

The Natural Garden

by

Lawrence Dyer

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The Natural Garden

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1. Introducing The Natural Garden

Okay, so you want a peaceful haven in which to unwind after the rigours of a stressful day at work, a place where birds sing and bees buzz amongst the flowers and you can forget your cares. The sound of wildlife is an important part of this of course, but it is just one part. It is the appearance or design of the garden that is the major aspect for many people. Certain plants, certain arrangements of plants and garden designs are much more relaxing to the mind than others, and what calms the eye calms the mind.

Part of this publication -- mainly the sections on designing your garden, and how to grow plants successfully -- apply to almost any kind of garden, not just Natural Gardens. So, if you are a gardening novice and you are not yet sure that Natural Gardening is for you then you can still learn the basics for almost any type of garden here. However, I would still hope that you might be swayed in the direction of natural gardening after reading this publication :-)

For those who do not need convincing about the benefits of Natural Gardening then this ebook is squarely aimed at you too, showing you ways to implement your dreams for a peaceful tranquil garden that will 'recharge your batteries' after a hard day's work and be a source of endless pleasure through the years.



2. What is Natural Gardening?

Just like many others, I've always been drawn to wild places -- from quite a young age. At a time when my parents' outdoor space and our neighbouring gardens had 'over-designed' mixed borders containing flashy herbaceous and annual bedding plants, I was turning my own little allocated corner into miniature landscapes of wild plants. This reflects my life-long love of wild places. However, *Natural Gardening* does not necessarily equate with 'wild gardening'.

Wild Gardening may be seen as subset of Natural Gardening. If you tend to think of wild gardens as narrowly consisting of featureless expanses of wild flowers, then you should realise that this is only one small part of what Natural Gardening is all about. Natural Gardens can be any of the following and more: a tropical or sub-tropical garden, a woodland garden, a water garden, an alpine garden, a meadow garden or an oriental garden, to give just a few examples. But more than this, it is the approach taken in designing, planting and maintaining such gardens that makes them into Natural Gardens.

In a Natural Garden the plants used are either wild plants similar to those that grow in the locality -- or even in another part of the world -- or they have been bred from wild plants yet they still manage to maintain their natural beauty (more on this a little later). In a Natural Garden the materials and hard landscaping are natural products; garden chemicals are not used and the gardener is in tune with nature.

Most of all in Natural Gardening the design and arrangement of plants is informal and borrows from the way plants are arranged in natural landscapes. The purpose of all of this is to make a place that truly relaxes the mind and refreshes for the busy tasks of life that lie ahead, as well as to promote an understanding of and empathy with nature and the natural world -- so important in these days of global warming and environmental degradation. The Natural Gardening approach is therefore particularly important for children to learn, and if not for yourself alone I encourage you to do something natural with your outdoor space for your children.



3. Understanding What Plants Need to Flourish

Before we can go into the Natural Garden approach in more detail we need to cover some of the basics that apply to all gardening. If you are new to growing plants, then don't worry, this won't be painful. It isn't difficult or complicated and it won't take long. It's simple enough stuff that you need to know to be successful with gardening. If you are already an experienced grower of plants then you can skim-read or skip the rest of this section (although do note my rant against 'over-bred' plants under 'A Plant's Needs', three paragraphs below!)

Growing Plants on a Long Term Basis

So many people buy expensive plants at their local garden centre or nursery only to end up with the same plants looking sickly or even dead only a few months or a year later. What is worse, they then go out and do it again! Many seem to regard plants growing in pots as they would cut flowers, seeing them as having a short-term life only. Of course, with annual plants this is true -- annual plants are only intended to last the one growing season. But most of the plants on sale are *perennial*, they will live for many years -- in the case of trees, for example, potentially for hundreds of years.

So, how can you buy perennial plants and grow them successfully for many years? The answer is simple really. You have to give each plant the conditions it needs to thrive. This is just a question of knowing how to do it -- it certainly isn't magic or luck. And knowing how to do something such as successfully looking after plants can be learned by anyone, it isn't difficult.

A Plant's Needs

The first thing to understand is that different plants have different needs, and this depends to a large extent upon where they (or rather their ancestors) originated in the wild. Believe it or not, but all plants originated in the wild. It's obvious really, isn't it, yet many people seem to not quite grasp this idea. All garden plants came originally from the wild, but many have been bred and crossed with other plants to

end up with specimens that don't much now resemble their wild ancestors -- take for instance, dahlias, chrysanthemums and hybrid tea roses. But it is not these kinds of plants that this publication is concerned with, that is to say plants that have been bred to be so different from their wild ancestors.

