

# STRONG BONES

A clear, coherent frame is essential to creating beautiful pictures.

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IN THE PAST TWO ISSUES we have looked at how to relate a garden to its surroundings and to its house. The time has come now to start to set the garden out. Time to think about the structure.

## DEFINING THE PERIMETER

The way you handle the perimeter of a garden—how you frame the whole space—is critical to the ultimate success of your design, especially in a small garden. Larger gardens have more opportunity to break up the space with internal divisions, to make smaller gardens within the perimeter. But in a small garden the perimeter is always dominant.

The first step for many gardeners is to run a fence of some sort along the entire boundary of their property. Often the neighbors have already installed such fencing. Whatever the origins, some gardeners like to hide such fences using trees and shrubs, especially if they are close-boarded, animal-proof fences. The planting treatments differ. Some gardeners will opt for naturalistic plantings of varying depths, which make the perimeter of the garden seem like a woodland edge. Even in a relatively small garden, you can make it seem that the space goes on forever by drawing out a promontory of similar woodland planting toward the far end of the property, thereby suggesting that the garden extends behind that promontory.

Other gardeners may prefer to plant plain green hedges along the fence line, to make a more formal and coherent backdrop, with trees and paths and perhaps a pool arranged geometrically within the central



space. Some gardeners choose to make a virtue of the fence itself (in the smallest spaces there may be no other option), and decorate it with carefully trained climbers. You might want to dress the fence with trellis or sculptural driftwood, or to paint it a chalky blue or yellow. What matters is to make the fence a working part of the design if it is to be visible.

## SUBDIVIDING THE GARDEN

The value of subdivision lies not so much in limiting an excess of open space as in offering areas of different character and providing a sense of there being something new around every corner.

Even the smallest of gardens can be subdivided. The tiniest terrace could have a wooden balustrade and pergola above, hung with potted ferns and climbers, and beyond a little bamboo grove leading to a seat in the sun surrounded by colorful perennials.

Larger gardens offer scope for more ambitious subdivisions. Steeply sloping sites lend themselves to terracing and garden stairs, and within that stack of terraces there is opportunity to make spaces of completely different characters. There might be long grass terraces flanked by borders that face out over the view, or terraces with high hedges that face only across the terrace, arbor to arbor. I recently saw a fine terrace garden that used beautifully thinned bamboo hedging as a balustrade, offering stroboscopic views and slashes of sunlight all along its length.

Sloping woodlands lend themselves to winding informal stairways, punctuated by the occasional

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landing where a distant view has been carved out through the woodland canopy. These are the perfect places to see woodland groundcover planting closely, without having to bend.

On flat sites, every subdivision whose walls or hedges rise above eye height is its own separate world. It is a blessing and a curse. For while it is good to have spaces of different character—a pool garden, a formal garden, a topiary garden, a foliage garden, a white garden—if every space is cut off completely from the next, the garden can become a peep show, a portfolio of clever ideas with no sense of unity.

## GARDEN CIRCUITRY

This is why you have to plan the garden's network of paths as you plan the characterization of the spaces. The garden has to work as a satisfactory place to get around and be in. The pattern of enclosures needs to have a logic and *raison d'être*. So you might choose to make the enclosures open off a central lawn, like the mysterious rooms off Bluebeard's castle. Or you might make them open off a long central axis of open space running the length of the garden.

The greatest risk of making peep-show gardens is when you make enclosures run in some kind of continuous sequence, starting at the house and coming back to it, or running in a circle front and back, with the house at the center. If you do this, you need to play with contrast, making some spaces large and open, others close and shady, some fussy and some simple, others merely connecting corridors, some spaces paved and some grassy, some with wide entrances and some with narrow doorways or even doors, so there is real



variety in character and planting. Don't forget a vegetable garden can be part of that circuit, too, if you wish, or perhaps a tangent off the main circuit.

You can make visual short-circuits, too, places where you can glimpse from one enclosure through another to a third, making new and unsuspected vistas. You can do this literally with windows, cutting a hole or a dip into a hedge, or creating an opening in a fence.

To make all your subdivisions hang together, try to offer a common theme, perhaps in the paving materials where required, or in the coloring of gates and doors, or the style of brick, stone, or woodwork. Develop a "house style," within which you can play the game of variation.

## HOW MUCH WORK?

It is important to have the complex gardening, the hard work part, somewhere you will appreciate it best. Usually that is nearest the house. Gardens that run at full throttle, with fussy detail right to every boundary, can be restless affairs. Even highly formal gardens are usually better having the calmer and simpler spaces toward the edges.

You may want to have an absolutely simple, calming space outside your windows, as I do, and to have the more complex, hard-working parts of the garden in a nearby enclosure or to one side of that prospect. It will always be a personal choice. But some logical consideration at the start, of the relationships between the subdivisions of your garden, will give you a garden with which you are more comfortable in the long term. ♡



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