that are native to your area. In parts of England, that might not be a huge

range, but in parts of the USA it can mean a tremendous selection. So do let nature be your ultimate guide on how you combine your plants.

You can make artistic adjustments to get the scheme to work for your needs but do first take your inspiration from the natural environment if that's what you want to create. Desert conditions will have a lot more space between the plants than a wildflower meadow style for example so cramming in lots of plants won't look right.

Key Plants Associated with Natural Gardens (UK)

Wildflowers

Meadow grasses

Trees

Bulbs



East Ruston Old Vicarage Garden - Norwich, UK



East Ruston Old Vicarage Garden - Norwich, UK

EXOTIC GARDEN STYLE

EXOTIC GARDEN – Plants for this style of garden tend to have large leaves and a strong architectural form like a palm tree. These types of plants don't tend to be that hardy so they are not suitable for areas that get a lot of frost. If you do live in a cold climate you may find that there are plants that give the feel of an exotic garden but are hardy enough to grow in the conditions you have.

The other option is to protect the plants in the winter months by either covering with frost protecting membrane or sacking material that will keep a few degrees of frost off. Some palms can survive in cooler climates with some frost protection. A good garden centre, nursery or exotic plant specialist will be able to advise you on what's likely to survive in your area.

You can also cheat in the summer using exotic looking annuals like Cannas and Ricinus – technically these aren't real annuals as they do have a longer life span than a year in their native environment. It's only the cold that kills them so garden centres sell them with the summer annuals.

RICINUS & CANNA LILIES



If you mix these exotic summer plants with large-leaf tougher plants like *Viburnum rhytidophyllum*, *Viburnum davidii* etc. then you can achieve the look you want. And if your heart is set on having palm trees in your garden, by growing them in pots and bringing them inside during the worst of the winter, they will survive.

Basically creating an exotic planting scheme in a colder area does take some work but if it's really what you want, then it is possible with a bit of effort and careful plant choices.

Key Plants Associated with Exotic Gardens

Palms (Phoenix varieties)

Banana (Musa – Musa basjoo is one of the hardiest)

Agave

Phormium

Fatsia

Cordylines

Succulent plants like Cacti





Front Garden Austin, Texas, USA

MEDITERRANEAN GARDEN STYLE

MEDITERRANEAN GARDEN – this style of garden is similar to the exotic style of planting but with a lot more colour. So you could use all of the plants listed in the exotic section along with olives, citrus fruit, Bougainvilleas and Hibiscus. If you live in colder climates, the olive might be OK with some winter protection but citrus fruits will need to be brought inside for the winter months and Bougainvillea is unlikely to grow if there's frost.

Nothing really replaces Bougainvillea but you could try the purple Passion Flower instead. Again, it's not hardy everywhere, so do check which zone you live in before buying one.

There are lots of Mediterranean plants that will tolerate light frost as long as there is sufficient drainage because it's the wet in the winter that does as much damage as anything. So if you have a clay soil that gets water logged in winter, you'll need to add plenty of grit under the plant to help drainage. Never add sand to a clay soil as it will make matters worse.

Mediterranean plants won't survive in a permanently waterlogged soil though, so make sure you only put them in the dry, sunny areas of your garden. If you can create a feel of the style of garden you want to achieve by using some key plants and then fill in with plants that are more suited to your garden's conditions, you will achieve the look you want.

Key Plants Associated with Mediterranean Gardens

Bougainvillea

Hibiscus

Lavender (Lavandula varieties)

Rosemary (Rosmarinus varieties)

Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris* varieties)

Daisy-like flowers like *Osteospermum*, *Mesembryanthemum*



Southern Spain



Modern Courtyard Garden - Southern Spain



CONTEMPORARY GARDEN STYLE

CONTEMPORARY GARDEN – with a contemporary style of garden you can pretty much choose whichever plants you like. What defines this style of garden is more to do with how you plant and the types of landscaping materials you've used.

The thing I love about the contemporary style of garden is you can mix quite a natural planting scheme with smooth white rendered walls and crisp looking natural stone with hardwood decking. My favourite way to plant a contemporary garden is to mix the natural style of planting with an exotic and/or cottage style.

That probably sounds a little bizarre so let me explain what I mean. I use grasses as the base plant to my scheme, planted in decently sized drifts. Then I'll add plants like Allium to come up through the grasses. I will also put some strong architectural plants into the mix like Phormiums and Fatsia.

It's important to not have too many different varieties of plants. Keep the palette limited and repeat plant. It needs to be quite a simple scheme. If you fill it full of nothing but flowers and they are all competing for attention, you'll lose the calmness of the contemporary style.

Let's face it; anyone that lives in a pristine, modern house with a focus on clean lines can't keep that style by being a clutter-monkey! The same applies in the garden. You can get away with a natural, almost wild look but it can't be cluttered with lots and lots of different plant varieties.

It doesn't matter if your house isn't in a modern style, you can still create a contemporary style of garden. In the UK, we have lots of quite old houses that have been refurbished inside to a very contemporary design style, yet the outside of the property might be Victorian. It works because when you are inside the house, you are less aware of the architecture of outside the building.

In the garden, it works to look out to a very modern style, especially if the interior of your home is quite modern. The only time it doesn't work so well is when you are at the bottom of the garden looking back up to the house. Then it's obvious there's a bit of a clash of styles but as most people spend more time in their house looking out, they tend to still go for this option, even in a period

property.

If you do live in a building that's very modern, then you can really go to town with the design phase and use materials and arrange the space to tie into the dimensions of the building. For example, have a deck area the exact width of your patio doors, surrounded by natural stone and other deck sections at appropriate points to mimic features of the house design as shown in the picture below.



Key Plants Associated with Contemporary Gardens

Grasses – like *Stipa tenuissima*, *gigantea*, *Miscanthus* varieties, *Calamagrostis*

Alliums, *Agapanthus*

French lavender (*Lavandula papillion* varieties)

Black Bamboo (*Phyllostachys negra*)

Groups of Silver Birch (*Betula jacquemontii*)



Contemporary Garden - UK (Photo credit N. Townley)





Allium Purple Sensation with Stipa tenuissima

ORIENTAL GARDEN STYLE

ORIENTAL GARDEN – There are many different types of oriental gardens, from the Zen garden with the raked gravel, to the Chinese classical garden that mimics the natural landscape. If you want to create the real thing, you will need to do plenty of research.

If you just want to recreate the essence of an oriental garden, that's fairly easy to do as the landscaping materials, features and planting are very distinctive. The main concept behind these gardens is to mimic nature, so you'll never see a square pond in a traditional oriental garden.

There are also areas of open space in the garden. The use of rock, stone and gravels blend in with the planting, water and gentle undulations and slopes of the ground.

The centre of the garden is always empty and there is never perfect symmetry. So you won't see an area of lawn with equal width planting borders surrounding it. To help you visualise the concept, just think about rivers of gravel and stone, lawn, planting and water all flowing together as one harmonious entity. The lawn and gravel areas would be the largest of our 'rivers' and then the plants and finally water element are the smallest.

Thinking in terms of something fluid helps steer you away from a traditional western approach to gardens, with straight lines and perfect symmetry.

The exact plants you use will of course depend upon the type of oriental garden you are trying to recreate. If you just want the essence, then the following plants are a good place to start.