Why? Because in the opinion of this author at least, such plants have been taken too far in the desire for larger flowers, more colourful effects. Just as a young child's toys are big, bold and colourful, so some garden plants have been bred in similar vein, totally leaving subtlety and natural beauty behind. Of course this is just my opinion, but it *is* my opinion that you're here to read about, isn't it? In a nutshell, my contention is that 'over-bred' plants do not make a garden relaxing and inspiring, but rather give you an instant, in-your-face colour experience that is not really about beauty and lasting satisfaction. It's fizzy drinks versus fine wine, perhaps. Or maybe a hamburger versus haute cuisine. If a quick buzz is what you want from your garden, then fine, who am I to object, it's none of my business and good luck to you. But if you want your own little piece of that serenity you feel in wild, natural places -- a haven of beauty and tranquillity to calm your work-shattered nerves -- then listen up!

Okay, having got that off my chest -- and it's important to be clear about it from the outset -- back to giving plants what they need. To do this you simply have to find out what a plant's needs are then put into practice what you have learned. To take an extreme example to illustrate the point, you wouldn't plant a desert plant such as a cactus in boggy ground in an area that gets heavy frosts in winter, would you? If the wet ground hadn't got it the week after you planted it then the first frost would.

So it is with all plants, to a greater or lesser extent -- meaning that there are some plants much less sensitive to varying conditions than others, that will grow or at least survive in a wider range of conditions. Incidentally, the same is true of animals: for example, mice can be found in most places that people live, whereas the koala bear only lives in eucalyptus trees in Australia (apart from zoo specimens, of course).

The Conditions Plants Need

So, what in practice are these 'conditions' that we need to pay attention to in helping our plants to thrive?

Basically we have to consider soil, water, light and temperature. This sounds like it might end up technical and boring, but it won't -- it can actually be summed up quite simply and easily. Take soil, for instance.

Soils come in different types and colours but they are free-draining at one end of the scale (e.g. sandy) through to boggy and retentive (e.g. heavy clay) at the other end of the scale.

Free-draining soils suite some plants while retentive soils suit others, and of course there are lots of variations in between. You can find out how much clay versus sand versus organic matter (dead plant fragments) there is in your soil by collecting a representative sample, putting it into a jar of water and thoroughly mixing it. Once it has been left to settle for a day you will be able to see the different constituents in layers.

How to Get Better Soil

There are many plants that prefer a free-draining soil that also holds some moisture because it has organic matter and a proportion of clay particles in its make-up. Such a soil is usually referred to as 'loam', and since loam is so prevalent, most of the plants for sale everywhere have been selected because they will

grow okay in it.

You can also improve your own soil, making it closer to a good loam, by adding organic matter (e.g. well-rotted horse manure, composted bark, composted straw, garden compost and so on). You can improve the drainage of heavy clay in this way; adding large amounts of grit to heavy clay can work well too. Adding rotted organic matter to sandy soil makes it more moisture-retentive.

But note at this point that many wild-type plants look and grow much better on a soil that has not been improved or had plant foods added to it. So, don't go ahead and change the nature of the soil of your garden until you have decided what kinds of plants you want to grow.

Lime versus Acid

Different soil types also have lime in them to some degree, ranging from none at all to quite a lot, and this affects which plants will grow in the soil as some plants like lime and others like a lime-free (acid) soil. You can easily make acid soil more limey (alkaline) by adding powdered limestone, but it is harder to turn alkaline soil into acidic soil (adding flowers of sulphur is one method).

So, on the question of soil, you need to know what kind of plants your soil will grow well. Although you can try to change your soil to suit the plants you like, it is much more visually effective, easy, natural and cost-effective to grow the kinds of plants that will thrive in your soil as it is.

How do you find out what kinds of plants your soil will grow? First find out what kind of soil you have. Do the jar of water test. Also use a **ph testing kit** (for acidity/alkalinity) on a different soil sample from your garden. Once you have a good idea of what your soil will grow well you can read the plant labels and guides at the garden centre, ask the staff, and look up suitable plants in books, magazines or on the web.

Also, look at the plants growing in other gardens close by. This simple method alone can give you real insights into what will grow where you live.

Light and Temperature

Okay, now what about light and temperature? We can deal with these here even more quickly. Some plants like full sun, others part shade, yet others full shade. This kind of information should be visible on the plant label before you buy. Plant sun-lovers in the shade and they will grow weak and lank and lose colour. Put shade lovers in full sun and they will shrivel up. It's obvious really, isn't it. Yet many people do not follow such simple guidelines and then conclude that they cannot grow things. But it isn't difficult.

So it is with temperature. Plants such as agaves that will not withstand much frost won't last long in your garden if you get heavy frosts. Similarly temperate climate plants such as daffodils will not do well in a tropical climate. Find out which climate zone you are in and buy your plants accordingly.

