

An illustration of an olive branch with several dark olives and green leaves, extending from the top left and top right corners of the image.

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Dig

A Starter Guide
to Garden Design

Welcome to Dig!

We started Dig with a simple mission to make gardening easier, more accessible and more fun for everyone. Since then, we've delivered thousands of plants to happy customers, designed endless gardens and got our hands dirty too.

We do hope you'll enjoy this garden design guide. Whilst there's a lot to take in, we hope you enjoy the read, and be reassured that everything you see here, Dig can do!

Henry



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Chapter 1

Planning your space

It's a good idea to spend some time thinking about what you want from your garden and outdoor space. You'll find your ideas, thoughts and preferences might change as you

find new inspiration. By putting the time in now, you'll have a clearer vision once you get to implementing it!



Chapter 1 - Planning your space

***Firstly*, ask yourself what type of space you are looking to create.**

Is it going to be a space for entertaining?
Or one for all the family? Perhaps your key focus is inviting in more nature.

Is it going to be one space, or broken into sections and zones?

What inspirational gardens have you seen that you feel like you would like to emulate in yours?

How 'hands on' do you want to be?
Even a small space full of plants and greenery will demand a lot of care and attention, so make sure your level of ambition is balanced with your dedication to weeding and watering!

Dig Top Tip - Write a wish-list for the space

Even if you don't end up doing all of it, it will help you decide what type of space you're looking to create and what elements are most important in achieving this.



Al fresco. It's worth planning ahead if you're keen to create outdoor dining and social areas.

Family first? There are smart ways to make a garden family friendly, without having to use all the space.

Problem solving = problem highlighting

Is there a dry and shady corner of your garden, or an existing tree in the wrong spot? Sometimes highlighting something that you think is an issue - such as an awkward corner or an existing tree - and making a feature re-frames the 'issue' as new feature or area of interest within your garden.



Using existing elements. A large, previously unwelcome tree has been used in this London garden to create a natural canopy over a new pergola.

Inside out

Are there elements, shapes or patterns inside your house that you'd like to carry through to the outside? Thinking about these design ideas also ensures that the transition from interior to exterior is as smooth and elegant as possible.



From the inside. Create a synergy between your interior design and your garden



How Dig can help:

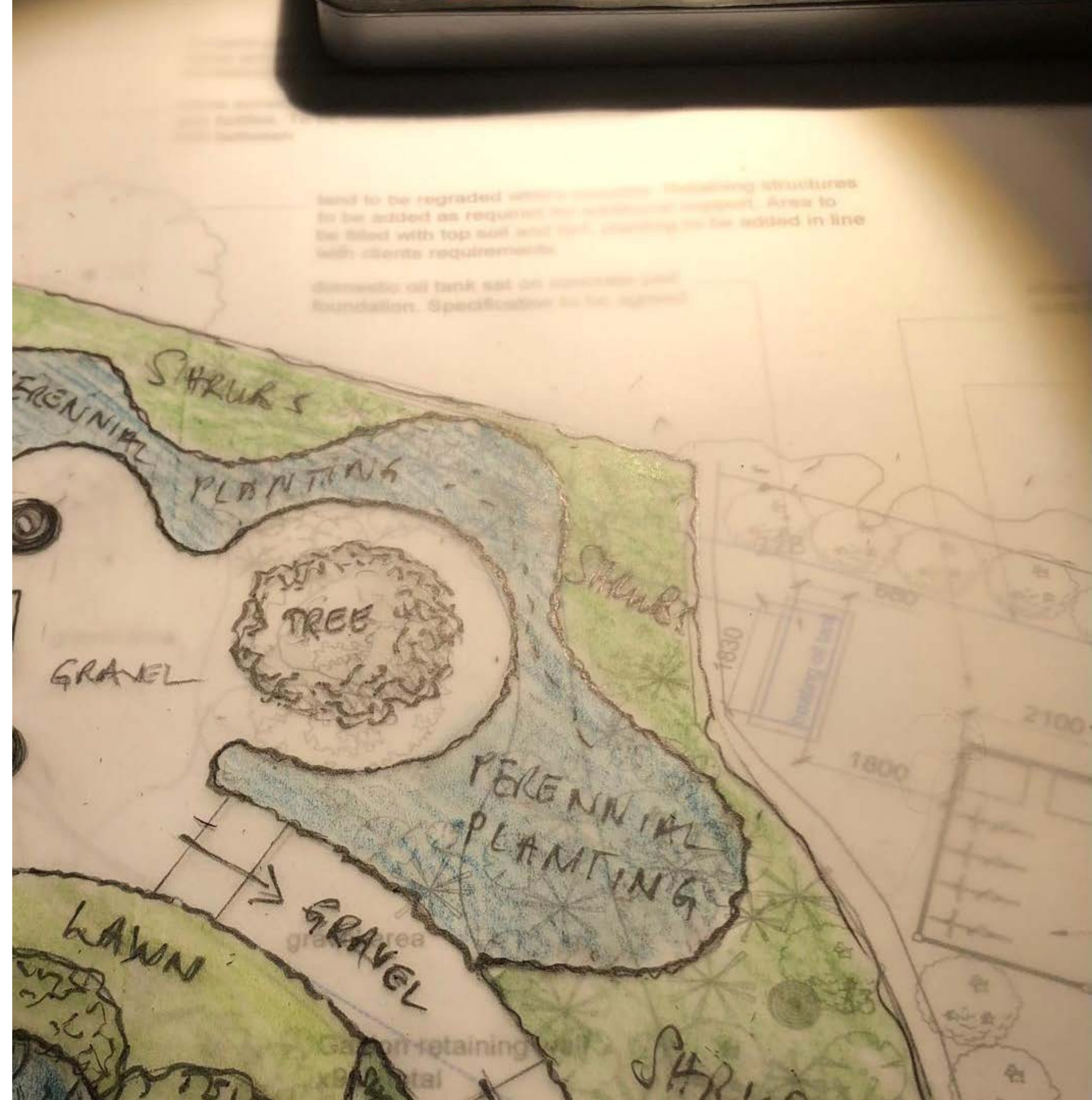
Take a look at
our [*detailed garden
theme pages*](#) for more
inspiration and ideas