Key Plants Associated with Oriental Gardens

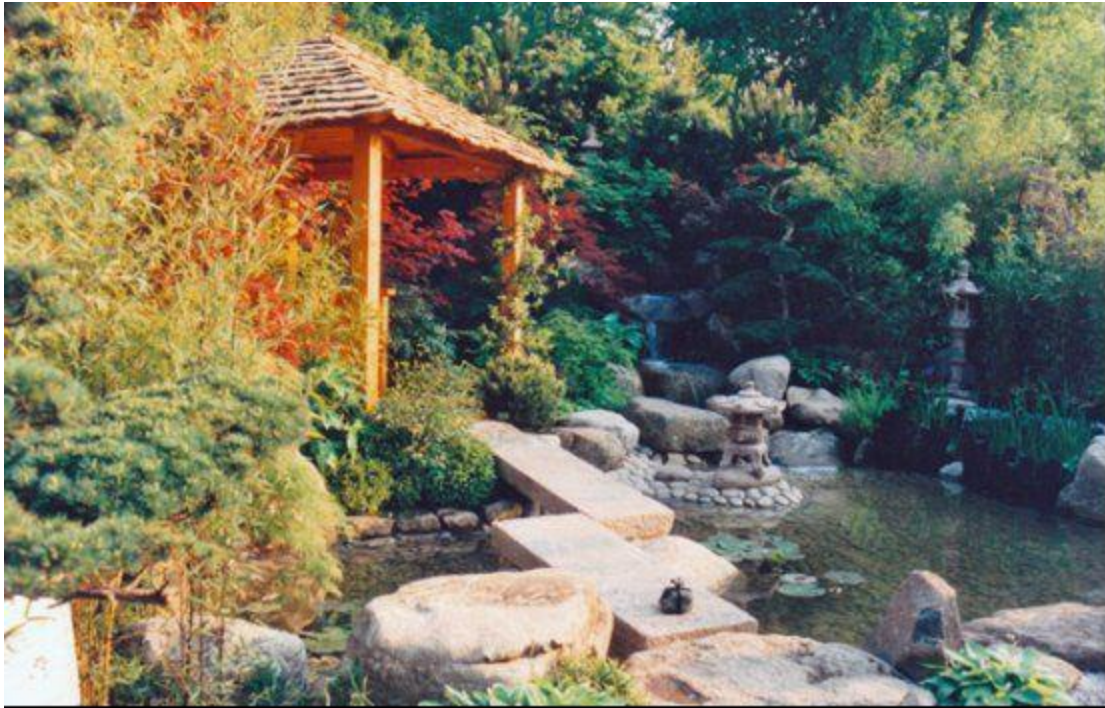
Bamboo

Japanese Acer

Wisteria

Small pines & conifers

Silver Birch trees



Oriental style garden at the Chelsea Flower Show, London



EDIBLE GARDEN STYLE

EDIBLE GARDEN – these are becoming increasingly popular with the ever-increasing price of food and people's desire to know where their food came from. There's no reason an edible garden can't look as good as it tastes!

The main thing you need to do is choose how much of your garden you want to be edible. 100% is

certainly possible. A good mix of fruit trees, vegetables, edible flowers and herbs can look spectacular.

An edible garden is going to be quite high maintenance so it might be easier to reduce the percentage of edible to non-edible plants. A backbone of traditional shrubs with the edible plants in front works well.

You still need to think about the shape of each plant you put in. That part doesn't ever change with plant design. With an edible garden, you do have an extra thing to take into account and that's the longevity of the plant you are putting in. Lettuce, for instance, is not going to be there all year round, so you will also need to either have a replacement lined up for the winter or plant the lettuce somewhere that's slightly hidden so you don't notice the gap.

The style of garden is totally up to you. There are no rules for edible gardens. So if you want to create a contemporary looking garden using edible plants, you can. Plants like sweet corn are very architectural and can look great combined with grasses.

The cottage garden style lends itself very well to edible plants as it was the original edible garden. You can either mix the edible plants in with the flowers or have an area with a box hedge separating it from the rest of the garden and grow your vegetables behind the box hedge. This will then help disguise any messy bits and bald patches as you harvest your produce.

The key plants for an edible garden are going to be whatever you like to eat, but here's a few of my favourites:

Key Plants Associated with Edible Gardens

Sweet corn

lettuce

carrots

peaches

cherries

apples

tomatoes

potatoes

red cabbage

nasturtiums

One last thing I would say about choosing which edible plants you grow is to pick things you really like! I know that is incredibly obvious but the number of times I have got carried away when sowing vegetable seeds with things I don't often eat, like tomatoes, then not known what to do with them all at harvest time.



Edible Garden



Beetroot in an Edible Garden

URBAN GARDEN STYLE

URBAN GARDEN – for me, an urban garden should be a bit jungly looking. Most urban gardens are quite small but that doesn't mean to say the planting should be. I don't mean you should add something that's going to get 50m tall. I mean create a carefully controlled jungle.

For example, in the UK you can use a tall grass like *Arundo donax* (do not plant this in warm countries as it will become invasive) can look fabulous. It helps to contain the root system as it does like to spread, which is why you can't plant it anywhere warm because it will take over. In the UK, it's not totally hardy and our cold, wet winters keep it in check nicely. Its architectural and jungle-like quality make it really stand out in a small urban garden, as shown in the picture below.



Urban Garden - UK

You can also use plants that over time may get quite large as long as you keep them well pruned. Only do this if you know you have the discipline to go out each year and prune things back. There's nothing worse than a garden that's overgrown and out of control.

So be careful with your plant choices and don't get anything that grows very quickly. You'll get away with using large plants if they are slow growing. I made this mistake with a Eucalyptus once in my parent's garden. I was intending to keep it as a large bush (yes, now I know – Eucalyptus grow at a rate of knots).

Needless to say, other than the fact it is a miracle my parents still talk to me after all the errors I made in their garden, this thing took off and there was no stopping it. I'm sure I only forgot to prune it one year and the next time I looked, it was a 30 ft tree. Oops. Still, at least I got all these mistakes out the way in their garden and not with paying clients!

So, anyway, back to our large-leaf beauties. Don't let my Eucalyptus story put you off using larger plants. As long as you get slow growing varieties you'll be fine. If you're not sure just ask for advice when at the garden centre or nursery.

Using larger plants does actually make a small garden look bigger, if done correctly. I think it fools the mind into thinking that a plant that large would only grow in a big garden. The other way larger plants help make smaller gardens look larger is they help obscure the view a little and whenever you can't quite see to the end of a garden, your mind will assume there's a lot more round the corner/behind the plant that you can't quite see round.

The other trick to successfully planting a smaller size of garden is to allow more room for the lawn and patio and reduce the size of the plant borders. This is because the plants will grow beyond their allotted space and start to encroach on your patio and lawn, which will make the garden feel too enclosed and, therefore, smaller.

If you allow for this at the outset, you won't be continually pruning everything back to keep it under control. So, for example, if you want a plant border to be 4ft (1.20m) wide, if you make it 3ft (1m) wide to begin with, which allows some wriggle room for the plants to grow, rather than starting out

with a 4ft border and it ending up with a 5ft one instead.

For me, urban gardens tend to have a little more focus on foliage than flowers because in a limited garden you do need plenty of evergreen plants to create year round interest.

Also, there tends to be a lot more shade because of surrounding buildings and many evergreen shrubs do well in shady conditions.

Key Plants Associated with Urban Gardens

Tall grasses

Bamboo

Fatsia

Aucuba

Viburnum

Hydrangea

Dicksonia



Urban Garden - UK



Colour Combining

I'm now going to share with you some of my favourite colour combinations and plant schemes. You can then use these as a foundation for your own scheme.

Do bear in mind that these are just examples for you to base your scheme on. There's more than a high probability that your soil and aspect are going to be completely different to the ones shown here. I know it would be lovely to be able to give you an entire planting border and say "here you are, it's done!" Unfortunately, it never works out quite like that because every garden is different.

So what I tend to do is have a combination of between 3-5 plants that go together really well in certain situations. I call this the Core Combination. So if I have a shady corner, I'll start off with my favourite Core Combo and then work my way out from that.

This enables me to keep each planting plan different yet still have a tried and tested formulas in key areas that I know will always look good.

Rachel's Secret Core Combinations

Well, I guess these are not going to be quite so secret any more, but I've never told a living soul about these until now! I must admit, I feel a bit exposed giving these out, but I know it will help you to have some starting points that work well together. I suppose it's a bit like recipe ingredients; we all know that sage and onion, pork and apple are great together. Well, my Core Combos are my planting plan versions of this.