On the question of water it should be stating the obvious that bog or marsh plants will not last long in dry soil, while succulents do not generally like prolonged heavy rain or wet feet. Of course there are exceptions and many variations in between with all of this. There are other climate conditions to take into account too, such as how windy the site is, whether it is subject to salt-spray from the ocean and so on.

To sum up, look around you at what grows locally, assess your site's characteristics, and when you buy plants find those that are described as suitable for your conditions.



4. Your Outdoor Site

First, before you can do anything with your yard or garden space, you have to understand what you've actually got, its advantages and its pitfalls. Go outside and stand in the space and look around you. What are the good points, the things you like? What do you wish wasn't there? Make some notes. Go and do it now, before you read on!

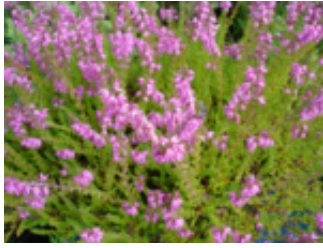
The advantages are the things you will want to emphasize and make the most of in your garden plans and design, the pitfalls you will want to limit and hide wherever possible. Sometimes it may be possible to turn a disadvantage into an advantage. Where there is the side of a high building bordering your site, as one example, you could grow climbers up it (with the building owner's permission) and focus on shade-loving plants in the shadow the building casts. So you would foster an interest in climbers and shade plants.

'Hidden features' you may not even realise your garden has

These are not so much hidden features that *your* garden has, so much as what your neighbour's garden has! If for example your neighbour's garden has a fine cherry tree in it, or a mature blue spruce, let's say, then make the most of it. Design your garden so as not to obstruct the view of it but to make it *part of your view*. Plant one or two of your own blue spruces or cherry trees and hide with planting any fences or walls that would give the impression that your garden ends and the neighbour's begins.

The same applies to views of countryside. Obscure dividing fences with natural-looking planting (rather than climbers *on* the fence that will only emphasise its presence). Position the dominant plants of your own garden -- such as shrubs and trees -- to lead into the countryside view. It might even be possible for you to do away with a boundary fence altogether in some circumstances.

Using what is beyond your boundaries in this way has been used in Japanese landscape designs for hundreds of years -- it is the concept of 'borrowed landscape'.



5. Designing the site

How people reach the 'mish-mash' effect in their gardens and how to avoid it

Too many gardens are made without much thought or sense of design. "We need a shed or store -- place it here because it's near the backdoor. We would like a pond -- it would be okay over here. Now what about a swing-seat? Not near the pond -- put it on the other side of the garden..." This is the style of some people's thinking. Quite often more thought goes into the arrangement of furniture and the colour scheme for the main reception room of the house. But the garden can be used as a room too -- an outdoor room. Where is the colour scheme for the garden? Where is the careful arrangement of garden elements?

Sometimes, when designing a living room or kitchen, it is a good idea to cut out small rectangles in paper to represent items of furniture and to try arranging these on squared paper with a room's edges marked out. The same principle can be applied to a garden space, the paper rectangles representing elements such as a garage, shed, greenhouse, sandpit/sandbox, children's play area, sitting area, even principle trees and shrubs (obviously use circles for the latter).

Many people nowadays prefer to use software for this designing process: go to www.GardeningSoftware.com to find out more about this.

Basic Design Principles to Make the Most of the Space you Have

Following are some tried and tested design ideas used extensively by landscape designers everywhere. Incidentally, these ideas are related to the layout concepts used by landscape painters.

How to Make Your Garden Space Appear Bigger

If your garden is long and narrow you can make it seem wider by creating lines that cut across it rather than run down it. The worst thing you could do would be to make narrow borders down each side. Rather, by creating lines that run across, the eye is drawn to either side, so giving a greater illusion of width. These 'lines' could be the edges of a lawn, or they could be a path -- grass or gravel or paving -- or they could be made using old railway sleepers, decking, hedging (tall or short); they could be made by lines of spaced-out plants, low walls, changes in the surface, logs, even buildings -- whatever you would like to use, in fact. These width-wise lines don't have to run at right angles to the sides of the garden, either. They can run at almost any angle; they don't have to be straight, for example the curving edge of an oval-shaped or circular lawn will have the same effect.

If you can create 'panels' or 'ovals' of grass, paving, scree or whatever that run diagonally across the garden space, their ends 'hidden' by the boundary fence or hedge (as if they run on into the neighbour's space) then the eye will be deceived into thinking that they really do run on beyond the edge of the garden, so creating a clear and striking illusion of greater space. Try it: take a before and after photo and

compare them. It works!

Using the Idea of Hidden Parts of the Garden

It is a tried and proven principle of garden design that if you can hide part of your garden yet allow the viewer to realise that there is a hidden part, then the garden will appear larger, more inviting, even more mysterious.

