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SMELL the ROSES

Thoughtful
garden design
encourages
stopping to
appreciate
nature and the
joys of life

By LISA KLEIN

A garden: cheerful flowers, swaying branches, flitting butterflies, babbling brooks, fragrant shrubs, buzzing bees, wind-rustled grasses, sun-dappled earth; tranquility, reflection, happiness, peace, celebration, union with nature, growth. It is a colorful mélange of life itself.

"I love life!" says renowned French landscape architect Louis Benech, who draws on this passion in each of his projects while creating a different version of what that means for each of his clients. "There is no common aspect to any of my gardens except that it's like a dress. It has to fit you — that's all."

Whatever form it takes — sculpted-to-perfection classic French hedges, gravel and spines of the desert, rambling and wild English-style, or stoic symbols of Japan — good garden design brings out the best in the land and the people who have made their home there.

"Gardens are healing, and that's what we're aiming for," says U.K.-based landscape architect Marian Boswall, author of *Sustainable Garden* and *The Kindest Garden*. "If you're ever feeling rubbish, then being in a beautiful garden is the best possible tonic."

Aside from the proven benefits of spending time in nature regularly, including reducing stress and anxiety, lowering blood pressure, increasing focus and creativity, and boosting the immune system, the formula for each individual or family's garden tonic will differ based on both where they live and what it is that makes them feel in top form.

"It's all about the client's personality and the land's personality and how they come together," Ms. Boswall adds. "And that's the most magical, when somebody feels so at home in a garden that it feels like an extension of themselves."

1
When there's enough room, like in the French countryside, garden design can include fields, mature trees and swaths of wildflowers
Photo by Eric Sander,
design by Louis Benech



2
It's important to consider how a garden will be used — perhaps for taking a dip in this Connecticut home's pool.

Photo by Neil Landino,
design by James Doyle
Design Associates

Creating this terrestrial connection is no small feat. But at the root of all landscaping is, naturally, the land.

"Our inspiration often comes from the regional character of the site and its history, which help ground the design in a sense of place," says Justin Quinn, landscape architect and principal of James Doyle Design Associates (JDDA) in Greenwich, Connecticut. "It gives us the canvas to work with. We also draw heavily from the present natural features, letting the land inspire and guide the forms, spatial arrangements and overall design approach."

This could include everything from topography, such as slopes, boulders, creeks and mature trees, to the climate and weather conditions. There is a reason traditional garden styles mimic their natural environment: pine and evergreen in Japan, succulents and tanned gravel in the Mediterranean, meadowy wildflowers and twisted hardwoods in northern Europe, palms and rubbery leaves in the tropics. Not only do plants native to an area thrive, they simply fit their surroundings.

"When we arrive on a site, we listen to the land — we take our shoes off, we meditate," Ms. Boswall says. "We're looking at where the wind comes from, where the sun is during the day, where the energy flows. We listen to what the land would like to be."

This not only makes for a garden befit its location, but one that is sustainable, as well — something JDDA clients ask for more and more. Choosing native plants is important for the insects, birds and animals that also call gardens home and they require less water and energy to maintain. Ms. Boswall even uses building materials that belong: bricks in a place with clay soil, for example, or regional woods that can "gradually meld back into the land."

Of course, there is usually a home sitting atop this land and, while not an original part of it, must also be considered as part of the landscape and a garden's design.

"We focus on harmonizing [our] design with the home and the natural surroundings to create something that feels cohesive and connected," Mr. Quinn says. "[So] the architecture and interiors of the home can [also] help set the design direction. A contemporary house might inspire clean, minimalist lines, while a historic property might call for more traditional, layered elements."

Mr. Benech, whose projects swing from centuries-old European estates to modern new-builds around the globe, considers the interiors of the home just as important as the architectural elements on the exterior: where windows are and what can be seen from them, views from seating and dining areas, where the light comes in. "A garden, for me, is also lived from the inside," he says.

Then, of course, come the people who are doing all of this living, both indoors and out. "I'm always saying that I don't want to sign my projects," Mr. Benech explains. "I react as a chameleon...I'm trying to make something pleasant for the people who live where I work. They are going to take care of it and enjoy it. If the space is not adapted to their way of life, it's useless, in many ways."

He adds that it can often take quite a bit of time to really know what homeowners are seeking in their gardens, although a good start is as basic as whether there are children needing play areas, if the family receives guests often or if their home is a seasonal retreat. Those who want to entertain may like a large, flat patio, while others who want a quiet space to reflect might enjoy a hedge maze with scattered benches. Still others would prefer to get a bit dirty in their garden and need built-in beds and irrigation to grow their own food.