One thing you will notice is I don't have many Core Combinations for really tall things. That's because I will add the tall things behind the medium sized combination, so they basically have to fit around an existing Core Combination and therefore I've not really needed to create many tall combinations. Plus the majority of gardens these days don't have room for really large plants.

The other thing you'll notice is there aren't many combinations that are garden style specific. Part of the beauty of these Core Combinations is because the group is so small, between 3-5 different plant varieties, you can use them as a foundation in a lot of different styles of garden. You may alter the

way you plant, for instance, planting in large drifts rather than small groups, but the varieties in the combination stays the same.







Now, although I do design gardens all over the globe, these combinations are primarily from my experience with UK gardens, so they won't be suitable for every country. Hopefully, though, they will still give you a good sense of how to combine plants if you're outside of the UK and the conditions in your garden are dramatically different.

There will mostly likely be plants that create similar effects in your country. You may also find that most of the combination is available in your part of the world, and you may only need to substitute a plant that isn't hardy enough in your region.

The photos shown here don't really do the combinations justice compared to how they look in the garden, but they will hopefully give you an idea of the colours and types of plants used.

SUNNY CONDITIONS – tall

Cotinus coggygria Royal Purple, Rosa glauca, Ceanothus Puget Blue,

CLOSE UP	PHOTO	PLANT NAME
		Please note: Height and spread will vary depending on conditions. All pictures and information to be used as a guide only.
		Cotinus Royal Purple
		Rosa glauca (rubifolia)
		Ceanothus Puget Blue

SUNNY CONDITIONS









medium height

Rose LD Braithwaite or Rose William Shakespeare, Perovskia Blue Spire, Weigela Alexandra Rose
Lavandula Munstead











CLOSE UP	PHOTO	PLANT NAME Please note: Height and spread will vary depending on conditions. All pictures and information to be used as a guide only.
		Rose David Austin 'L D Braithwaite'
		Rose David Austin 'William Shakespeare' 2000
		Perovskia atriplicifolia 'Blue Spire'
		Weigela 'Alexandra' (Roses & Wine)
		Lavandula Munstead

SUNNY CONDITIONS – lower growing and ground cover











Nepeta mussini, Hemerocallis Gentle Shepherd, Cistus decumbens, Bergenia cordifolia

CLOSE UP	PHOTO	PLANT NAME Please note: Height and spread will vary depending on conditions. All pictures and information to be used as a guide only.
		Nepeta mussinii - Catmint
		Hemerocallis Gentle Shepherd
		Bergenia cordifolia
		Cistus Decumbens

Stipa tenuissima, Allium Purple Sensation, Alchemilla mollis, Iris Sable, Heuchera Obsidian











CLOSE UP	PHOTO	PLANT NAME Please note: Height and spread will vary depending on conditions. All pictures and information to be used as a guide only.
		Stipa tenuissima
		Allium Purple Sensation
		Alchemilla mollis (Lady's mantle)
		Iris Sable
		Heuchera Obsidian

Sedum Purple Emperor, Agapanthus, Santolina Edward Bowles, Iris Sable or Iris Jane Phillips

CLOSE UP	PHOTO	PLANT NAME Please note: Height and spread will vary depending on conditions. All pictures and information to be used as a guide only.
		Iris Jane Phillips *Poisionous if eaten
		Sedum 'Purple Emperor'
		Agapanthus Purple Cloud
		Santolina 'Edward Bowles'
		Bergenia Bressingham White








SHADY CONDITIONS – medium height

Choisya ternata, Aucuba japonica Variegata, Fatsia japonica, Hydrangea quercifolia, Viburnum davidii

CLOSE UP	PHOTO	PLANT NAME Please note: Height and spread will vary depending on conditions. All pictures and information to be used as a guide only.
		Choisya ternata (Mexican Orange Blossom)
		Fatsia japonica
		Aucuba japonica 'Variegata' (Spotted Laurel)
		Hydrangea quercifolia
		Viburnum davidii

SHADY CONDITIONS – low growing and ground cover

Veronica gentianoides, Ajuga Catlin's Giant, Alchemilla mollis, Bergenia cordifolia,

CLOSE UP	PHOTO	PLANT NAME Please note: Height and spread will vary depending on conditions. All pictures and information to be used as a guide only.
		Veronica gentianoides
		Ajuga Catlins Giant
		Alchemilla mollis (Lady's mantle)
		Bergenia cordifolia

PART 3 – QUICK REFERENCE RE-CAP

Choose a style of garden that suits your tastes and maintenance requirements, and research which plant varieties will give you the look you want.

Islamic garden style: palms, acacias, buxus (box), rosemary and other scented plants

Formal garden style: Box hedging & topiary (Buxus), Yew hedging & topiary (Taxus), Roses, Lavenders, Delphiniums

Cottage garden style: delphiniums, hollyhocks, foxgloves, lupins, Centranthus rubra, Alchemilla mollis, Catmint (Nepeta), lavender

Natural garden style: Wildflowers, meadow grasses, trees, bulbs.

Exotic garden style: Palms (Phoenix varieties), Banana (Musa – Musa bajoo is one of the hardiest), Phormium, Fatsia, Cordylines

Mediterranean garden style: include plants on exotic list plus add Olives, Citrus fruit,

Bougainvilleas, Hibiscus, lavender, rosemary and thyme.

Contemporary garden style: Grasses – like Stipa tenuissima, gigantea, Miscanthus varieties, Calamagrostis, Alliums, Agapanthus, French Lavender (Lavandula papillion varieties), Black Bamboo (Phyllostachys negra), Groups of Silver Birch (Betula jacquemontii)

Oriental garden style: Bamboo, Japanese Acer, Wisteria, Small pines & conifers, Silver Birch trees

Edible garden style: Basically anything you like to eat that will grow well in your area. Sweet corn, lettuce, carrots, peaches, cherries, apples, tomatoes, potatoes, red cabbage, nasturtiums

Urban garden style: Tall grasses, Bamboo, Fatsia, Aucuba, Viburnum, Hydrangea

So now you know about which plants help define certain styles of garden, let's now look at how to put everything together using the Planting Plan System.

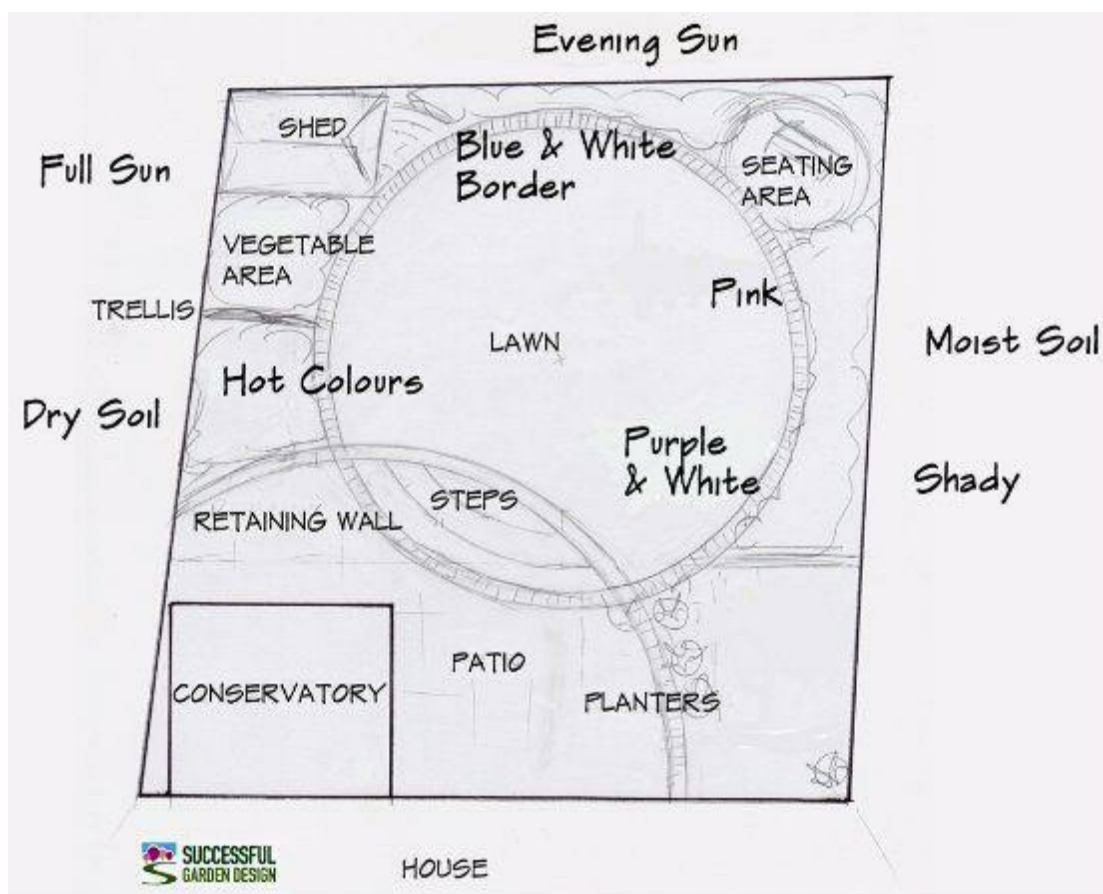
Part 4 – The Planting Plan System – How to Put Plants Together

