

# The new garden challenge

*Jean Claude Defrance of Natura Garden Centres offers a guide to the fundamentals of Mediterranean garden design, focusing in this article on the importance of addressing structure and layout well before planting plans are considered.*

Who can fail to be excited by the challenge of a new garden? Even the most blasé of new home-builders is usually stirred, if not into action, at least into some level of interest when the inevitable moment arrives that “something must be done” about the building site wasteland surrounding every new home. And a rebuild of an existing garden is at least as much of a challenge, often more so, given the likely constraints of existing structures and plantations.

So here are some tips on the best conceptual approach to a new or rebuilt garden, as well as some practical hints on the more mundane aspects.

Mention ‘garden’ to most people and they immediately think of flowers, bushes, trees and lawns - few imagine ‘structure’ or ‘layout’ the primary or fundamental elements. Of course, a garden wouldn’t be a garden without flowers, plants and trees; but then a painting wouldn’t be a painting without canvas and board.

So, just as an artist will carefully select the fabric and frame for his painting, a gardener must first design and prepare the layout and structure of his garden – long before any plants are chosen.

Look at any piece of ground and you’ll immediately find one of two features, sometimes both: sloping and flat ground. From a gardener’s point of view, slopes are rather awkward legacies of God’s creation - in the rainy season they are susceptible to wash-away and erosion, and are awkward to plant and maintain.

There are two solutions. One is to scatter slopes with natural rocks (to shore them up), but this takes up lots of garden space, can look messy, and creates an area that needs close maintenance. Yet it’s still the preferred tactic for many landscapers, because relatively easy to do. The other solution, infinitely preferable in my view but more challenging both technically and aesthetically, is to terrace a slope with natural stone walls. This technique creates successive flat areas that provide extra planting or garden space, interesting perspectives, great visual appeal and easier maintenance.

It is obviously important to build walls that are pleasing to the eye. The best in my view are those that disguise any use of cement and that combine different size strata of rock in horizontal layers. Crucially these walls should be what I call ‘gardener style’ rather than ‘builder style’.

If step one in a garden is solving the slope problem, step two is deciding what to do with both the existing flat areas and those that have been created by the stone walled terraces. Here the debate gets interesting!

Nine times out of ten the instinctive reaction of both homeowner and landscaper is to lawn most of the available flat area, with perhaps a surrounding flower bed or hedge and the odd 'island' for trees, plants or flowers. Very common – and how unimaginative!

In decorative terms, this is the equivalent of laying a wall-to-wall carpet; in professional landscaping terms it's the equivalent of selling (cheap) wall-to-wall carpet! Little effort is required, no imagination, and it's an easy sell. Anyone can do it – but it's not landscaping.

Real landscaping is doing something more than this: the imaginative ability to create interest and variety in a garden at every turn, whilst respecting the natural environment and local conditions. Apart from anything else, lawn in the Mediterranean climatic zone is an alien, ecologically-hostile, water and labour-intensive interloper.

Turning an open flat area into a place of interest and beauty is certainly a challenge. My approach to a Mediterranean garden is to plan simultaneously around the 'Four S's': Surface, Shape, Shade and Surprise. What does this mean?

Surface is easily understood: a combination of elements such as gravel, natural earth, flat rock, sand and pebbles. Shape is also obvious: the new aspect that will be created by the planting of tree or bush, or the erection of a man-made structure such as a pergola or gazebo. But surprise?

Creating surprise is perhaps the landscaper's greatest challenge: the ability to draw a viewer into a garden, yet simultaneously to withhold much of it from immediate sight. It creates the promise that there is something else to see or to discover - not likely in the wall-to-wall grass carpet garden!

In practical terms this means devising a layout and a planting plan that hides aspects of the garden from view. For example, it could mean the construction of a meandering gravel path lined with a stone wall, trees and bushes, that allows no more than a few metres of visual perspective, but that eventually opens out into a wider planted area. Or it could mean a creeper-covered pergola that shields a hedged enclave from view, where the garden visitor can enjoy some moments of privacy.

The fourth and final 'S', shade, is doubly important as a design factor in a garden with a variety of surfaces, especially when gravel, rock or sand are used. These surfaces, because of their light colour, will intensify the reflection of the sun. Hence high trees, bushes and pergolas are vital shade elements in any Mediterranean garden plan.

Important too, but often overlooked, is the need to integrate the design and location of a swimming pool, outdoor terraces and a driveway into the garden plan. Too often these elements are designed and positioned only in relation to the house, long before any garden plan is devised. So for those building a new

home, here's an important tip: undertake the garden plan before these components are built, making them conform to the needs of the garden and not vice-versa - they are in the garden after all!

To summarise: first, design and build stone-wall terraces to deal with any slopes; next, introduce natural earth beds, flat stone, sand and/or pebbles; third, determine the elevation aspect of the garden, i.e. the horizontal view as seen from key positions such as the main house terrace. This last aspect is crucial in concealing both unsightly perspectives and creating areas of the garden that can only be discovered upon entering it.

With these basic ideas in mind, your garden will offer interest and variety but most important it will be inviting. In my next article I shall address in detail the planting plan, and the importance of appropriate selection of trees and plants.

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