

# SIZING UP A PROPERTY

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



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.

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?

**Look at water.** In an area where water is everywhere—in streams and pools and lakes—you might feel the garden ought to be the same, a formal or informal matrix of waterways or water features. Or it might conspicuously be an island garden, set up in the face of the surrounding water.

**Look at the soil itself.** Shallow soils over rock are limiting in terms of what will grow. Certain trees struggle. The traditional mixed border of flowering shrubs and perennials will be difficult to achieve. But you might do wonders with scree plants, from hot or cool regions, depending upon your own climate. Very thin soils in areas with high rainfall can produce wonderful landscapes of trees with little but moss and rock below. This might lend itself to a minimalist or Japanese style of gardening.

**Look at the soil in terms of its pH, too.** Neighboring gardeners will always tell you whether it is acid or not, and whether you are likely to succeed with lime-haters such as rhododendrons or have spectacular autumn color. Test it anyway, in several places, so you know where you stand.

**Look hard at the trees in the locality.** Is your garden located so that the trees surrounding it are part of the native population and the greater landscape? Do those trees come into your garden and form part of it? Or are you surrounded by few trees, and those merely a miscellany of exotic horticultural introductions? If you are part of the native landscape, then take advantage of that fact. Strengthen it to give your garden a positive uniform character, or strengthen it to give yourself something against which to make a contrast, within the confines of the garden. If you are surrounded by exotics, then you have complete freedom to plant a matrix of trees that have a duty to your garden only. It is a terrifying freedom, and many gardeners as a result plant an ineffectual one-of-everything garden. Some choose to concentrate on their favored species or genera, and develop a special feel to the garden in that way.

**Is the garden safe from local populations of wild animals such as deer?** If not, could you install fencing sufficiently invisible to work with your kind of design? Could you afford that protection? Or should you think about making an outer unprotected garden and an inner, enclosed one where you are free of walking pests?

**Think about the climate.** Perhaps it is such that

grass is not green but brown in summer. Will you garden in a manner and at a cost where watering turf is reasonable? Or will you plan for smaller, pivable spaces, where the lack of open green space is not an embarrassment? Those same hot-summer climates often produce an abundance of tough, leathery evergreens, and these may be your source of greenery, clipped or otherwise, in the lean times of year. Winter may be the time of year when things flower and the climate is kindest.

**Consider views, whether you are in town or country.** There may be none. But you might be able to gain a fabulous one by making a mound or walkway eight or ten feet high. Does the whole garden focus toward a space or a view that is ugly or uneventful? If so, should you keep it, or screen it, or focus it more narrowly, keeping the best parts only?

**Think about your house.** Is it architecturally commanding, with a strong period style, or the kind of place around which anything goes? Both are exciting and offer different kinds of opportunities.

Think finally about the kind of gardening that already exists—somebody else's (or maybe nature's) choice of plants and planting styles—and the responsibilities that go with them. Does it suit you? Does it work in the kind of garden emerging in your mind? How much is easily scrappable and how much is salvageable?

Now—at last—you start to see the possibilities of the new garden. Now you can start to think positively, and plan a design that's right for your landscape and for you. ♡

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