So, hopefully, you've now got your scale plan to work from which shows the existing garden layout and planting. You should also have the mother of all plant lists with asterisks highlighting the potential power plants that are suitable for your garden conditions, tastes and garden style.

Where do you start?

1 WRITE ON THE PLAN THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION –

- ☐ the areas that are in sun and shade
- ☐ soil conditions e.g. wet, dry
- ☐ the colours you'd like in each area



List which parts of the garden are in sun/shade & the colours you want in each area on your plan

2 CHOOSE THE FIRST PLANT

Pick a location on your plan, anywhere you fancy. Then to pick your first plant, look at your list and choose a power plant to start with. Don't deliberate too long; just pick something to get you started (you can always change it later, if you want).

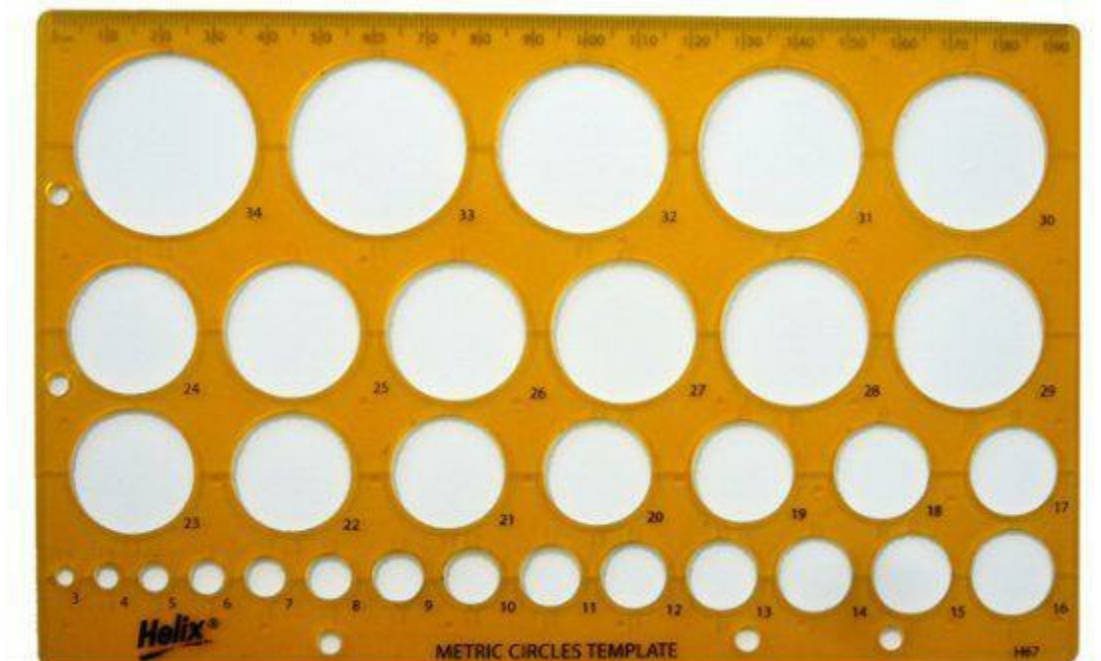
Now you may wish to start at the front of the border, I often do. Or you may prefer to start at the back and work your way forwards. There's no hard and fast rule, just start somewhere!

How quickly do you want the garden to develop?

How many plants you put on your plan will come down to how soon you want it to look like an established garden. Planting in groups really helps speed up the process because the group grows into one large mass, which makes it look like one large plant mass and therefore more established.

I tend to use a five-year growth rate when choosing how many plants to put on the plan. So if a plant grows to four metres wide over 20 years, in five years it may only have a one metre spread, and that's what I allow for on the plan.

Use a circle template so you can get the scale of the plant correct on your plan. That way you will know how many plants you'll need to correctly fill the area. So, for example, if you are working on a metric scale of 1:100 (imperial equivalent $1/8'' = 1\text{ft}$) and the plant you choose has a spread of 1m, then you'd use the size 10 on the template. Now I know that sounds rather confusing so let me explain. The circle's template is metric and the numbers refer to how many millimetres wide each circle is.



Circles template

So, 10 mm is 1cm and if your scale is 1:100 that means that for every 1 centimetre on the paper, that represents 100 cm (1m) on the ground. I know that is a bit of a brain twister so the easy way to do it is in your mind remove the 0 and the size 10=1 which = 1m. So size 25 = 2.5m spread and so on.

Now here's where it gets a little bit more complex – I find a scale of 1:100 a bit too small to work on so my preference is a scale of 1:50 (imperial equivalent 1/4" = 1ft) so that every 1cm on paper is equal to 50cm on the ground. Or the way I find easiest to think about it is every 2cm on the paper is equal to 1m on the ground.

This means that you need to halve all the numbers on the template. So circle size 15 no longer means 1.50m spread, it now means 0.75m spread on a scale of 1:50. I know that probably sounds awful if you're not used to working with scale but once you get going it's actually pretty easy to do.

Now, if your eyes are popping out of your head with horror at this point and you're experiencing a complete brain freeze, there is another way you could do this. Draw a big circle to represent a group of plants and then measure how wide it is, then work out how many plants to put in that size circle. So if you've drawn a circle 6cm wide on a scale of 1:50 (1/4" = 1ft) that is going to be 3m wide on the ground. So you could put in one very large shrub or three smaller ones in that size area.