Chapter 2

The Practicals

Whilst it might not be the most exciting part of planning your garden transformation, following these practical steps can make all the difference further along the line.

By understanding how much light your garden gets, what type of soil you have and how to measure out the space correctly, you're setting yourself up for success!



Chapter 2 - The Practicals

Sun, shade, or both?

Understanding how much sun or shade your garden receives is really important and easy to do, especially with most smart phones having a compass app!

It helps work out the spatial arrangement of the garden (you're probably going to want a seating area in a sunnier part). And also guides what plants you like, that will be happy in your space.

Soil pH

Testing your soil pH is a great way to add to your site analysis and ensure that your plants thrive. You can easily purchase a soil testing kit online, and it takes a few minutes to complete. A neutral pH (around pH 7) is ideal, but not vital to success!

What's growing?

Looking to see what else is growing in your garden is also a helpful way to see what may thrive - for example if you have Camellias or Rhododendrons then this may be a sign that you have ericaceous (acidic soil). This is not a bad thing! Many edible plants love this type of soil such as berry producing plants (Blackberries, Redcurrants etc.)



Acid lovers. Camellias are often found in British gardens for their stunning early Spring flowers & evergreen foliage.



Different aspects & light levels

South-Facing Gardens: Full sun for most of the day, especially in summer.

West-Facing Gardens: Full sun from midday onwards, with warm afternoon light.

East-Facing Gardens: Gentle morning sun, shade in the afternoon.

North-Facing Gardens: Little to no direct sunlight, mostly indirect light.

Chapter 2 - The Practicals

Drawing up your garden

After all the work done so far, this is a vital step in the process! Take your time to ensure you get what you need.

You can use Google Earth to get a sense of scale, geography, and it has a handy measuring tool, but it is best to use a measuring tape!

Firstly, sketch your garden out including basic elements such as your house, boundary lines, any trees and manhole covers / drains.

