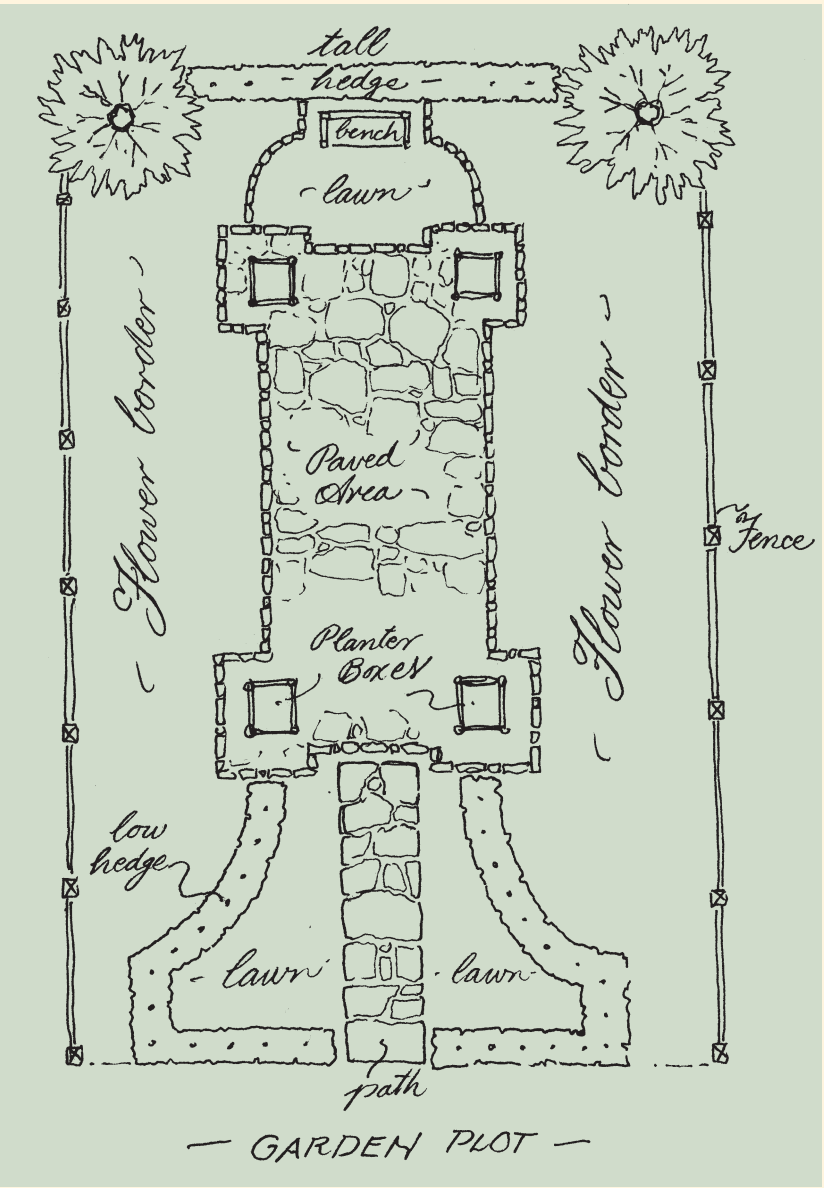


Hands-on Design

Forget the graph paper but remember to start your plan from the center. Anna Pavord

FACED WITH A PLOT OF GROUND to turn into a garden, a new gardener's instinct is to tackle the edges first, to work around the boundary. Perhaps this is a remnant of some atavistic urge to mark territory. Dogs lift legs. We plant clematis. Whatever the reason, it usually leads to a particular sort of garden layout: borders, usually too narrow to build up any depth in plant groups, all the way around the edge of the plot, a path making another circuit around the inside edge of the borders, or, if money and energy run out, leading up just one side of the plot, parallel with the boundary. There will be a bit of terracing next to the house. Whatever ground is left becomes lawn. The center of a design such as this becomes a center by default, not so much a designed shape as a random happening.

If you think from the center of the space out toward the boundaries, quite different patterns may begin to emerge. You may start with the thought of a rectangular paved area in the middle of the plot, with wide flower borders on either side reaching to the boundaries. You may see a path up through the center of the garden, the length divided by upright screens of trellis on either side of the path so that the width of the garden spreads and narrows as you pass down the path between the trellis screens and into the spaces contained beyond them. There could be rectangles of grass on either side of the central path, with plants contained in raised beds around the three-sided shapes made by the trellis screens and the boundary wall. (Do not think of raised beds against a fence. The weight of the earth will gradually force the bed to collapse—into your neighbor's garden.)

These are simple ways of manipulating shapes on the ground, using the same basic ingredients of paths, flower beds, and grass that regularly crop up in outside gardens. By thinking of the center first, you may end up with an arrangement that gives you far more opportunities for imaginative planting and consequently more pleasure.