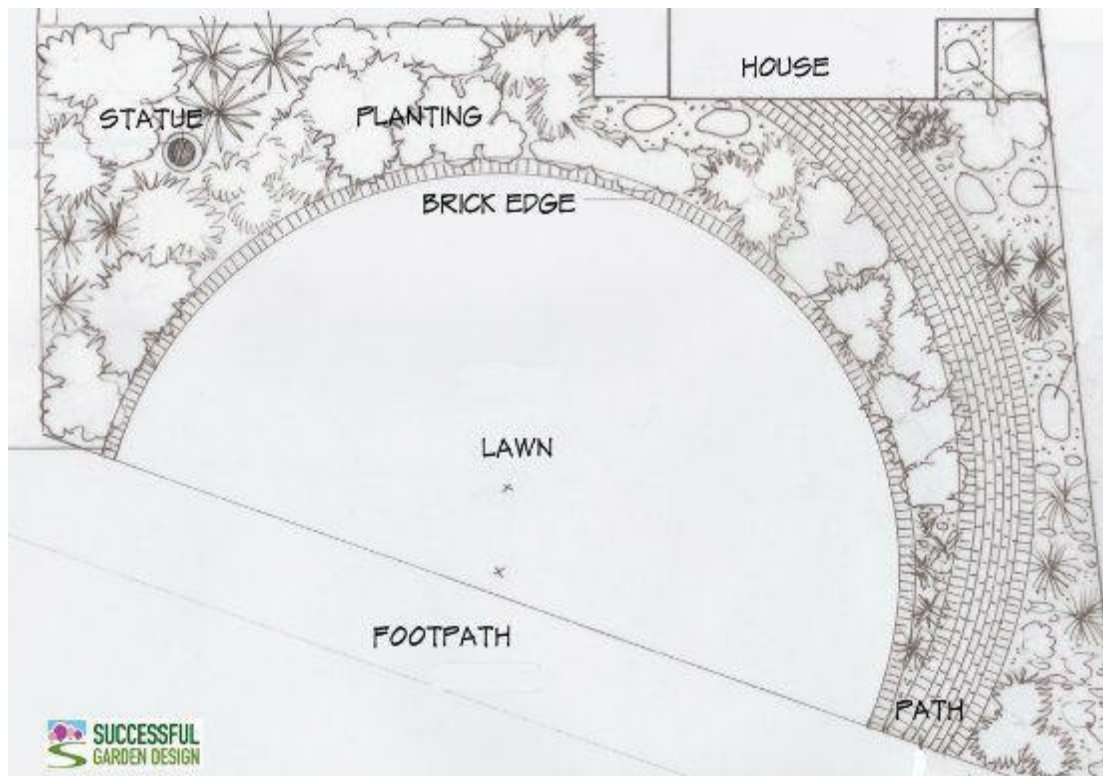
If you don't want to buy a circles template, you can always draw around coins. A 10p is approx. 1.20m (4ft), 1p is 1m (3ft), 5p is 80cm on a scale of 1:50. It is much easier with a proper circles template, though!

Scale is really important if you're going to do this correctly. It will save you a lot of time and money in the long run. But if you are still really averse to it, the only other method available to you would be to go out into the garden and if you have some empty flower pots or large stones, place them in the spaces and then count how many plants you think you're going to need to fill the area.

If you want to see exactly how scale works then there are some free video tutorials covering the basics of how to survey a garden and draw a scale plan on the Successful Garden Design website. Just go to the [video tutorials](#) page. Or there's a Kindle [Survey book](#) as part of this How to Plan Your Garden series available on Amazon.

3 OUTLINE THE PLANT SHAPE ON YOUR PLAN

Once you've chosen the plant you want to use and put in a circular representation to scale on the drawing, then go over the outline in a way that conveys something about the plant shape and habit to you. For example, if the plant you've chosen is a grass or spiky shape, then draw in lines to show that, as shown below. This will help you see at a glance the shapes and types of plants you've used.



Plant outline shapes

As you can see in the example, the bold edge goes around the outside edge of the group. It's also a good idea to write the number of plants and, if it will fit, the plant name in each group of plants.

I know that in virtually every garden design book you see either numbers or lines going to each plant, which you then follow back to the plant name (as shown in the plan below). Whilst that looks ever so neat and professional, I promise you that when you are out in the garden setting out vast numbers of plants, especially if you're in the UK, it will be raining and windy and trying to follow which of those neat lines or numbers links to each plant will be a complete and utter nightmare.

When you have an idea of the types of shape you'd like around your first plant you also need to consider the following:

- ☐ Height
- ☐ Time of year it flowers

It's important to get right the height of the surrounding plants. It's not going to work to have tall things in front of small things, so bear this in mind when you're choosing your plants.

The other consideration is when plants flower. You don't necessarily have to have everything that flowers in the summer next to one another. I like to put at least two or three plants next to one another that flower at the same time of year to create a stunning combination. Like roses and lavenders, for example.

A little trick you can use is to choose power plants that flower for weeks on end and have different plants around them that continue the combination. So, for example, you could have the roses and lavender combination but also have a plant that flowers either before or after the roses in conjunction with the lavender so that there's a continuation of a flowering combination either side of the roses and lavenders doing their thing together.

This will make the garden feel like it's always in flower. The power plants help carry and link the flowering seasons and combinations together. Which leads us nicely onto the fifth step.

5 REPEAT THE POWER PLANTS

Now you can either repeat the power plants at various intervals around the garden at the beginning. Or you can repeat it after you've done a section of planting.

There are various ways you can construct a planting plan. You can start in one corner and systematically work your way round or you can hop, skip and jump your way round as plant ideas pop into your head.

I tend to do a mixture of the two. I start out doing a section with the aim of working my way round to the other side of the garden, then suddenly either an idea for a combination or a plant I really want to use will pop into my mind and it's not suitable for the area I'm working on, so I find somewhere else on the plan to put it.

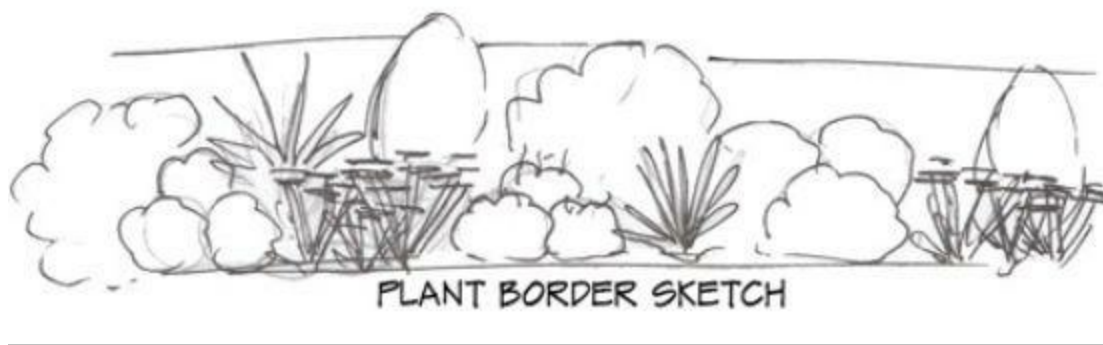
So I often end up with gaps between the areas of planting combinations, and this may well happen to you too. So, my solution/cheat to deal with the gaps or when I just cannot think of a new plant to put there to link the areas together is to use one of the power plants.

I know it's a bit of a cop out to use the power plants whenever there's a gap or you can't think of something else, but, hey, it works! It's no different from a chef needing an ingredient to add some impact or link flavours together in a new recipe and reaching for the nearest clove of garlic. This is why it's good to have put the work into your lists so they free you up when it comes to choosing which plants to use.

I tend to find that I'll come up with a combination of about seven different plants that work well together, then I need to start a new combination. The power plants are great at linking two different groups together, it's like knowing one person at a party; as long as you know just one nice person you'll be able to blend into the group because you're a friend of someone they all know.