So how does this work in practice? It can be done with any large object placed into the field of view when someone enters the first part of the garden or its main area. The 'large object' is usually a clump of tall shrubs or a tree, or both; or it can be trellis work with plants growing over it. It could equally be a living willow screen, a clump of bamboo or even a building softened with climbing plants. An object that appears 'non-solid', such as tall plants, works best though, so a building used for this purpose might not be ideal, unless there is *no where else to put it*, in which case you would be turning a negative feature into a positive one.

To summarize this point: if upon going into the garden, someone can see that there must be hidden parts further on that they can't yet see in their entirety, then they will be intrigued and the garden will look larger and more interesting to them. Of course, this works best with a first-time viewer of the garden, however it still works to some extent no matter how many times you see the garden or how familiar you become with it. So, it's well worth making use of if you can. It can be effective even in very small garden spaces, using smaller 'objects' to create hidden parts of the garden, however tiny.

Focal Points

Creating somewhere for the eye to go to is a technique used in many garden designs. In grand 18th Century English gardens this might have consisted of a folly (the shell of a building built for no other purpose) or a gazebo. Building on that tradition today, statues are often used at the end of narrow vistas or 'corridors' formed by hedges or trees. On a smaller scale, a garden seat, formal pond, urn or large boulder could all be used as a focal point.

Dividing the Space into 'Garden Rooms'

Again a technique used extensively in English gardens. By dividing a larger space up with hedging or tall shrubs and trees, individual gardens can be created that are different from each other. 'Windows' can be left in the planting to give tantalizing glimpses of 'garden rooms' beyond. This technique partly works in a similar way to the idea of hidden parts of the garden, described above. If you have only a small garden space you could get together with one or more neighbours to link your gardens together to create a series of 'garden rooms'.

Large and Small Foliage and Coloured Foliage

Did you know that if you have plants with large leaves in the foreground of your garden scene and plants with small leaves at the back then the sense of distance to the back will be increased, as the eye is deceived. This works best in small gardens. Coloured foliage can be utilized for the same effect. Greens and yellows at the front and blue-greys at the back should give the same sense of distance. Why not combine both for maximum effect?

For a Peaceful Haven Avoid Sharp Edges and Too Many Straight Lines

Sharp edges and straight lines don't feature much in nature. Yes, they are there and can be found with a little looking, but an excess of straight lines and pointed corners, such as you find in any photograph taken in a city, look unnatural to the eye. They say 'Stand up straight!' and 'Pay attention!'. Not what we want from a peaceful haven at all.

Straight lines and angles can be very exciting in a garden. For a garden that is designed to catch the eye and be viewed only for a minute or two they are very useful. This is why you will see some of the exhibitors' gardens in flower shows designed using these elements. But what we are looking for is a garden we want to spend time in, a garden that soothes the troubled brow and slows down the heartbeat, not makes it race.

So we need to avoid such 'thrill' elements in the main, unless striving for a special effect hidden in a corner and only intended to be viewed for a short slice of time.

Oh, the Problem of Lawn Edges!

One of the most problematic elements in the Natural Garden is the lawn edge. This is assuming we actually have a lawn, of course. Many fine and beautiful garden havens have been created without the need for a lawn at all. But, if you do actually need a lawn -- somewhere for the kids to play, for example -- then you need a lawn *edge* where the lawn ends and something else begins. The problem is that lawn edges look artificial, and artificiality detracts from the calming, natural effect we seek.

So what to do? Curved lawn edges are more relaxing than straight ones, but perhaps we can go further than that. The fact is that we do need a lawn edge, don't we? If not, the lawn would grow into the flower border, wouldn't it? Well, this is rather the thinking of the traditional lawn-and-flower-borders type of garden. But, the point must be made that lawn grass is vigorous and will grow into other areas unless controlled somehow -- hence the traditional need for lawn edges in the first place.

So, how to get around formal-looking lawn edges. Here are some suggestions:

- Turn the lawn into a flower meadow and the edges will be much harder to see, masked by the tall grasses and wild flowers.
- Use paving stones or cobbles as an edge -- though not ideal, the effect is less harsh (and mowing may be easier).
- Use a physical barrier to the lawn edge (such as planking on its edge) but allow plants growing beside the lawn to billow over onto it (can make mowing harder).
- Have the lawn stop at a garden building, or low retaining wall of stone or logs.
- Make the soil of the area beside the lawn hostile to its grasses through it being composed of chopped bark, sand or gravel.

The last point above is hard to achieve though as lawn grasses will grow into almost anything, eventually. Other suggestions are:

- Have your lawn composed of something other than grass (camomile or thyme, for example) -- though this is not suitable for playing football on!
- For a kids' play area use chopped bark and no grass at all.
- For a sea-shore 'look' use naturally rounded gravel (not crushed rock) and sand instead of grass.

