

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

An eco-friendly garden requires careful planning and responsible management, but looked after well, offers great rewards

Words AILEEN SCOLAR

Given that most gardens involve earth, air, and water, as well as living plants and wildlife, they should, by their very definition, be environmentally friendly. Yet that isn't always the case. A desire to control nature with the application of chemicals, an inclination to subvert climate with excessive irrigation, or a determination to compose an environmental illusion with an over-abundance of hard landscaping can all create an effect that is far from ecologically sound.

In reality, an eco-garden should simply be a space that has been designed and executed in empathy with the surrounding landscape, working "with" rather than "against" nature—an effect that is ideally self-sustaining without

the need for daily irrigation, and able to evolve in tune with the cyclical rhythms of the seasons. "Right plant, right place" is an important factor, as is the impact the garden has on local wildlife, the environment, and on people's lives.

Bernard Trainer, an Australian landscape architect who has practiced in California for the past two decades, describes his design approach as "appropriate and authentic," an ethos that considers not just the look of the resulting garden, but the resources required to grow plants there.

"If you design responsibly, effectively it's an eco-garden," observes Debbie Roberts of Acres Wild, a British design duo that operates in Europe and the United States. London-based landscape designer Emily Erlam, who created an outstanding



eco-garden in England's only desert landscape, Dungeness in Kent, also favors a "light touch."

"For me, that means creating a beautiful garden without removing or bringing in lots of materials," she explains. "And if we do choose to bring them in, my hope is that they will be crafted and laid beautifully with the intention of being there for many years to come."

NATURAL PEST CONTROL

The use of chemical-rich herbicides and fertilizers is also incompatible in an authentic eco-garden. "We only use organic pest and disease control agents and organic fertilizers because they're better for both the environment and the people using them," says Amber Scott Freda, a landscape designer in New York. "Artificial fertilizers tend to destroy micro-organisms and earthworms which, over time, can result in a dead soil."

At their simplest, the primary considerations in an eco-garden are water, plants, and landscaping materials. Using water ecologically means many things: encouraging moisture to seep into the ground via permeable paths, capturing and recycling rainwater, and creating rain gardens—shallow landscaped depressions planted with moisture-loving plants that hold excess rainwater until it gradually soaks into the soil.

Smart planting is crucial, too. There's a desire to embrace local and indigenous varieties, but nature is not as discerning about plant providence as you might think. "A sensible palette takes a global ethic," is how Pennsylvanian horticulturist Rick Darke describes his approach to plant selection. That means choosing plants—not necessarily natives—that suit the location, taking position,



climate, and soil type into account. For example, trees that cope well with low rainfall include California live oak, Monterey pine, and Monterey cypress. You also need flowers that are rich in pollen and nectar to sustain birds and pollinating insects. Bees, in particular, adore borage, lavender, echinacea, verbena, and salvia. Seed heads can also be left in place to sustain wildlife.

Even city rooftops can be greened up in an eco-friendly way, says Scott Freda: "Since creating a garden on a roof is a lot like gardening on top of a mountain, in New York City we use plants that grow well in the mountains, like conifers."

Meanwhile, in New Mexico, Design With Nature's Paschall Garden is a good example of how to marry contemporary architecture with »

Arable landscape: The vibrant garden at Blue Doors Lodge in Arundel in England's South Downs, designed by Acres Wild (opposite and top left).

Flowers in the desert: Emily Erlam's eco-garden in the wilderness of Dungeness in Kent, England (above and top right).

MAGGIE/ARIANNE MAJERUS



Barren to lush: Amber Freda's makeover of this rooftop garden in Brooklyn's Park Slope (left), features drip irrigation lines and low-voltage lighting.

Intensively planted: Emily Erlam's Rain Garden in Norfolk, England (below).

a shrubby desert environment. A “dry” stream bed, vast boulders, roof-water recycling, and naturalized planting contrast with the geometric lines of the property to produce a balanced, and inherently sustainable, result.

DESIGNS WITHOUT WALLS

But it's perhaps the “built landscaping” choices we make that have the most impact. Acres Wild takes an appropriately monastic approach: “We use the absolute minimum of hard landscaping—that's a really important aspect of our designs,” says Roberts. “And rather than putting in huge retaining walls in a sloping site, we'll specify a lower wall with a gently sloping planted bank because it's more ecologically sustainable.”

Simple ways to landscape sensitively include avoiding imported materials and choosing locally sourced materials and traditionally skilled craftspeople. Certifiable timber, permeable paving, and natural or recycled materials are good choices, while pine needles, timber chips, grit, and mown areas through lawn grass are all low-impact selections for paths and trails.

Most of all, choose materials that sit well within your own specific landscape. “*Genius loci*—a sense of place—should be what every good garden design strives for, and it's not just a visual consideration; it runs much deeper than that,” explains Roberts. This is particularly true of the eco-garden.



In delivering her iconic Dungeness design, Erlam achieved a truly sustainable result: “The garden was located in a Site of Special Scientific Interest so there were many rules to comply with,” she recalls. “Using local gravel, stones, and wood, alongside gentle hummocks of Mediterranean-style planting, was logical in such a protected site. But it actually turned out to be the very success of the garden because nothing looked out of place or ‘over-designed.’”

And when a garden looks as if it has always been there, unfurling itself gently from the ground beneath, you can quietly congratulate yourself on a job well done. ●

Aileen Scoular is an award-winning garden designer and journalist

On the market

GREEN CHOICES



Enchanting residence

Santiago, Chile

Price upon request

Bórquez & Asociados

Limitada

Maria José Bórquez Yunge

+56 229 536 992

This magnificent four-bedroom, five-bath residence has grounds designed by Alberto San Fuente, one of the city's top landscape architects, and delivers a taste of paradise, with charming pathways, a firepit, and an antique fountain. Rustic tiled walkways through the garden lead visitors to a glass entrance door, while the formal living room is flanked by vast windows.



Chelston Estate

Paget Parish, Bermuda

Price upon request

Sinclair Realty Ltd

John M Sinclair

+1 441 296 0278

Once the official Bermuda residence of the US government, Chelston is surrounded by stunning park-like grounds suitable for horse-riding, tennis, and golf. Transformed by a three-year renovation, the 14-acre (5.6-ha) beachfront compound encompasses a 10,000 sq ft (929 sq m) main house, four cottages, a pool complex, and a beach pavilion, with a total of 16 bedrooms and 15 full baths.