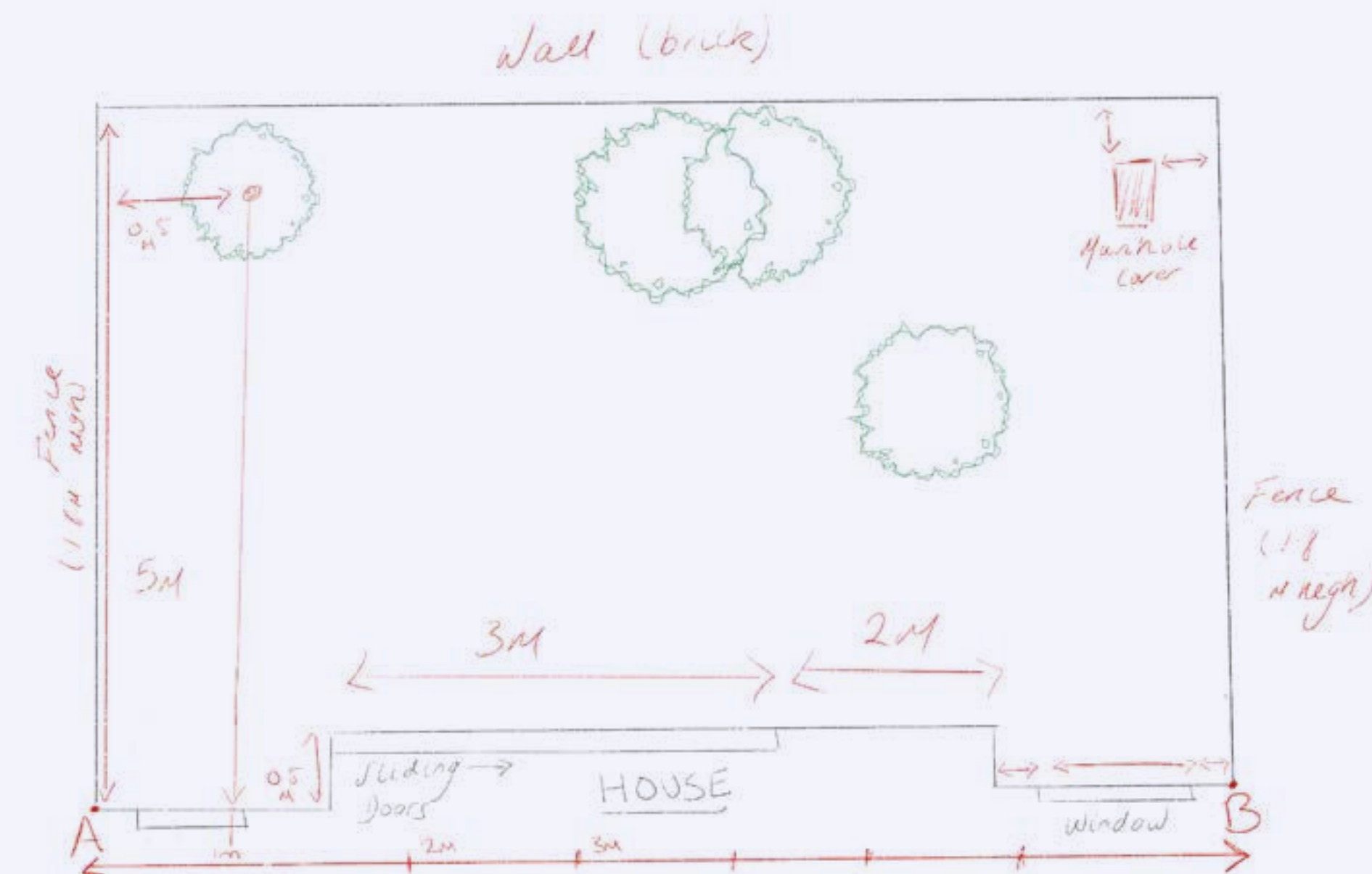
Our design team undertake this level of rigour for our larger [Dig Studio](#) projects. Feel free to email us!

studio@digclub.co.uk

Then measure the length of your house - the two end points of your house are now classed as A and B and are fixed points.

Now you can do triangulation - whilst this sounds complicated, it just means that you measure from the fixed points of A and B to the top left and right hand boundary corners - so diagonally across the garden.

If you have curved areas of your garden, you can take something called offsets - this is where you measure two lines of exactly the same length at 90 degrees from the house, from A and B. Peg out a straight line at 90 degrees to them so it's parallel to the house.



Along the pegged line, at regular intervals, take measurements at 90 degrees from the line to the perimeter to plot the curve. Make sure you note down the measurements plus the distance of each interval on the sketch.

You can also use the offset technique to record the positions of fixed features such as trees, a shed or permanent structures.