To summarize, you either have to contain lawn grasses in as visually an unobstructive way as possible or get rid of them altogether.

How to Include the Things You Need in Your Garden Without the 'Uglies' Taking Over

A problem everyone has in designing a garden is how to incorporate things such as a compost heap, garden shed, greenhouse, dustbins and so on without these 'ugly' things spoiling the haven of calm we are striving for.

There are basically two choices here. You can either make a feature of them, or you can hide them. Take a garden shed, for example. You might (if you have the money) choose or commission one that looks like a smaller version of your house, like an outbuilding built at the same time as your property. Or you might change the appearance of an existing garden building to make it more amenable to the eye -- clad a shed in rustic bark and thatch in a woodland-themed garden, for example. This is all fine if you can afford it. If you can't then you had better either live with the building as it is or try to find a way to hide it.

So how might you hide it? You could grow climbers such as clematis and honeysuckle over it. Attach trellis work or wires to the face of the building so that the climbers can get a grip. Pyracantha, although not a climber as such, will effectively clothe the face of a building with evergreen foliage, white flowers and yellow, orange or red berries in the autumn, depending upon the variety. For a very quick effect, Russian Vine ('Fallopia baldschuanica' or 'Polygonum baldschuanica' -- also know as 'Mile-a-Minute-Vine') will grow surprisingly quickly over anything, covering a small garden shed usually within a couple of years. However it will not stop growing at that point and will look for something else to grow over. It is deciduous, meaning that there are lots of brown stems to look at in winter (not ideal), has frothy-white flowers in late summer, and is amenable to pruning -- as are all the climbers described here. Other useful climbing plants are the various ivy varieties, jamines and climbing roses.

Compost bins and dustbins can be disguised behind low fencing or trellis panels, or even low stone or brick walls, over which plants can be encouraged to grow.

If you have the advantage of planning a garden space from scratch then you have the luxury of being able to carefully plan where you are going to put such items. First, and this is very important, make a list of the utilitarian things you will need to include in your garden. Use the rectangular pieces of paper idea described above to test different layouts or go to www.GardeningSoftware.com for some software to do the job on screen.

You might decide to site the 'uglies' all together in one corner of the garden, behind a screen of bamboo, for example. You'll need to lay a path that leads to them. This should not be of grass or it will get muddy in the winter if you live in a wet climate -- rather it would best be a harder surface such as paving slabs. Or you could use a thin layer of gravel over a geo-textile membrane or on the top of a layer of hugin (a naturally occurring clay-sand mix commercially extracted in some areas). Do not use a deep layer of fine gravel as this is hard to walk on and will attract any local cats to use it as a toilet. Chopped bark is an attractive alternative, especially in a more natural looking garden. The bark will probably need topping up every couple of years. For other effects, some more formal, others less so, you could try for your path: granite setts, cobbles, beach pebbles, deck-style planking, natural-stone slabs, ashes, sawn log-sections and so on. Always try to use materials that fit in with the style and theme of your garden. And don't forget that your house is part of your garden scene too, so try to use materials that relate in some way to the house. You can find information and sources of materials and equipment at

www.GardeningSearchEngine.com



6. Garden Themes

Finding a Garden Theme that Inspires You and Which You Can Put into Practice in Your Garden

Making a themed garden is a good approach because it brings unity of purpose to the garden. The garden is much more likely to succeed as a garden if there is a cohesiveness built into its design and planting. A themed garden also helps you to escape from one world -- the world of everyday, working life -- into another, the piece of fantasy landscape that your garden will have become.

Examples of themes include the Japanese garden, the gravel or scree garden, the rock/mountain garden, the alpine meadow, the willow/riverside garden, the heather garden, the spruce forest garden, the farmyard garden, the seaside garden, the marshland garden, the bamboo grove, and so on.

There are many others, as many possible themes as there are people to think of them. Some of them can be quite subtle, differing only marginally but in specific ways from others. There are gardens that at first glance don't appear to have a theme at all but only upon closer inspection do the elements that construct the theme become apparent.

Themes do not have to be based on wild or countryside places, of course. Gardens could be made to give the impression of being in any location. For example you could have a town square garden, a canalside tearooms garden or a monastery garden. Themed gardens do not even have to relate to a real location. You could have a nautical garden, as another example, with a sun-shade sail, portholes in the garden wall and 'rigging' to grow climbers up.

