

Masterclass

Garden historian Todd Longstaffe-Gowan applies classic design principles to his work. He reveals the basic rules

How to create a small town garden

In his new book, the garden historian and designer Todd Longstaffe-Gowan establishes that many of the basic principles applied to town gardens in the 18th and 19th centuries are as useful today. In *The London Town Garden 1700-1840*, he follows them rigorously when designing small gardens and enclosed urban spaces.

Study the genius loci

Take some time, before doing anything, to get a feel for the character of the space, no matter how small it is. What are its advantages and defects? How can the one be used and the other remedied? Also look outside the garden, with a view to making use of features beyond its boundaries, such as a tree or a church spire.

Make a planning grid

Draw a diagram of the space on squared paper, establishing its basic geometry in relation to the house: all town gardens are based on straight lines and right angles. Look from the garden at the house, and vice versa. Go up to the top floor of the house and look down at the garden.

Stick to pragmatic constraints

In the 18th century, these were dictated by such things as clothes: a path had to be 5ft wide to accommodate ladies' skirts. And what you will use the garden for, and when? Will you be sitting in it, eating in it, looking at it from indoors? How much time (and money) are you prepared to spend on upkeep?

Study your soil

Do not do anything before you have examined the quality, consistency and depth of the soil.

Too many people are so excited by a new garden that they start planting straight away, without checking the soil. Sometimes it will be so poor in a town garden that it needs replacement. It will always need enrichment or adjustment of the texture with grit, manure or compost.

Regularity

In larger country gardens there is always a regular, ornamental "buffer" area between the house and the landscape. In a town garden, without the landscape, the buffer is the garden, and cannot be considered separately from the house. You really have to think of the town garden as another room of the house, with similarly regular lines but with greater flexibility and scope for fantasy.

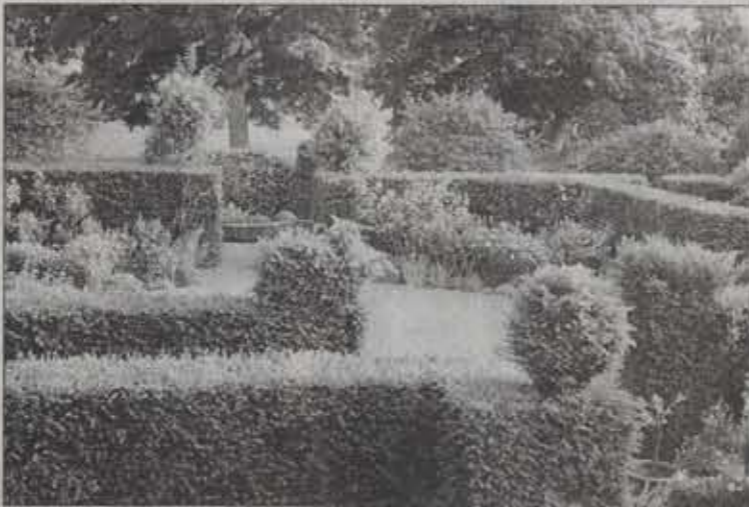
Variety

This need not be in opposition to the notion of regularity: a series of three small rectangular beds



Pictures: DAN DUCHARS, ANDREW LAWSON

Work in progress: Todd Longstaffe-Gowan in the midst of creating his town garden. 'Take some time before doing anything to get a feel for the character of the place'



Clockwise, from above: this country garden uses hedges to draw the eye; grow figs to cover a wall; echinops provide drama; use pots and hedging to make a focus for a vista

seen from one window might appear regular in outline and homogenous, but from a different vantage point be perceived to be full of contrasting textures, hues and forms. The two elements are complementary.

Think about vistas

These can be achieved on any scale, and are an extremely important element in the design. A gap between trees, a bench, a grotto at the end of a path, a gate, something beyond the boundaries — all can be highlighted by a path, or hedge drawing the eye in a particular direction.

Deal with the boundaries first

Do all the planting along walls first, while you can still get close to them — it is a common mistake not to. Most flowering climbers reach for the light and flower as high as they can, leaving bare stems, so cloak a wall in another creeper, ivy, for instance, then grow a clematis or rose through it.

Avoid grass if you can

Small patches of grass in towns are pointless. Use gravel or stone instead, but not in complicated patterns.

Change things around

One of the great advantages of small town gardens is the possibility of moving things about, according to whim or the season. Pots, especially, can be replanted and rearranged very easily, to make a new focus for a vista, or brighten a dark corner.

Treat green as a colour

Foliage usually does better than flowers in a town garden because of constraints on light, so think about your foliage in connection with how the light hits it at different times of the day.

Water

Water and foliage together provide movement and reflect light. Try to include water in your design: even a trickle over a grotto adds another dimension.

Take your time

Don't start planting until all these considerations have been taken into account, and then choose carefully, resisting the temptation to have too many different plants.

Plant several pots of agapanthus; the best one is 'Bressingham Blue'. For walls; try a trained fig, in a large pot to prevent the roots from spreading too far; the myrtle, *Myrtus communis* 'Flore Pleno', allowed to remain as a loose shrub against the wall, for its flowers and wonderful smell; *Rosa Banksiae* 'Lutea', slightly tender, but fine in London, one of the best roses.

Do not have too many bedding plants, but exceptions can be made for a few dramatic flowers, such as the black hollyhock (*Althaea rosea* 'Nigra') or the best allium, the bright blue large-headed *crispifolium*.

● To order 'The London Town Garden', call 0870 1557222.

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