How to visualise the look of the planting plan

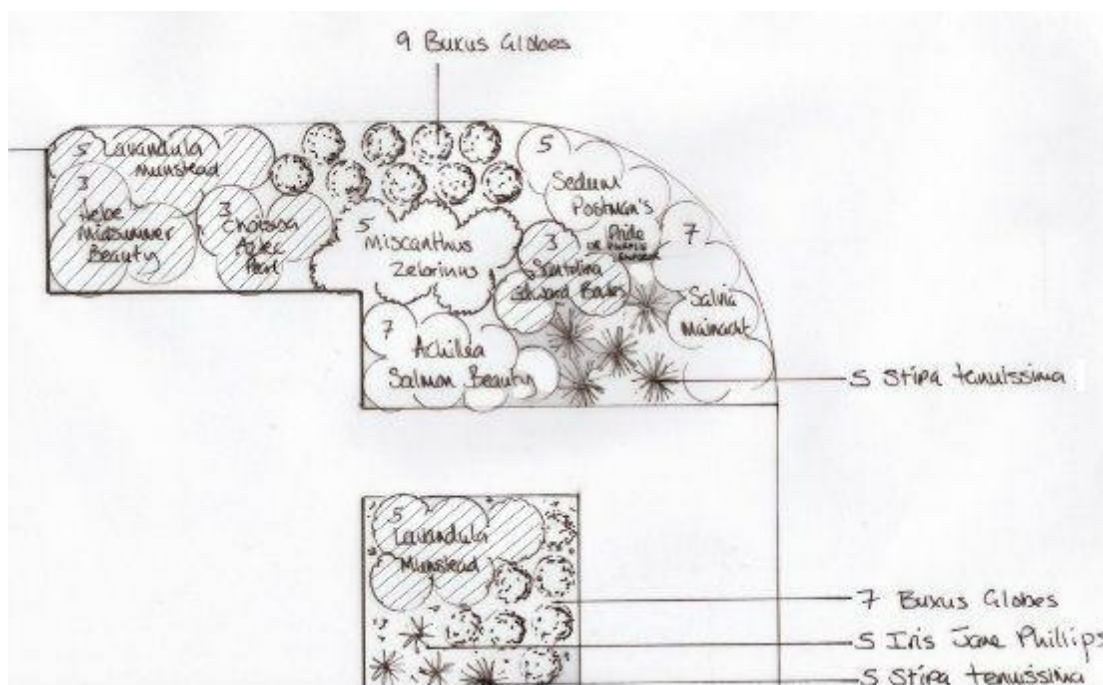
It's really difficult to picture how all the plants in your garden will look together. You might find you can picture one or two plants together but then aren't able to visualise beyond that small group. There are a few ways around that as we mentioned earlier, specifically drawing a sketch of the outline shape as you go along, as shown in the example below.



It's really no problem if you can't picture how everything will look together at once. It is frustrating, but if you know that each group of three different plant types works well with one another and you make sure that the next plants you add work with the plant at the end of that grouping and do this all the way round the garden, then it will all work well together.

We mentioned earlier that it's important to get the right balance of flowers to more structural plants like the evergreens.

So to check you're getting the right mix of a third evergreen, deciduous and flowers it's a good idea to make the evergreens stand out on the plan so you can see how well they are spaced around the garden. I just add diagonal lines across the evergreen plants, as shown in the example below.



Evergreen plants are indicated by diagonal lines

Other Useful Visualisation Tricks

If you have any colour pencils or marker pens handy, then photocopy your planting plan and colour in the centre of each plant in with the appropriate flower colour and then on the outside edge of each planting mass put in the green or other leaf colour.



Adding colour to your planting plan will help you visualise how it will look

Adding a touch of colour to your plan will really help bring your scheme to life and it will also show you if you've over or underused certain colours. There aren't rules for over or under using colours, that is dictated by your personal tastes and colour scheme you were aiming for initially. This is just a good way to check you're on the right track for your design preferences.

It is OK to deviate away from your initial ideas. Gardens and garden design are an evolving process. You might have more white flowering plants than you initially planned but if they are the right shape, size etc. then they could look far superior to something more colourful. So allow yourself a little bit

of flexibility in the design process.

Use Your Lists Effectively

The lists you've spent hours creating will really come into their own during the design process we've just outlined. Refer to them as often as you can for inspiration. However, if you find yourself going over and over the same list and finding nothing, it's time for break (assuming you've been doing this for an hour or two).

Designing a planting plan uses a lot of mental processing power. There is so much to think about in one hit: shape, size, colour, location, conditions and of course everything has to look good with one another and create interest throughout the entire year! It's no small feat to achieve that lot. So go easy on yourself if you've only filled in a small segment of your planting plan.

I find that there's only so long I can design a planting scheme in one sitting. My warning signs that it's time for a cuppa tea is the list staring phase. As soon as I'm going over and over the same list and not getting anywhere, it's definitely time for a break.

When you come back refreshed, the right plants for the rest of the scheme will usually jump off the list at you when you start up again. Or you can stay put, not take a break and sit there for hours and achieve nothing. I've tried that repeatedly and taking a break wins every time.

If you really are stuck in an area even after the break, there are a couple of things you can do. Basically, leave well alone and come back to it another day. Sometimes you just need a longer break away from it.

There's always going to be a sticking point in any planting design. I get them all the time. The fastest way to get past them is to ignore them. When I get stuck (and it's usually that last plant that links everything together), if the tea break and list studying has failed, I either leave it till the following day or continue on with a completely different part of the garden.

By working on other things or just going about your daily business, it allows the brain extra processing time, the all important behind the scenes stuff. Don't think for a minute that walking away is giving up. It's not. Your brain is a problem-solving machine. It's what it does. You might think you're watching TV or sleeping and not working on your planting plan but you will be. That problem-solving machine in your head is like a dog with a bone; it won't let go of it until it's solved the issue.

Actually, it might be an idea to keep a notepad by the side of the bed. When I first started out as a designer, I was always being woken up, usually about 3am, with that eureka moment with designs I was stuck on (which is every design when you first start).

After about three years, I managed to strike a deal with my brain to wait until I actually wanted to get up before bombarding me with its night time processing wonders. We have a good relationship now. I get to have an uninterrupted night's sleep and the idea downloads don't hit me till I get in the shower!

So just know that this takes as long as it takes and if this is the first time you've ever done a planting plan, cut yourself some extra slack here. You're doing a great job. I know that because you are taking the time to get this right. Everyone else is busily throwing their cash at the nearest garden centre and hoping and dreaming that this time they'll get it right. They probably won't but you will. Trust in the process you're learning here and trust in yourself.

Write on your survey plan which parts of the garden are in sun and which are in shade. Also add which areas are wet and dry.

Write on your plan where you want certain colours to go.

Choose where you want to start on you plan and choose your first plant from your Power Plant list.

Now choose the next plant – make sure it's a different shape to the first plant you picked.

Link your combinations of plants with a Power Plants to create a smooth transition between groups.

Think about shape, height, spread, colour and evergreen structure as you choose your plants.

Check your combinations by drawing a sketch of the plant shapes or photocopy your plan and colour in the centre of each plant, this will help you visualise how your scheme is coming together.

Part 5 – Useful Tips for Creating a Truly Stunning Garden

What To Do If Your Existing Plants Are Too Established To Move

If you aren't able to or just don't want to have to move the established areas of plants around the garden in order to get the right shape plants together, the good news is you don't have to. There are some very simple cheats that will enable you to quickly and easily transform any border without moving anything.

Actually, truth be told, there is just one cheat but with several ways to do it. The thing that we are aiming for is clarity within the planting borders. If you're creating a planting scheme from scratch, you can choose which shape plants you put next to one another. For mature planting schemes you need to find a way to create clarity that isn't plant based.

So here are the cheats, and they work like a charm. The easiest one is to place an object of some description amongst the plants. It can be anything with a clear-cut and easily recognisable form, like a pot, sculpture or statue. Even a bench, if there's room. Basically, anything solid for the eyes to rest upon will create a break from the busyness of the plants and bring instant clarity to any border.

The pictures below show the planting scheme I did in my parents' garden. These were after I'd spent months shifting things around because all the heights were wrong and it still didn't look as good as I wanted afterwards. At the time, I didn't know why exactly. I just knew there wasn't enough clarity. Adding features was the only way I managed to improve the chaotic planting.



Masses of plants without defined forms



Adding the pot and bench helps to bring clarity because there are clearly defined shapes to look at

Another version of this, which has been used forever and a day are hedges. Specifically, tightly trimmed hedges. If you look at virtually any of the famous English gardens and really study the planting schemes, they are often quite messy. What makes them work are the perfectly manicured hedges, both front and back. The solid form gives structure and counteracts the unruly plants behind them.



Neatly clipped hedges also help bring clarity and definition to borders

If you don't want to have a formal garden, then skip having the clipped box hedge at the front and just keep a well-maintained hedge at the back. That will still help bring clarity. If your garden is hedgeless, then make sure the boundary wall or fence is in good order and not totally obscured with plants. If that isn't possible, then shape some of the shrubs to form topiary, or add an obelisk or some form of upright structure. Anything, really, that will break up the plant mass will do the job.



