

# SPACE

Why your garden needs it and how to deal with this difficult but essential element. Stephen Anderton



**Space is the logical picture frame within which a plantsman can color the canvas. We shouldn't be embarrassed as gardeners by having open space in a garden. We should welcome it.**

DESIGNING THE OPEN SPACES of a garden—creating them, shaping them, connecting them—can be the greatest challenge a gardener faces. We may be happy planting, and even designing a substantial border, but designing open space—the absence of plants—can be extremely difficult.

Why does a garden need an absence of plants anywhere? Well, in a nutshell (a pretty small space) a garden needs open spaces so that there is room for people, so the solid three-dimensional features of the garden have breathing space to show themselves off, to make a contrast with the more provocative colors and textures of the planting, and, finally, to offer a satisfactorily proportioned environment that relaxes the spirit. We shouldn't be embarrassed as gardeners by having open space in a garden. We should welcome it.

Have you ever gone into a garden so over-designed that there is not a square inch left that is not bristling with detail? What should be an open terrace where

you could put chairs and a table is usurped by arty cobbles and rills, or a knot garden. What should be a spacious lawn is hysterical with scattered trees and shrubs. There is no space left that simply welcomes people, no space to breathe.

**There have to be welcoming spaces** in order to tempt us in and keep us there, so we can enjoy the plants and flowers all the more. That's why most of us have the longest view we can muster running straight out from the back of the house, as a big opening gambit. Temptation is what it's about, encouraging visitors to set off into the space, and see where it goes.

**Very occasionally open space can be a waste.** A friend of mine has a walled garden outside his basement apartment. It measures just a few yards each way, and it is almost too small to have any useful open space. So instead his only open space is a deck about big enough for two chairs. The rest of the garden he has filled—literally—with palms and pseudopanax and bamboo clumps, until his deck is effectively in a roofed jungle. Mirrors fixed low on the far wall suggest the jungle is deeper than the reality, but really this is planting brought right up to the windows. Space, if there is any here, is just the picture of receding gloom between the tree trunks. You can almost hear the cicadas and see the glowworms.

At the opposite extreme, I once knew a gardener who built his house on the lip of an abandoned granite quarry with a wooded rim. You entered the house through trees. But the other side of the house was all glass, and suddenly there was this great, gaping quarry, cloaked with plants and waiting to swallow you up. It was breathtaking. So much space, and not a jot of it wasted. He was offering all his space in one big eyeful.

**Space is also the means of getting from A to B in a garden.** Cleverly used, it is the continuous temptation to



delve further into the garden, to take you on to C and D and E. Think of it like opera: there may be narrow paths lined with peeling birch trunks or carpeted with erythroniums, and these are the recitatives that move the action forward. They lead to sunny open spaces of formal planting and architecture, which are the arias—the places where the plot stops while you luxuriate in the quality of the display. One kind of space can lead you on to the next, by offering snippets and overtures of what is to come. And temptation may come as the desire simply to stay put.

The size of a space must always relate to the people who are to use it, and so a good stopping place will be intimate but not oppressive, sheltered but not shut in. An enclosure of hedges just big enough to hold a seat for two may be the place to spend an entire afternoon.

**Space can offer risk, too,** rather like that view into the quarry. A raised terrace that looks down to a prospect of open country or formal gardens always gives a sense of command and adventure. But make that terrace too narrow, and it becomes more of a threat than a pleasure, something to pass through quickly rather than spend time in.

As well as accommodating people, space is what separates the architectural features of a garden. Enough of it lets you have huge deep borders down each side of a garden without them seeming to be on top of each other. Enough of it makes a rounded single specimen maple seem dignified rather than squeezed by small-scale planting. In an avenue of trees or topiaries, it is the size of the spaces between the

plants as much as the plants themselves that defines the rhythm of their progress.

**But size alone does not make space valuable.** If space is well proportioned, whatever the size or character or style, it gives a garden year-round attraction. It will be appealing even under snow. Clever, complicated planting set around a well-proportioned space will seem effortless and inevitable.

Mention space to some gardeners and they immediately think of the “open center,” which used to be considered the starting point of every good garden. But open centers are not necessarily a good thing. Valuable, well-used space can be found in many different forms—in narrow linking corridors between hedges, in boxed enclosures, in a woodland floor under high-pruned trunks, or in a narrow doorway separating two contrasting parts of a garden. What is important is that space is not just seen as unused ground between plants, or more grass to be mown. We should be prepared to put as much work into caring for spaces as we do for plants. If that means mowing, then so be it.

If you begin to think of space in this way, then you will use it constructively. You will think about whether your back lawn is of a size that relates happily to your house, and whether it could usefully be larger or smaller. You will think about the syntax of the garden’s various spaces, and how they work as a sequence—the bold opening paragraph, followed by an expansive middle section, the occasional dark joke along the way, and the final architectural flourish. ♡

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