Novice gardeners are usually told they must draw out a plan on paper before they start flailing around with spades and wheelbarrows. Because this is the way professional garden designers work, it has been

ILLUSTRATIONS BY WAYNE DAVID HAND

assumed that it is also the best way forward for amateurs. It ain't necessarily so.

The first path in our present garden was made by my brother, a vet and a superb gardener. On one of his rare weekends off, he came down to our patch, an acre and a half of garden wilderness untouched for 20 years, specifically to undertake this project. I was hugely excited. Marooned inside by small children who hung onto my legs for most of their waking hours, I watched from the kitchen window.

My brother stood on the bank and gazed out at the view. Several hours later he was sitting on a log gazing at the view. At the end of the first day, not a sod had been turned. On Sunday, I decided that the path was a lost cause. My brother spent most of the morning staring up into a beech tree, rubbing his nose. "He needs the rest," I said, to no one in particular. We had lunch. I spent the afternoon at the beach, and returned to find my brother gone. But there, as you will have been expecting, was the path.

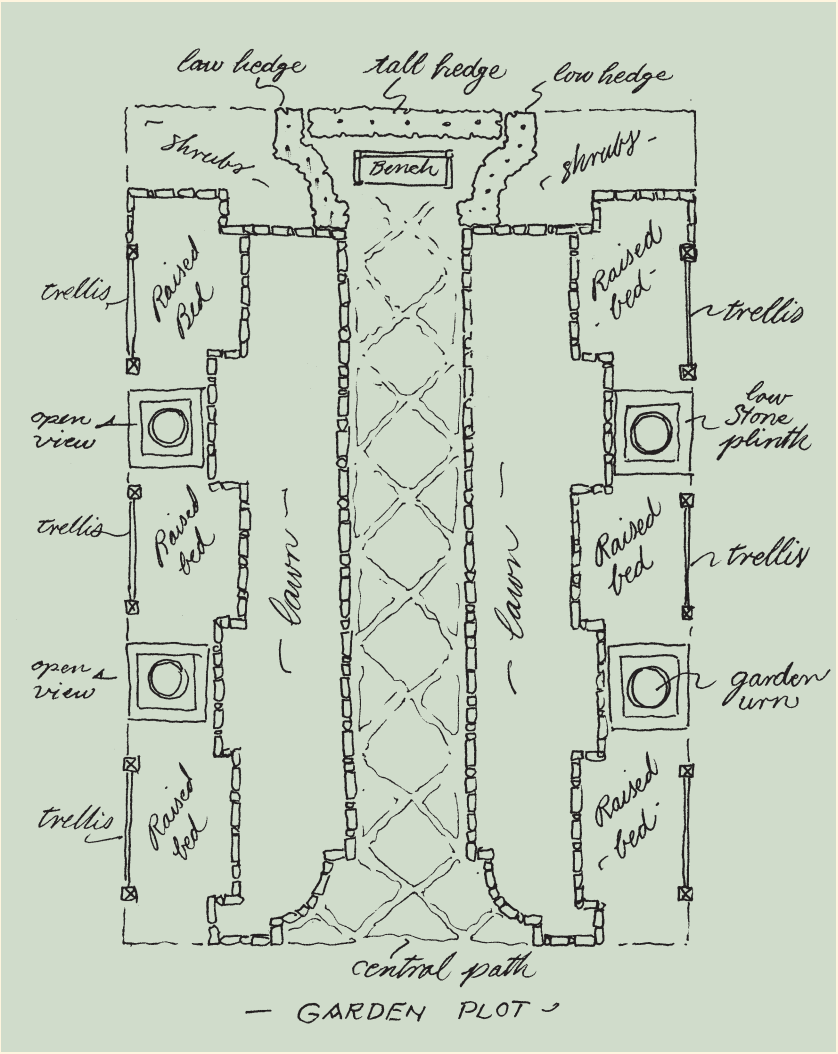
It was wider than I would ever have planned on paper, although on the ground it looked absolutely in scale. It also took a line that I would never have thought of drawing, but which brought it around a tricky contour and gave a nice glimpse of a beech tree lined up with a holly along the way. I cannot pretend that anything that has happened in the garden since has been worked out on paper first.

Paper designs tend to get over-complicated. Interlocking circles ooze out over the page. A bare space is a threat to your creativity. The obvious is avoided at all costs. "Features," as designers call them, start bobbing up all over the place. To achieve its full effect, a feature should be used as sparingly as a threat.

Another difficulty with paper is that it cannot contain the information you need to make the right decisions and that you get as you prowl over your patch. You take in the slight rises and falls in the ground and the consequences that these will have on your design. You are aware of things beyond your boundary that you would rather not see, and can work out more easily how this can be done.

Above all, working on the ground, it is easier to develop a sense of proportion and understand that a space where nothing is happening, a void, may be as important as anything else. A planned void is a very different thing from a void by default.

Professional designers would never get clients to pay for a couple of days, walking about rubbing their noses. Time is the advantage amateurs have, and when it has been well spent, mulling over possibilities and adaptations, sticks and string and hose on the ground may prove better design tools than pencil and paper.



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