A statue or sculpture will also help bring clarity to your plant borders

At some point, though, you will need to have some well-structured combinations, otherwise you're going to need a statue or something every few feet, which will look a little crazy!

The Most Important Thing in Garden Planning

Now, this is going to be a slightly surprising thing to read in a book dedicated to plants, so brace

yourself: The real key to creating a great looking garden isn't in the planting. Yes, you did just read that correctly! You have to have a good underlying design structure in place before you do the planting.

It might seem a little bit strange to leave discussing such an important part of the design process until almost the end of the book. The reason I've left it alone until now is I'm a great believer in giving people what they want and also what they need.

The two aren't always the same, though. You want to know about how to combine plants, which we've covered, but there's something you need to know and do before you get to the planting phase. Unless you take care of this part properly, you won't ever achieve the results you want.

One of the main mistakes I see when I look at people's gardens is they have focused all of their efforts on the plant side of things. As much as that makes sense, because a garden wouldn't be a garden without plants, it's not the key to really making a garden look amazing.

Plants are the finishing touch, the icing on the cake. They are not the cake itself. What I mean by that is they are the endpoint of a great garden design, not the start. If you want a great looking garden, you have to consider the design shapes BEFORE you even go near a single plant.

There's no need to worry if you've done it the other way round. Virtually everybody does, so you're in good company. But how many people do you know who have a great looking garden?

A great looking garden doesn't really come down to how much money you spend on it. I've seen people call in professional landscaping firms to 'landscape' their garden, spend a lot of money doing it and still not achieve great results.

The lack of stunning results isn't down to the landscaper; he or she may well have done an excellent job of laying the paving, walls and so on. If there isn't a well thought out design to begin with, it doesn't matter how much money you spend, the garden will never quite look as you want.

The good news is that even if you are the person that's already spent a fair bit on your garden and haven't got the results you want, it's not too late to get some design shape into it and rectify it.

Garden design is a big subject, one that is beyond the scope of this particular book, but if you'd like to see it explained in more detail, **I run a FREE online Garden Design Workshop.** You can find out more about it here - <http://www.courses.successfulgardendesign.com/ggf-workshop/>

If you haven't thought about design first, I urge you to watch the videos and see how much impact the right design shape for your lawn and patio can make to your garden. Without the correct design shape for your garden type, it will never look as you want even if you do a great job with the planting scheme.

I know that's probably not something you want to hear but it is true nonetheless. I'm sure you are chomping at the bit to get going with your planting scheme, but if you just spend a little bit of time on getting the design shape right first, it will totally transform your garden. Then when you come to do the planting scheme, it will be a knock-out!

If you are concerned that it will cost a fortune to re-design your garden, it really doesn't have to. Just getting the correct shape for your lawn has an ENORMOUS impact. Edging a lawn to the correct shape isn't expensive to do at all.

It's hard to explain just how much difference it makes in words, but the video tutorials will show you exactly what I'm talking about. So it's really nothing to be afraid of, it doesn't have to cost a lot of money to change a garden and getting the right shapes in place before you buy all the plants can only

be a good thing. It will save you a lot of time, money and hassle in the long run.

OK, so once you've got a design shape that will transform your garden and have an equally good planting plan, you're going to need to purchase the plants, so here are some tips on doing just that.

Helpful Tips on Plant Purchasing

Plant availability will fluctuate dramatically depending on the time of year. So if at all possible, give the nursery or local garden centre your desired plant list as soon as you can so they can get them for you. Very few garden centres hold much stock these days and nurseries can sell out quickly in peak seasons.

My preference is to deal directly with nurseries. Not all nurseries will supply directly to members of the public, but most will supply landscapers. So if you are hiring someone to build your garden, see if they can also use their trade advantage to get the plants as well. They might charge you a percentage to do this, but it will still be cheaper than most garden centres.

Now if you've chosen your plants to suit the conditions of your garden correctly, you shouldn't have too many losses. Do allow for some though. On commercial projects the assumption is about 10% will die, in a domestic garden, assuming you are able to keep the plants watered correctly, then between 2-5% of fatalities is the norm.

One of the reasons garden centre plants are dearer, other than the fact they haven't grown the plant so their starting cost is higher than a nursery, is the replacement value has been worked into the price. Not in every garden centre, but a fair few will replace plants that have died, no questions asked. They obviously can't do this for free, so that's why their plants are significantly dearer than nurseries'.

So you have the choice of paying more in the garden centre and knowing they will most likely replace it if it dies (depending on which country you live in, of course). Or if you go to a nursery, you will get it cheaper to begin with but they won't replace it if it dies. Good nurseries will replace plants if they've had a crop failure and they know it's not your fault. But if you've just not watered a plant and it dies, tough luck! Which I think is fair enough.

Working to a Tight Budget

There are many options available to you that will save a great deal of money when it comes to buying plants. We've already discussed the first one, buying from a good nursery rather than a garden centre. There are also some other tricks of the trade you can try.

Obviously, the cheapest thing in the world is a packet of seeds, but you do need patience and a bit more time and skill to get the end results, so the next best thing is buying herbaceous perennials. The reason is twofold. The majority of them can be divided without doing any harm to the plant. So if you buy one, you can often get two free with some careful division. This is because the plants spring up from the roots rather than relying on woody stems to survive the winter, like shrubs do. Because they grow differently, you can split them up fairly easily with a fork or spade.

Not everything appreciates being split up, but the vast majority do. So look for large pot-fulls of plants when shopping. You'll see this more towards the end of the growing season.

If you are planning on planting in early spring, then I would suggest you buy the smallest size pots of perennials as they will easily reach the same size as the ones sold in larger pots, but you'll pay a lot less money for them. Most 2-3ltr pots of herbaceous perennials started out the same size as the baby plants they put in the cheaper 9cm (3½") pots.

Other Plants You Can Divide and Save Money

These days, nurseries do cheat a little bit with how they grow plants to suit the demands of garden centres and DIY chains. Have you noticed if you buy a pot of basil, for instance, just how full the pot is and how well established the plant is? Well, here's the trick; that pot is crammed full with seedlings, not one bushy plant.

If the nursery were to grow one large plant, it would take many months to get it that bushy whereas they can fill the pot with seedlings and they will give the appearance of one big plant almost overnight. Clever, huh? Well, if you spot this, you can use it to your advantage. Sometimes they will do it with shrubs as well.

So if you're buying lavenders, box (Buxus) etc., take a close look at the pot and see if there are lots of tiny plants or one mature one. If there are lots of plants, you can then divide them up, just like you can with herbaceous perennials. Whatever you do, though, don't try to divide a shrub unless it's definitely more than one plant in the pot or you'll very likely kill it!

Another way of getting plants, if you have friends with lots of them, is to organise a plant swap day. Everyone turns up with plants they no longer need and if they are good friends, they'll bring food as well. As the organiser, you'll get first pick of the goodies and often a lot of lovely leftovers as people always bring lots of plants.

Don't forget birthdays and Christmas. It's sometimes difficult thinking of presents to get people, so if you give your family and friends a plant list or get them to buy you a plant voucher so you can choose your own, it will help them and you. You might even be able to arrange for a local nursery to have the list on hand and people add money or get you specific plants from that list.

Setting Plants Out in the Garden

When it comes to setting the plants out in the garden, it's much easier if you are able to set everything out together before you plant. This will enable you to make sure you get the correct spacing.

If you aren't able to get hold of everything at once or are doing it bit by bit, then place a plant pot or large stone in the gaps to represent the missing plants. This will enable you to judge the spacing correctly.

If you're not sure how much space you need to leave for each plant, make a note of the approximate size on your plan before you start setting everything out. Or give yourself a simple code like S, M, L for small, medium and large, and then space accordingly.

