

Designing with Plants

Sometimes I am working on so many planting plans that I start to dream about them or even worse attempt to do them in a half awake – half dream-like state, which is so frustrating because I've forgotten them by the time I wake up! The thought and consideration that goes into creating even the smallest planting plan is huge and I argue with myself constantly about the virtues of one plant versus another.

The next stage is to price it all in detail for the client and then formalise the plan onto paper for their approval. Following this I order the plants and arrange for them to arrive on a certain day at a certain time. I then work away at setting them out into their rightful places and I don't like anyone else doing it – what a pain I must seem. But after all that when I walk away looking back at all of those beautiful plants exactly where they should be I cannot describe the immense pleasure I get!

It's not just about creating a planting plan using plants that you know will survive in specific conditions it is also about creating a design using a palette of colours, textures and shapes that flow together to create the effect you want. It's painting with plants.

When I start on a plan I have obviously noted the dimensions of the bed or borders to be planted and details such as their orientation to the sun and wind etc. I have taken into consideration the soil structure (clay, loamy..) and any other practical requirements.

But where I really start is in trying to picture the overall effect of what I'm trying to achieve. In my case I am guided by the consultation time that I have had with my clients and the setting in which the plants are to finally go (i.e. the architecture of the house or dominant colours present) but for you it has to come from gradually forming this picture through being aware of what you don't like and what you do like. It is **so** worth taking the time to discover what you feel because it is that journey which will make you paint a beautiful picture and give you the confidence to achieve it.

We are so very lucky in the North East of Scotland because we have an abundance of very beautiful gardens to go and see. Castles and gardens managed and owned by Scottish National Trust, Scottish Heritage and of course the very popular Scotland's Gardens Scheme providing over 350 gardens in Scotland opening to the public every year where the proceeds go to charity. But it is also the quality of many of these gardens and the planting within in them that is so inspiring. Crathes and Leith Hall spring to mind as the most influential gardens from my own personal point of view. I adore how they have travelled with time, adding to the existing portfolio, never scared to try something new but always remembering where they have come from and their heritage. We also have our very own Gardening programme providing us with invaluable information and visual experiences through our television sets every week (Beechgrove Garden) and of course this weekly column written by Jim McColl, providing us the benefit of his many years of experience, countless ideas and the outcome of research on what works and what doesn't.

So having established that there is an unending source of inspiration and information specific to the North East of Scotland and having decided upon the overall effect you want to see in your garden, you can start to create your plan.

How you approach this is up to you but I start by taking an A3 sheet of paper and drawing a 1cm square grid (1cm representing 1meter) onto the sheet and then in bold lines mark out the dimensions and shapes of the areas to be planted. I think of the final plan in layers, the first layer will provide the backbone and there will be quite a lot of evergreen interest in this, because of the long winter months. In my plans each plant must have more than one attribute for it to be included (unless it is completely gorgeous, then I forgive it and it goes in) – it has to work hard and be useful as well as pretty. These plants that provide the backbone are the tallest and so I must think about how tall they will ultimately grow, how wide their spread will be and whether they provide a flower and or a berry and what time of year they do this.

I make a list in the margin of all the possibilities that I can choose from, that I know will grow in these conditions and soil. Then I think about my next layer, which are likely to be medium or small shrubs (depending on the depth of border) and do the same thing and then my edging plants. Now I am ready to fill-in with all the herbaceous plants I want to include and then my list of bulbs.

I am ready to start committing the plant suggestions from my list to paper represented by a shape and as I do this, I am ticking off the list as I go. Gradually, I build-up the picture of how the border will look and when I'm finished I take time away to come back to cast a fresh eye over my work and make my second and often eighth pass before feeling contented with it. Now the plan must be turned into a 'shopping list'. You need to note the name of the plant and the quantity required. This can be quite tricky, so when you are ticking off your list of 'possibles' put the number along side to remind you of how many you put in.

Now you are ready to go shopping! Many good garden centres are happy to help you price a sizeable list and often help out with delivery too, so remember to ask. Where the list is small then you can obviously handle this yourself.

The plants are delivered and you are ready to go. Set all of the plants out before you even consider planting. You must put as much consideration into the space they will need to grow in now as you did on your plan. Leave them to sit and go back and forth over where they are positioned to iron out any last minute wrinkles. Then, plant them and sit back, have a well-earned cuppa and watch them grow! In time you will find that you become as bad as me when you find yourself excitedly saying to a friend "my tree peony flowered for the very first time today, it's so exciting!!"