Chapter 3

The space & materials

Whatever the size of your space, there are some simple tips and tricks to ensure that you achieve the desired atmosphere and design that you're after.

Are you looking to add perhaps just a pathway to increase usability to a part of your garden, or perhaps create overhead shelter such as with a pergola, or with trees?

Perhaps you just want to refresh your planting beds, add new ones or create a haven for wildlife by creating a pond or water feature and additional pollinator friendly planting.

Materials can play a big factor in the feel for the space - do you want to go natural and organic, or use harder elements like metal for a more modern vibe?



Chapter 3 - The space & materials

Pathways or patios

For hard landscape materials such as pathways or patios, it is key to think about the site - ensure drainage has been properly planned out and considered, as otherwise your garden will become waterlogged. Gravel is a great way to aid with drainage - either for your pathway, or with gravel strips either side of a paved area and it looks great to, especially with Med plants.

Also consider the maintenance of paved materials, as well as suitability for outdoor use. In the rain some materials, such as porcelain paving, can get slippery, if it does not have an anti-slip texture applied to it.

Water features

Water features are also an excellent way to welcome in wildlife, sounds and create a different, reflective surface. You can place water bowls for example nestled within a planting bed to add a sculptural element to the garden. They are always better placed out of direct sun to avoid algae!



Sensorial water. Ponds, fountains and bowls create an immediate calming essence in an outdoor space.

Pots and planters

Pots and planters are a great way to add structural elements to your gardens, as well as perhaps try planting combinations that you may not be able to achieve in your beds. For example, if you have heavy clay but want to experiment with Mediterranean style planting, then this could be achieved by placing pots or planters near to the house (or even within the beds) to achieve a variation in style.



Power of Pots. Pots and Planters are a brilliant way to introduce colour, shape and style without the need for soil and flower beds.



Chapter 3 - The space & materials

A delicate balance

We usually like to say that the ratio in smaller gardens for hard landscaping to planting areas should be 50:50. This is to ensure that the garden feels like it hugs the house and any patio areas, as well as being used to create a sense of intimacy.

The inclusion of planting areas also contribute to aiding in water runoff and drainage, as well as minimising the 'heat island' effect in cities where large areas of paving reflect heat.

Dig Top Tip - For smaller spaces think BIG!

Big shapes and features when well proportioned can make a small space seem larger. For example, on a small terrace, larger pots with tree ferns can immediately create an enclosed green space whilst also adding privacy.

Have fun with paths

Think about how a pathway can feel more intriguing and mysterious if it changes in width, going from wider (two people side by side), to 1 person width.



Chapter 4

All about plants

Now that you have assessed your site, drawn up the survey, mapped out the planted areas and considered the materials, we can move onto the really fun part!

Choosing plants that will not only fit your brief but also thrive in your garden is so important but can take some experimentation... Some plants will just work, and others might not. But by having an idea of the types of colours and combinations you're keen to use, you'll give yourself the best chance of success.

Remember too that whilst there are endless 'recommended' combinations, it comes down to your taste, preferences and what gives you the most joy!



Chapter 4 - All about plants

A colour wheel, with many combinations

The colour wheel is a great source of inspiration to encourage you to think about what colours you want in your garden, and then what hues compliment or contrast with each other.

Monochromatic schemes employ one colour with different variations.

