

Building the BONES OF A BORDER

The first step to a great garden is creating a framework that is practical and aesthetically appropriate to the site. (Part 2) Fergus Garrett

A Backdrop
of some type shows
off the plants in the
border, screens
unwanted views,
blocks battering
winds, and provides
a vertical anchor. If
you make a hedge,
start small, prune
hard, and leave
room for its expansion
and your needs
for access. The
author chose beech
for its changing colors
and sturdy
habit.

EVERY GOOD GARDEN, no matter how large or small, formal or informal, must have atmosphere and also a feeling of intimacy. As well as being aesthetically pleasing, however, the space must be practical, and there are complex issues attached to this that need careful thought. The constraints of a site come in all shapes and sizes, but so do its advantages. My original visit to White Flower Farm was crucial not only for fact-finding but also for capturing a feel for the place. Situated in gently rolling, partially wooded Connecticut countryside, White Flower Farm has its roots firmly in rural America. An old farmhouse shares the site with the nursery and the gardens; the overall feeling is traditional and romantically informal. Whatever the design implemented here, it had to echo these characteristics.

As I walked the grounds, the design was never far from my thoughts. I hadn't quite worked out whether I needed several small, connected borders or a single large border, or where exactly to situate them.

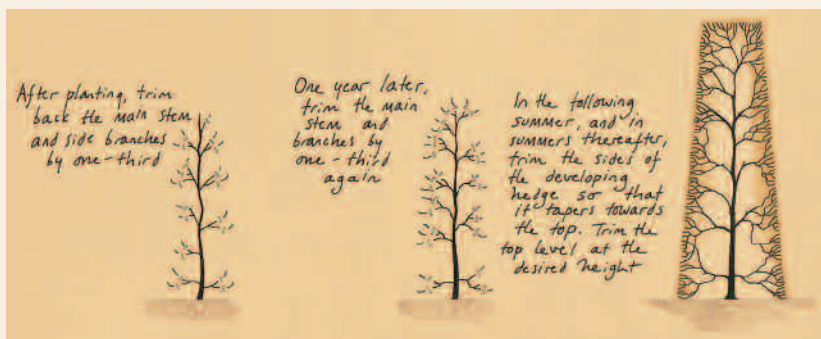
The question more or less answered itself. A stretch of ground between the nursery sales area and the stock beds seemed ideal. The site is open and free from shade, right in the heart of the garden, perfect for the centerpiece a large border would create. There were

several borders already here varying in size and style, so rather than fuss things even further I visualized one large border stretching the whole length of an existing split-rail fence. It's a common mistake to make a garden too fidgety, cramming in every feature possible, putting in beds here, there, and everywhere without consideration of the spaces involved. Good design often means bolder, simpler sweeps, which are much more effective in the overall plan. Here, a big border would act as a backbone to the others in the area, pulling the whole space together.

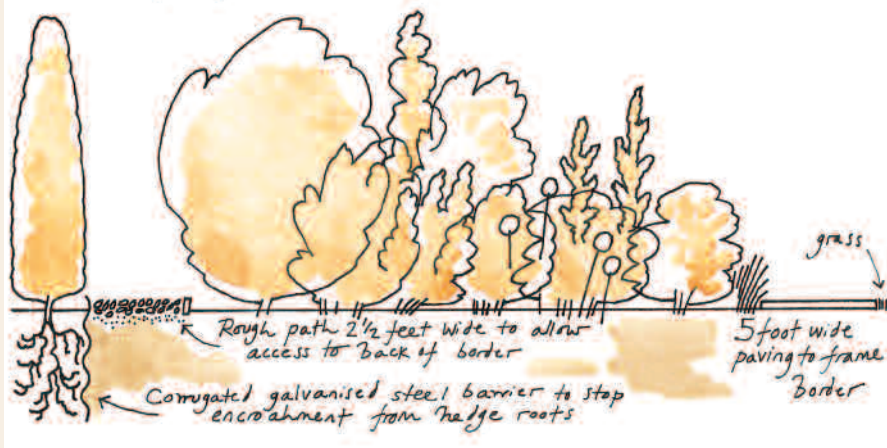
The site—the crown of a gentle slope—was perfect for a dramatic, rectangular bed running east to west and facing due south. It could be as long as 340 feet, but a shorter length seemed better proportioned in this space. Pacing it up and down I opted for a bed 280 feet by 20 feet; the depth is essential to fit in all the trees and shrubs that a mixed border relies on for its structure.