You will often find that you have to shuffle everything around a little bit to get the spacing right. This is why it's so helpful to place everything at the same time, saves a lot of digging up and moving, further down the line. Also, you'll often find that it will look like you don't have sufficient plants to begin with. Then, once you space them properly, allowing for their eventual size you'll find that it is OK, you will have enough.



Set out all the plants together so you can get the right spacing

You Can Change it!

Throughout this book we have gone to great lengths to choose the perfect combinations by paying attention to shape, size, colour and so forth of each plant. However, no matter how much thought you put in, there may be occasions when you start to set out the plants and see a better combination than the one you had originally thought of.

It is OK to change your mind and move things. Just keep in mind the shapes and growing conditions of each plant. There's only so much information you can hold in your mind at the planning stage and seeing plants all together on the ground can often lead to new inspirations that you couldn't have perceived in the initial planning process. There can be subtleties in leaf colour and texture that jump out at you when you come to place things.

The ultimate aim is to create the best looking garden possible, so allow yourself a little bit of wriggle room. You don't have to doggedly stick to your planting plan if a better option presents itself. Having said that, don't go crazy and change every last thing in a manic last-minute flurry. You will have put a great deal of thought into your planting plan, so only change things if something much better comes up.

Whatever You Do, Keep Your Lists!

I have plant lists that go back over well over a decade. They are very well worn now but still serve me well. Yes, I know I do this professionally so obviously a good list of shade loving plants and the like is always valuable to have on hand but if you move house or have friends and family that ask you for help, you'll really appreciate not having to do your lists again from scratch.

You also never know, this might be something you want to take up as a profession or paid hobby. I have quite a few design students that have done [Successful Garden Design courses](#) for their own interest, with no aspirations to be a garden designer at the outset and they've loved it so much that they've then gone on to do it professionally.

PART 5 – QUICK REFERENCE RE-CAP

Order your plants as far ahead of needing them as you can.

Compare nursery and garden centre prices, get plants through your landscaper for a trade

discount if you can.

Buy either large pot-fulls of herbaceous perennials and divide them up to get extra plants or buy the very smallest size as they will soon catch up with the larger size pots by the end of the growing season.

Set out all the plants together before you start planting to make sure you have spaced them correctly.

Keep hold of your lists for future projects.

This book was based on the Plant Design Formula, which is an online course on how to create the perfect planting plan for your garden. The course includes video tutorials and access to Rachel's colour photo plant database spreadsheet.

Feedback

I'd love to hear your thoughts on this book. Your feedback helps me to make this garden planning series even better.

About the Author



Rachel Mathews has been designing gardens professionally for over 20 years. In that time, she has designed hundreds of different size, shape and styles of garden, from tiny contemporary courtyards to large, traditional, formal gardens, both in the UK and internationally.

She is passionate about teaching her simple garden design method so people can make the most of their garden, no matter what size, shape or where it is in the world. She runs [FREE Garden Design Workshops](#) to show people her simple technique that makes garden design easy and inexpensive, with great results.

Rachel divides her time between designing, traveling and teaching online garden design courses at [Successful Garden Design](#).

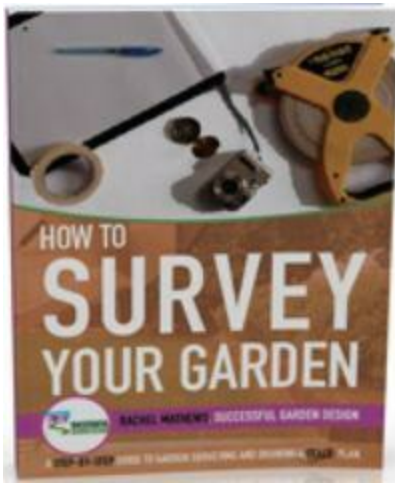
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Books in the 'How to Plan Your Garden' series

[How to Survey Your Garden](#)



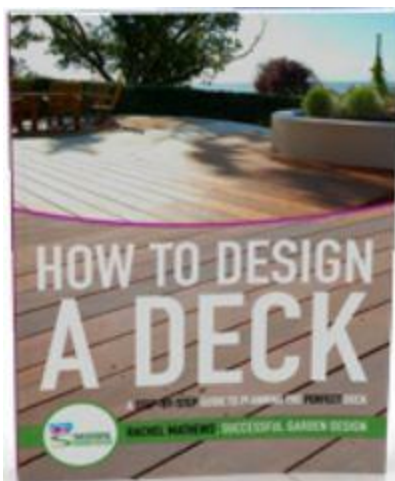
The vital first stage of planning your garden is surveying and drawing a scale plan. Unless the plan is to scale you won't be able to design and build the garden properly as nothing will fit as you imagine it to. This book explains how to easily measure and draw a scale plan of your garden. There's nothing complicated – it's simple to follow and anyone can do it. The book is packed with useful tips and tricks to make the whole process easy.

[How to Design A Small Garden](#)



This book will show you how to make any small garden look and feel larger and more interesting, no matter what shape or how small your garden is. There are plenty of example plans to inspire you to plan the perfect garden.

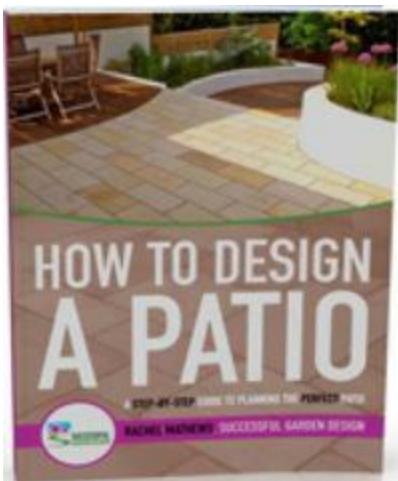
[How to Design a Deck](#)



How to Design a Deck is packed full of easy to follow tips and ideas to help you design the perfect

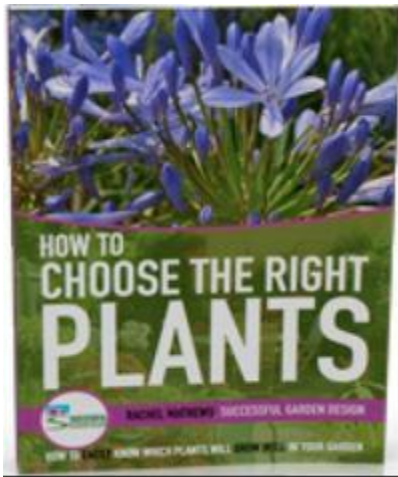
deck for your home and garden. It's vital to choose a shape that enhances the space and makes the garden work. This book explains how to design a deck or improve your existing garden without needing to spend a fortune. There are lots of tips and tricks for making areas look longer or wider, and how to add the 'Wow' factor to your garden.

[How to Design a Patio](#)



How to Design a Patio is packed full of easy to follow tips and ideas to help you design the perfect deck for your home and garden. It's vital to create the right shape patio and choose paving that enhances the space and makes the garden work. This book explains how to design a patio, improve your existing garden without needing to spend a fortune. There are lots of tips and tricks for making areas look longer or wider, and how to add the 'Wow' factor to your garden.

[How to Choose the Right Plants](#)



This book helps take the stress out of plant buying. It will show you simple methods to enable you to know what conditions a plant needs to grow in just by looking at its attributes. There are also tips on how to know what soil type you have and lots of easy to follow tips that will enable you to buy plants that will thrive in your garden. Choosing plants that suit the conditions you have, will save you a fortune in fatalities, and this book will guide you on how to know which plants will work and which won't.

Includes a bonus video on how to tell which plants need acid soil and which need alkaline soil.

Coming Soon

Garden Design & Landscaping - The Beginner's Guide (April 2013)

This book will explain what's involved in successfully landscaping a garden and how to go about it.

The book covers how to work with landscaping professionals, how to DIY design your garden, how to learn about garden design. This book also answers the following questions: what's the difference between a gardener, a landscaper and a garden designer? Is garden design software worth using? How do I choose a landscaper to work with? How do you tell if a landscaper is a good one?