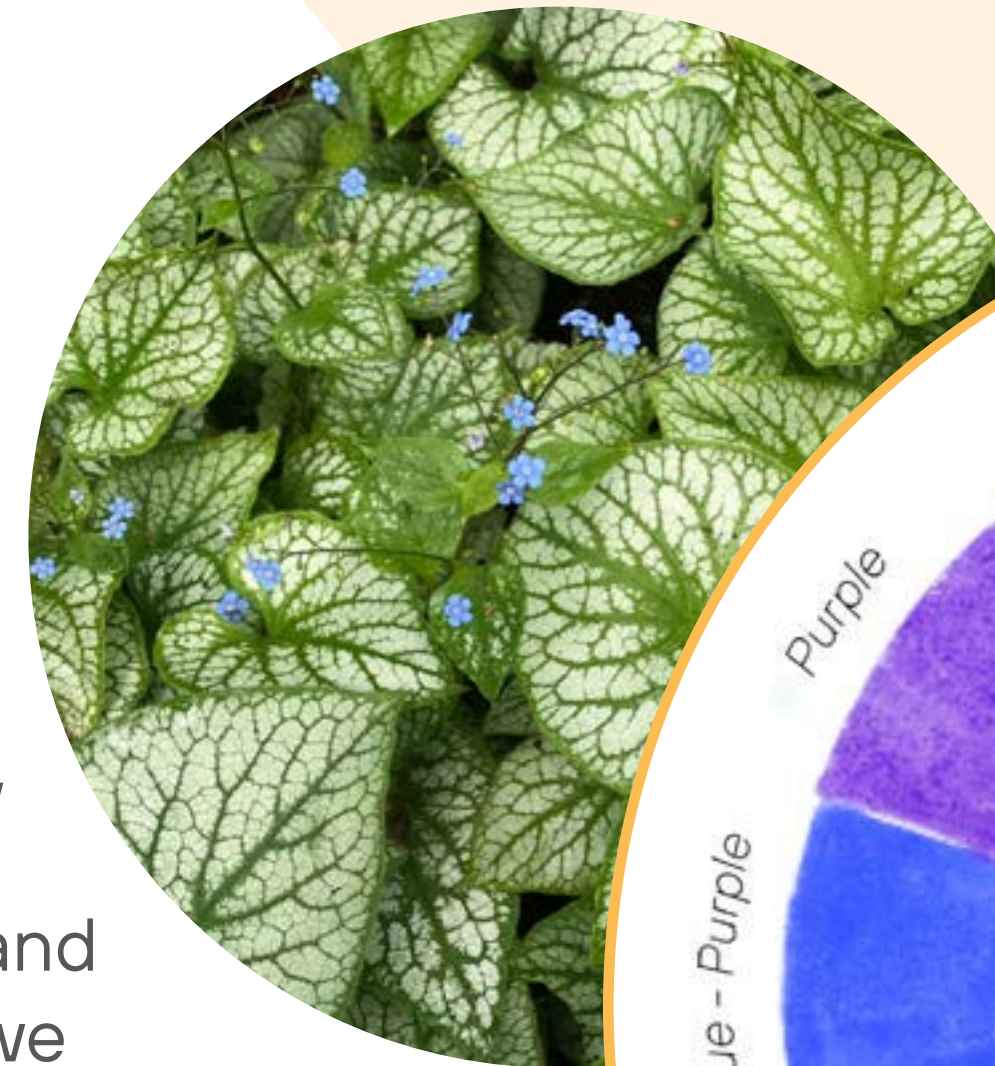
This can be used to emphasise texture and details such as foliage, bark, and flower forms. And, because there are not numerous colours to distract your eye, you can focus on what makes each plant unique.

Paler colours, such as whites, will brighten up a shady spot, for example, Astartia 'Alba' and Geranium 'White Ness' that we include in our Cottage theme.

Leaves can also be handy here, Brunnera 'Jack Frost' is extremely versatile and the variegated leaves are ideal for creating interest in a shadier garden.

Dig Top Tip - Choose repeat flowering plants

They're really handy within the garden - these are plants that have a second or even third flush of flowers after being cut back. These include Nepeta, Geraniums, Alchemilla and Geums.



Colours to evoke different moods

Analogous or harmonious colours use colours that lie next to each other on the colour wheel. They would share similar pigments and usually blend in to one another creating a minimal contrast effect. This can create schemes that are elegant and calming when using 'cooler' colours such as blues and greys, but when used with 'hot' colours such as red and orange, it can make a bright and cheery scheme.



A bright, blended look. Oranges and reds combine with this analogous planting combination.

An example of *Complementary colours* would be purple and yellow, or orange and blue. Our Adventure theme uses this technique, a fun and lively theme that includes the purple of Echinacea purpurea alongside the soft, orange tone of Achillea 'Terracotta'.



Fun contrasts. See the pop and vibrancy that comes from oranges, purples and reds combining together as complementary colours.



How Dig can help

Our [*Instant Beds*](#) and [*Plant Collections*](#) can do the hard work for you when it comes to plant and colour choices!

Chapter 4 - All about plants

Feelings & forms...

The vibrancy of complementary colours attracts your attention and draws your eye to a certain area, whereas cooler colours will naturally create a quiet, more relaxed spot. One will encourage movement, the other encourages stopping or sitting, and can be a useful way to signify a transition to a quieter space in the garden.