A hedge would be needed to provide a backdrop for the plants but also to screen off unwanted views of the open terrain. I always prefer hedges of a single specimen, especially if they're meant as a backdrop. The uniform look and behavior provide a calm framework for the fireworks of mixed border plantings. Evergreens are useful for hedges, particularly in winter, but in this case I opted for European beech, *Fagus sylvatica*, which is hardy in USDA Zone 5. This has strong wood, a dense branching structure, takes clipping well (this hedge will be kept at seven feet), and has wonderfully fresh green foliage, especially in spring. The leaves turn rich russet brown in the autumn and are held on the plant through most of the winter.

When planting a hedge next to a border, it must be remembered that its roots are likely to travel into the border in search of water and nutrients, competing



Position of Hedge and Back-of-border path



with neighboring plants and making digging difficult. A barrier sunk into the ground between the hedge and border to a depth of two feet easily solves this problem. Corrugated-iron sheets are tough and last in the soil forever with little danger of being pierced by the hedge roots. This barrier must rise a couple of inches above the soil surface so that the roots don't have an easy passage into the border from the top. Allow sufficient growing space for the hedge by putting the barrier about two feet away from its base. Young plants put in two feet apart will soon grow and knit together. It is essential that the sides of the hedge be clipped from an early age in order to develop a dense framework. Clipping should leave the bottom of the hedge wider than the top; this slight angling, called "batter," assures that light reaches the lower branches, helping to keep the plants fully clothed down to the ground.

As the border is 20 feet deep, we needed an access path between the plantings and the hedge, running its entire length. This need only be two and a half feet wide, just enough to allow a wheelbarrow through. It will be hidden by the vegetation in front of it and will be accessible from both ends. The path doesn't have to be paved; a simple dirt track is sufficient.

To break the straight line that occurs along the border's edge I wanted plants to spill out onto paving, which will frame the border on three sides. Without this, plants would lie on the grass, creating a maintenance nightmare and eventually killing the grass beneath them. The paved path needs to be a good five feet wide to allow easy public passage and also room for plants to flop. The material chosen should be durable and compatible with the local stone.

Bluestone is ideal for this site and totally in keeping when laid in a random pattern. It has the additional benefit of being less slippery than slate.

One aspect of the chosen area bound to prove problematic was the uneven and undulating levels. The site is on a slope that falls noticeably north to south but also varies

east to west. The border itself could slope slightly from north to south, as long as this didn't allow soil runoff. The path, on the other hand, has to be level on this axis, but could rise and fall gently along its length if this undulation wasn't visually disturbing.

Once the border was cut out, plenty of organic matter was dug in to a depth of 18 inches to improve the soil structure. Luckily, there is no perennial-weed problem, as the area has been under grass for several years, so once cultivation was completed the bed was ready to plant. It is critical that the soil of a new garden be free of grasses and other perennial weeds. Otherwise, they will insinuate themselves into your plantings, giving you endless trouble for years to come.

If you are dealing with a grassed-over area such as this, either treat the grass with a systemic herbicide (a herbicide may need to be applied not once but several times if the weeds are particularly persistent), or skim off thin layers of sod and bury them, upside down, at least a foot deep in your soil. The grass will rot and help enrich the soil. If you simply rototill the grassed area, it won't be long before the grass comes back because the tiller will never bury it deep enough. When doing this sort of preparation it pays to be thorough rather than cut corners. ♡

Uneven Sites require modification in order to avoid soil runoff and any visual distraction. In this case, the site had a minor slope from the back of the border to the front, but not enough to worry about. Bumps along the length of the border were evened out so that the path has only slight undulations.