Approaches

There are so many types of garden, just as there are so many types of wild landscape. One approach is to look around you at what works well in other gardens nearby and then to combine some of the best ideas into your own creation. As a general rule aim to grow what naturally does well in your soil and conditions. Go out and look at nearby countryside for inspiration. Are there heaths, sand dunes, marshes, moors, mountains, forests, prairies, swamps or deserts nearby? If there are, do bear in mind that your soil and conditions may not be the same as those of what you are seeing, even if you live close-by. However, you may be able to make your own garden version of what you see by using related plants, for example.

On this point it is worth noting that you should never, under any circumstances, take plants from the wild. Most wild plants are protected and it is illegal in most countries. The reason it is illegal is that taking wild plants depletes natural places and can slowly lead to their degradation and demise. Wild plants and their close relatives can all be bought from nurseries these days. There are even nurseries specializing in wild plants, so there is no excuse.

Themes of garden that you may want to consider within the confines of what your plot allows include: the water garden, the tropical or sub-tropical garden, the woodland garden, the alpine garden, the meadow garden, the spring garden, the prairie garden and the oriental garden to name but a few. (I will attempt to deal with some of these in more detail from a Natural Gardening point of view in up-coming publications.)

Go out and view big gardens that are open to the public. Many such gardens have different sections (or 'garden rooms'!) dedicated to what I describe as different themes. How do you feel when you enter one of these themed areas? Which are your favourites?

Think also about places you have been in your life, including places you have been on holiday or on vacation. It is a good idea to make a list of your top favourite places or locations from your entire life. If you travel extensively this could be a long list! When I say locations and places here, I am thinking of specific, limited locations, so putting for example 'Thailand' in your list is not useful for this purpose because it is far too wide a category. Rather, try to be very specific, so 'The riverside boat place with the fish-drying racks we went to in Thailand' would be a viable entry for your list. Likewise, 'My uncle's tropical courtyard garden' would be another good entry in a list.

Once you have a list of such favourite or inspiring places think about which ones have the basic potential to be made into viable gardens *in your outside space*. The end of the last sentence is in italics because whatever kind of garden theme you settle on, it has to work in your own space. For example, a desert garden would look ridiculously out of place as well as being disastrous plant-wise if built in an area of natural water-meadows with high rainfall. Just so, a rock garden with big boulders would appear incongruous in a flat region that has no natural rock outcrops.

It is by far the best way to make a garden that fits in with its surroundings (and perhaps makes use of 'borrowed landscape' as described earlier). However, incongruous gardens --if you must have one -- work much better when they are completely cut off from the surrounding area in visual terms, so that there is no glaring contrast apparent to the eye.

Take time over choosing a theme for your garden. Even after you have a fairly good idea of what you want to do, try to rein in your enthusiasm to get started and make yourself live with the idea for a few weeks. It is much better to do this than start a project only to get half-way through and find you are becoming bored with your chosen theme. You have been warned! :-)



7. Wilderness Design

How to Place or Arrange Plants in Your Garden to Take Advantage of 'Wilderness Design'

This is one of the key aspects of Natural Gardening. The arrangements of the plants in a way that looks 'natural'. Various attempts have been made at times in more conventional garden styles to achieve 'natural planting', some with greater or lesser success. For example, when naturalising bulbs in grass, the gardener is advised to throw the bulbs (with limited force!) and to plant the bulbs where they land. This can certainly work.

Again, in the planting designs of Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932), the great herbaceous gardens designer, plants of the same variety are sometimes arranged in 'drifts' to good effect. A 'drift' in this context is simply a very elongated oval shape, as opposed to planting in circles, clumps or individually. This works when drifts of one colour relate to or contrast with drifts of another.

In Natural Gardening we want to go further than these two planting ideas, finding a way to make our planting look *not* just natural, but to borrow the serenity and beauty that comes from natural arrangements of plants in the wild. Some may imagine that this wild arrangement is random, but it is not. For example, If you look at trees in a piece of wild woodland (i.e. not planted by people) you will see either that each tree tends to occupy its own space (such as the trees in an oak wood) or the trees grow in clumps and groups (such as in a birch wood).

Plants in the wild are not positioned at random, but according to 'natural rules' for their type and their environment. Another example of this is plants growing in desert regions of the United States. Such plants tend to be very widely spaced from each other because of the extremely limited water supply. By contrast, heathers on heaths and moors in Britain grow in close clumps, rubbing shoulders with their neighbours.

But it is not just degrees of spacing I am considering here. If you take a specific area of a wild terrain you will see that there are only a certain number of types of plants in that area. On a heath or moor, this may be as few as a dozen types of plants, but hugely dominated by only one plant (heather, usually) or sometimes dominated by two types of plants (heather and gorse in drier areas, or heather and bilberry (whortleberry) in moister soils). It is the interplay of two (or sometimes three) main types of plant that brings such beauty and satisfaction to the eye and mind.

