

SIZING UP A PROPERTY

The first step in planning a garden is to understand the landscape with which you're working. Stephen Anderton



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WHEN DESIGNING OR REDESIGNING a garden, where do you start? Do you quake at the thought or simply draw a blank? Does your mind fill with lists of must-have plants but only half an idea of what to do with them? If that's the case, you're not alone.

Gardens don't spring into the mind fully formed. They need some logic and applied objectivity to tease them out of the void. Don't be frightened by the word *objectivity*. Being objective will not make your garden dull or predictable or commonplace, because every person on Earth sees things differently. Our own personalities and past experiences shape the way we think, and the way we try to be objective. Subjectivity will always have its way.

If you try to be objective about designing a garden, then at least the garden will make practical and aesthetic sense. There may be the odd intuitive genius who can go through this process and produce a wonderful garden without it feeling like objectivity. But it is objectivity nonetheless. Design is a discipline that handles space and mass and form and momentum, and it can be a heck of a lot of fun.

Before you can start to plan what to do with a garden, however, you have to know just what it is you have on your hands. You need to look hard at what is there and soak up its atmosphere as it stands now. This is what old Alexander Pope the poet meant when he talked about needing to “consult the genius of the place.” It has nothing to do with the Town Planning Office, or agricultural psychiatry. It is just seeing what is there in front of you and trying to understand how it works (or even *if* it works) and—most of all—how it is special.

Every place is special in its way. We gardeners have to take advantage of that. And that specialness may be something much bigger than the garden, something of which the garden is only a part. It may be a regional or local specialness, which you can develop in a natural-looking manner, or stylize in a formal fashion, or use as a contrast to something completely different. You do not have to garden in a manner that mimics your local environment. You can contrast with it if you wish. What you must not do is ignore the local environment and work in a vacuum. What will make your garden special is making it belong to where it is, making it seem as if it could be nowhere else, not just a copy of a layout in a foreign magazine.

So look at your neighborhood. Look to see what your architectural vernacular is. It will be made up of many different kinds of things.

Look at the landform itself. Is it flat or rugged? Will you go with it or against it? If you decide to make the most of the opportunities of a property that slopes up and down (sun and shade, good drainage, cool north-facing slopes for small alpine plants), then will you stay with a naturalistic landform, or move to terracing and a formalized landform?

