

REAL GARDENS

SPRING 2011

Inspiration, style & expert advice

Real projects!

- City roof terrace TRANSFORMATION
- PRACTICAL outdoor dining space
- Total garden RENOVATION
- RELAXING outdoor area
- VEGETABLE PLOT created

PROJECT ADVICE

Simple garden improvements that will add value to your home

EASY
DESIGN
UPDATES

BY MATT
JAMES

Outdoor lighting solutions

Expert advice plus latest buys

ADD COLOUR

Easy ways to brighten up your outside space this summer

Planning a garden project this summer?

Real Homes expert and garden designer **Matt James** offers his advice on where to start and how to make the most of existing features

What does your garden already have to offer?

The first step to successful garden design is looking at your space and making considered judgments – both positive and negative – on what is there before you implement any changes. You'll often find that ripping out everything and starting from scratch isn't necessary.

Wander around on a sunny day and identify what works for you and what doesn't in the garden. Draw up four columns headed 'Must remove', 'Should remove', 'Could remain' and 'Must remain' and, bearing these in mind, move slowly around your space, making notes on everything from the boundary fences and planting to the garden shed.

Note how you and your family use the garden – where you sit, relax and play. Also write down the short-cuts you use to get from one area to another, as it might mean moving or creating a path later.

Be particularly critical of the hard landscaping because this is difficult and costly to replace once the planting is done. If the walls and paths are in a good condition, keep them – unless they don't meet your needs, and you'll probably wish that you had replaced or resurfaced them.

Even a blank canvas of a space offers plenty of design opportunities, it just takes a little more time to tease them out. A simple slope might inspire the idea of terraced outdoor garden rooms – each one subtly screened from the next one. An all-lawn



This awkward-shaped courtyard garden was overlooked and underused

garden requires no costly clearing, but by simply cutting into the turf with an edging iron you can create new shapely and attractive beds and borders.

Defining a lawn by giving it a simple bold shape – like a sweeping curve – will help bring unity to disparate elements and create a new cohesive look. It will also cut down on awkward-to-mow areas.

Try not to see your garden in isolation. Take into account the landscape around you, especially the gardens on either side. Overhanging trees are part of your garden and can be 'borrowed' free of charge, making your own space feel bigger.

Do you have a wonderful view that could be incorporated? A church spire or cityscape could be framed by pencil junipers, making this distant feature part of your own design.

Don't forget that your soil type and aspect will dictate what plants you can have in the garden. For example, much-maligned thick, wet clay offers a perfect opportunity for dramatic bog plants, while free-draining sand is great for fragrant plants such as rosemary and lavender.

In terms of aspect, where the sun hits the garden is perhaps the most important consideration. It won't just determine the types of plants you can grow there, it will dictate where you sit or dine out with your family and entertain friends.

If you are still finding it difficult to see the potential in your outdoor space, it might be worthwhile calling in an experienced garden designer for a day's consultancy. Turn to page 11 for advice on where to source a designer. ■





The courtyard has now been transformed with raised beds made from old railway sleepers, plus defined seating zones, a gravel area and a slate patio by Earth Designs



The lawn area was reshaped and the new beds were planted with grasses and cannas. A decked area from Wickes provides a relaxed space for the whole family to enjoy



This space with a concrete path and seating area to one corner lacked personality and interest

My tips for creating atmosphere

1 For tranquil corners of the garden, use soft cool colours, such as pastels, pale yellow, light blue, mauve, silver and pale pink – these will encourage you to slow down. Warm, nurturing neutrals have a similar effect, but you can also use materials with lots of texture, such as wood and wicker to subtly spice things up so the space doesn't look dull.

2 If you're creating a lively social space, contrasting textures will add to the effect. The most upbeat modern designs use glossy plastics, polished concrete and stained glass, often against gravel or sawn natural stone.

3 Unfussy, flowing or symmetrical layouts with no dynamic angles or complicated curves will help enhance a peaceful atmosphere. Don't overdo the detail – no fussy patterns or intricate artwork. Weathered copper containers, cedar decking, smooth render and Yorkstone paving complement each other for a great simple design. The sound of flowing water is also essential to create a relaxed feel, so consider some stylish spillways or glass cascades.

Sadolin Four Seasons Garden Colour in Prospect Bay, £22.99 for 2.5 litres, B&Q

Cuprinol Garden Shades in Sweet Pea, £19.89 for 2.5 litres, B&Q



What to do if...

you want to create a stylish focal point

For it to be truly successful, the golden rule for a focal point is that it must be distinctly different in shape, colour or arrangement from its immediate surroundings and the main background.

To boost the effectiveness of bold shapes or sculptures, contrast them with soft, billowing wild flowers, bamboo, tall grasses and perennials. Intricately detailed pieces work best

with a neutral backdrop such as a beech hedge, or rendered wall.

Consider scale and proportion. Small elements are usually lost in larger schemes, so are best used in urban courtyard spaces. To gauge the size of your proposed new focal point, cut out a life-sized template of it, or stack cardboard boxes to help picture how it will look in situ.