This is quite different from most gardens where there may be hundreds of types of plants of different form, leaf-type and colour competing with each other for the viewer's attention. Now this is of course usually because people want to grow as many types of plant as possible in their garden: each plant has its own flowering season, characteristics and points of interest. At the level of individually viewing plants this works well, but at the level of viewing the whole garden as an entity or picture in itself, it most often does not work terribly well.

Not everyone will agree with this: people with established gardens will want to defend their style and manner of planting; people have also grown used to the 'hotch-potch' effect of hundreds of different types of plant in the same space. Lovers of wild places, however, may find some gardens overcrowded with different plant shapes and colours, and yearn for the calming effect on the mind that wild plantings have.

None of this is to say that you cannot have variety, and lots of it, in your garden if you are looking for a natural effect. The solution to this is to see your plants as falling into general types, the types in fact that will form your wilderness-influenced garden scene.

So, let's look at an example. You are planning a woodland garden that will consist of tall trees with an understorey of shrubs and a ground cover of low plants. How do you achieve a natural effect? If you plant trees that contrast vastly in form and colour with each other, and likewise with the shrub layer and the ground cover layer, you will end up with a bit of a hotch-potch effect that encourages the eye to dart around from one thing to another. It will be a 'busy' result that makes you want to move around a lot and can leave you feeling dissatisfied.

If, on the other hand, you plant trees with similar general form and colour-shading (such as a collection of birch species, or eucalyptus species, or sorbus species -- whatever takes your fancy and fits in with the surroundings) then you will achieve a harmony of effect that calms the eye and mind, a truly satisfying garden experience. The same will apply to the shrub and ground cover layers, of course. Yet there is still the variety within individual species to provide interest at an individual and seasonal level. Not to mention space for individual, one-off type plants here and there.

The same principle can be applied to any type of garden, from a tiny alpine garden to a tropical garden. Some types of gardens start off with an advantage in this in that the plants being grown are naturally rather more similar to each other when viewed at a distance, so a more harmonious effect is achieved more easily. Many tropical plants have large leaves and brightly coloured flowers of red and yellow, for example, making them easier to combine into a complete garden scene when viewed from a distance. None of this is to rule out contrast between plants, which has its place in creating interest, but must be used sparingly if a calming harmony is to be aimed for.

Not everyone will agree, but that's the beauty of gardening, isn't it, we can each do our own thing yet still be respected by other gardeners.

How to Learn from Wild Plantings

Okay, let's look a little closer at wild landscapes to see what else can be learned and applied to the garden.

To begin with, planting in wild places, while having its own spacing, is often not uniform, but tends to be interrupted by areas of other plants, by areas where the original main plant has died out for example or cannot successfully compete with something else.

Such areas of differing plants grow into each other or border each other in a non-uniform way. Isolated clumps of one plant appear separated from their fellows and surrounded by the neighbouring type of plant. This effect sometimes increases to the point where one type of plant intermingles freely with another, yet there are areas where the concentration of one plant or the other is greater or lesser. A third type or style of plant will form clumps or 'drifts' here and there, or become concentrated to one side or the other.

To see all of this, and fully understand what I am driving at, you need to go and look at plants growing in wild places. Then you will be able to take certain ideas from wilderness 'design' and use them for an intensely natural and calming effect in your garden. Some of these ideas or principles may be summed up as:

- Planting drifts or multiple clumps of the same kind of plant (or similar varieties).
- Allowing areas of different styles or types of plant to run into each other, or through each other.
- Attempting to create a complete 'plant ecosystem', with different plant types in different roles, such as in the layers of planting in a woodland garden.
- Regarding plants not so much as individuals but as part of the whole garden scene.

How you apply these principles in practice in your own garden is of course up to you, and different people will have their own approaches. More than this, in a small garden some of these principles may need careful thought to apply well, especially if you feel inclined to take the approach of wanting to pack as many different kinds of plants into your garden as possible. However, these are the principles that can give the most natural and relaxing effect in a garden. Making a garden into a plant collection of as many species or varieties as possible makes it just that, a plant collection (which is fine if that's what you want), as opposed to a unified garden scene designed to promote tranquility.

So, this section on 'wilderness design', while perhaps the part that needs to be given the most extensive thought and needing where possible to draw on observation of natural landscapes -- as well as being an individual thing -- is more than worth striving for, as the benefits in terms of garden beauty are very great indeed.



8. Your Garden Long Term

Planting

First, a brief note on the mechanics of planting. To go into detail about every aspect of gardening is beyond this brief publication, but a useful description of how to plant is given at www.junipertrees.com/how-to-grow-junipers.html under the heading 'Planting Junipers'. Although specifically about planting junipers, the general instructions there would apply, or could be applied, to most types of plant.