Combining plants that have - for example - a spire (this would include Agastache, Veronicastrum or certain varieties of Salvia), with a daisy like flower such as Asters, or Eurybia creates a lovely contrast in forms.



Fragrant edging. Astrantia spires contrast beautifully with other, smaller flowers & foliage around them.

Grasses are also a lovely way to add tactility and height, as well as there being a wide range of types such as semi-evergreen, more compact ones and taller ones. Placing aromatic plants near pathways, or nearby seating areas is also a lovely way to experience those more fragrant plants.



Fragrant edging. Use grasses & aromatic plants near pathways to create a sensorial experience.



Flow, and repeat

Repeat plants throughout a garden in order to create rhythm and harmony – even if you have one side that is more shady than the other, choosing perennials or shrubs (evergreen shrubs are a great way to anchor a scheme and provide year round interest) that can be carried across both sides of the garden will achieve this. We also tend to group plants in odd numbers, such as in 3s.

For a more naturalistic scheme we also ‘spot plant’ – this is planting in 1s or 3s.



Repeat planting. Lavender throughout provides synergy and natural flow.

Chapter 4 - All about plants

The shapes of flower heads are also really important and interesting to consider – variation in the form of plants (how they grow), and their flower heads, will create a scheme that is visually interesting.



Spires. Liriope's elegant spires create great visual interest in shadier spots.

Chapter 5

Sustainability & inviting nature in

It's no secret that one of the easiest ways to maintain a sustainable garden is to include a variety of pollinator friendly plants - bees in fact see colours and are most attracted to blue, purple, violet white and yellow flowers.

Choose flower shapes that are open, where they can easily reach the nectar. Tubular shaped flowers, such as those on Foxgloves, Penstemons and Snapdragons are also important sources of food for bees.



Chapter 5 - Sustainability & inviting nature in

Year round colour, year round help for nature

Ensuring you include flowering plants the whole year round not only creates a cheerful, year-round scheme, but also helps to prolong the flowering season - starting with Hellebores which flower from January, to growing Salvias, Heleniums, Asters or Gaura for that late season, autumnal interest.



Food for bees. Anemones are at their best in late summer/autumn which provides colour & welcome pollen!

Avoid pesticides in the garden - if you have a pest, such as slugs for example, then try to solve this by using copper wire or egg shells around the base of the plants, or alternatively create a sacrificial corner of plants in another part of the garden that you don't mind getting eaten!

Encouraging insects that predate on the pests is also a great way to treat this issue organically. Insects such as hoverflies eat pests, so growing plants that attract them - for example Alliums, Japanese anemones, Hebe, Sanguisorba or Poppies - is an easy and organic way to ameliorate this issue.



Dig Top Tip

Create a bug hotel from old logs - this is not only fun to do, but the more pristine your garden is, the less places nature will have to take refuge in.

Wildlife-first, but beautiful too.

Plants are vital to wildlife, with pollinator plants for bees and leaving seed heads over winter for birds and insects (which also look stunning). You can encourage bats into your garden by growing plants such as Michaelmas daisies and retaining mature trees (these sometimes have hollows which are ideal for bat roosts).



Leave them be! Don't immediately cut off old flower and seed heads. They look lovely in winter and are a great source of food for animals & insects.

By using what's already within your garden - such as working around existing trees, re-using paving, and generally minimising the scale of demolition and waste materials - you will not only benefit the environment and be more sustainable, but also more cost effective.

Storing water in your garden is a straightforward way to not only save water usage, but also make us more conscientious of how much water we're using. In fact, watering less frequently can also encourage your plants to become hardier, and develop greater root systems.



Water storage. You can still make water storage a feature in the garden and surround it with planting.



Final thoughts

A (pleasant) marathon, not a sprint.

As mentioned at the start, there's a lot to take in when it comes to planning, designing and creating a garden. But it doesn't need to be intimidating and it shouldn't cost the world - you can break your project into stages, make the most of what's already in place, and evolve the project as you go.

Most important of all is that the experience is enjoyable and that - by improving your outdoor space - you're making a difference for yourself, those around you, nature and our planet.

As always, we're here to help and advise - do get in touch if you think we can help.

Happy gardening!

Henry



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