Maintaining Your Garden in the Long Term as a Natural and Inspiring Place

Gardens are not static, unchanging places. They are never 'finished' but perpetually a work in progress. This is their nature. The changes in a long established garden may be small on a year-by-year basis, but they are changes nevertheless. Established trees or large shrubs may eventually get too large for the site and need to be pruned or removed, paths may eventually sink in places and need to be rebuilt, some planting may become lank and straggly and a new start needed in those places. Even in large scale parks trees grow old and get blown down by gales. And of course, people's ideas about what they want from their garden change, and so they change their gardens. In short, a garden is not like a landscape painting in that it is not forever 'fixed'. The same thing is of course true of wild landscapes, on a small scale at the least.

This aspect of gardening must certainly be appreciated, and what we are talking about here is renewal or even 'refurbishment' of the garden. Below the level of such radical change and in addition to it there is maintenance of a garden, that is keeping it looking good and more-or-less as its designer intended, while remaining aware that in the longer term parts of the garden are going to change.

So, if you are new to gardening, how is a garden to be maintained? Putting it basically, it's a question of pruning, weeding, mulching, planting and replanting. Here we can take the word 'pruning' in the widest possible sense. So, grass that is intended as a lawn to be walked or played on has to be regularly cut (a kind of pruning, really), shrubs and trees that grow beyond their allocated spaces have to have their branches pruned, and herbaceous plants have to have their dead foliage pruned or cut off.

When pruning trees and shrubs try to make the cut under a smaller clump of foliage that will be left, in order to hide the cut as much as possible. This particularly applies to ground-cover junipers. For more on junipers in the garden visit: [Using Junipers in the Garden](#). Cutting back dead growth on herbaceous plants (and herbaceous ornamental grasses) can be left until spring in some cases where the dead seed heads will remain picturesque over the winter.

Some shrubs are specifically pruned each year to produce more flowers (e.g. buddleia or 'butterfly bush' is cut down in spring) or coloured stems (some willows and dogwoods, pruned very hard in spring have strikingly colourful winter stems). Likewise the older stems of raspberries are pruned back to encourage the newer stems to produce fruit the following season.

All prunings and cut material should be composted and later used as a mulch. Thicker prunings take a lot longer to rot down but if put through a shredder first this process is accelerated. However, a shredder uses fossil-fuel energy needlessly, something we need to be aware of in this age of global warming. Alternatively, branches and thicker twigs can be used to make low banks around the edges of a site or across it: when waste soil is added such 'banks' will build up in time and of course can be planted.

I also cannot emphasise enough that waste material from your garden is a valuable resource when turned into garden compost. Do not get rid of it, compost it! Also compost waste paper and cardboard, uncooked kitchen vegetable scraps (**not** meat, fish or cooked food as these can attract vermin), hair, old woollen pullovers (not nylon, of course) and so on. Every garden needs a compost bin (and/or worm bin) in an out-of-the-way corner. To compost in this way is to take part in the cycle of nature and of life itself, in which all that was alive dies and is broken down by soil organisms into a food and growing medium for new plants (which in turn feed animals, and so on).

In the same way, I almost never use garden chemicals or sprays. That is unless they are derived directly from natural materials, such as being made directly from crushed plant material. Weed killers are out, for me and for many others. The reasons should be obvious.

Weeds can easily be hand-pulled, giving exercise and satisfaction, or larger areas can be mulched with layers of old newspaper or corrugated cardboard (after soaking both well first in water) then topped with a further layer of chopped bark, garden compost, spent hops, leafmould or similar. In extreme cases, such as overgrown gravel paths, a parafin-powered flammer or blow-torch-burner designed for the purpose can be used, though see the note above about using fossil fuels unnecessarily. Such devices must also be used with great care and only when the soil is damp, as dry combustible materials nearby are easily set alight, and the use of such equipment is prohibited in forested areas.

Organic gardening is fun, more satisfying, usually much safer and need not be any more work than conventional gardening with chemicals. Best of all, the results are superb. And if we are serious about natural gardening, how could we ever justify doing it in any other way?

Final Thoughts

So, now you have a knowledge of the basics of how it's all done, what are you waiting for? Get out there and turn your backyard space into a Natural Garden! Keep coming back to this publication to check details and to refresh on ideas, and make good use of our website and newsletter. Many of the ideas and elements of this kind of gardening are mentioned only very briefly here, so do not overlook them but rather seek further information online.

Most of all, let me know by email how you get on. I am always interested to see what people are doing in their gardens, all the more if they have been inspired to a greater or lesser degree by the Natural Gardening approach. And who knows, if I like the sound of what you are doing with your garden I might ask you if I can feature it on the website. Finally, treasure and enjoy your outdoor space, it is your little bit of nature, your private haven to refresh and purify your soul.

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by Lawrence Dyer

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