All three landscape architects agree that getting beyond surface-level requests is equally important, listening to memories and stories, asking questions and leading clients into understanding what will really make them happy — and getting them to admit how willing they will actually be to, say, prune topiaries regularly, maintain specific soil conditions or care for difficult plants.



3
Mixing textures and shapes, as seen here in Saint-Tropez, France, adds interest to the garden.

Photo by Eric Sander,
design by Louis Benech



4

Paths that wander between plantings, such as these in Switzerland, invite reflection

Photo by Eric Sander, design by Louis Benech

5

Native plants, like those used in Sussex, England, invite insects, birds and animals to also enjoy the garden

Photo by Jason Ingram, design by Marian Basswall Landscape Architects

6

Planting a variety of flowers that bloom throughout the seasons ensures a perennially colorful garden

Photo by Jason Ingram, design by Marian Basswall Landscape Architects

7

Statues, such this one tucked into a French château garden, create focal points

Photo by Eric Sander, design by Louis Benech





While landscape architects may appear as sages communing between Mother Earth and the human psyche, most would say that where it began for them, and what they love most, is also the real essence of any garden: the plants. Their deep knowledge of flora and fauna is what makes each project really work — and wow.

"The plants need to come from places where they'd like to live together," Ms. Boswall explains. "In order to understand that, we need to understand where they'd like to be, and that's really understanding the plants themselves and who pollinates what and which creatures will come into the garden based on what you plant."

Once "friendship between things," as Mr. Benech puts it, is established, a garden's plan takes shape. Like the interiors of a home, garden design must consider structural elements, materials, colors, textures and spatial organization — all with plants as the main building blocks.

"Plants are more than just something to look at; they help define the space and bring it to life," Mr. Quinn says. "The way plants interact — whether they soften a hard edge, frame a view or create layers of depth — shapes the space."

In large gardens, this can include different "rooms" that each serve their own purpose: reading or relaxing, growing food or foraging, entertaining, play, simply enjoying the flowers. And, in any size space, different plants are layered to create borders, dimension and shapes for visual interest. These tiers — ground cover, grasses, flowers, shrubs and trees — also mimic a natural ecosystem to attract birds, insects and small mammals.

Since a garden is alive, it will change with the seasons, and choosing plants that look their best at different times will ensure a beautiful experience year round. "A flowering plant flowers rarely more than three weeks," Mr. Benech says. "I'm always mixing things. My [own] garden is small, but I have, one by one, something blooming almost all 12 months, even in very cold weather."

Tapping into seasonality can make even a very simple expanse like a field appear ever-changing. "If you grow a natural meadow, you can have it be yellow and pink at some times, and then blonde and blue during some other period," Mr. Benech says. "The result... is going to be very simple and very uniform, but this simplicity is rich, and the uniformity is going to evolve according to the seasons in a very different way."

As if this eclectic assembly needed any enhancement, landscape architects still find a way to artfully add focal points as needed or requested, such as fountains and other water features, arches or sculptures. Then there are the creature comforts — this time for human occupants of the garden. People, of course, need pathways to walk on, benches to sit on and other more manmade ways to enjoy the outdoors.

"I love taking familiar materials and using them in an unexpected way or composition," Mr. Quinn says of making these elements meld with each garden. "We've designed countless fireplaces, pools, kitchen gardens and gates, but the goal is always to make each one unique in its own way."



MS. BOSWALL LIKES to create some sort of common ground where people can come together — in any way that suits them best. "We often have, in our designs somewhere, a hearth," she says, which could mean anything from an actual fireplace or pit to a bar-and-party set up to a family dining table. "It's where you gather, it's where people meet, for that feeling of conviviality and warmth."

Whether from the hearth, wandering paths through fleeting blooms, admiring sculpted topiaries, harvesting fruits and vegetables or listening to the birds chirp from 100-year-old trees, gardens invite their people to slow down, watch them change and let life unfold.

"A garden is a living thing; it's growing, it's going to evolve," Mr. Benech, who has watched the gardens he's designed grow for many decades, muses. "It's such a metamorphosis of a place. I love the idea of surprises; I love to see things growing — it's a question of life." ||

8
Some plants, like the mowed grass and pruned topiaries seen here in France, require a commitment to upkeep

Photo by Eric Sander, design by Louis Benech

9
Many homeowners enjoy a designated gathering place for friends and family, like this inviting patio in Connecticut

Photo by Allegra Anderson, design by James Doyle Design Associates

10
Building layers of plants creates dynamic places that retain structure, as seen here in Kent, England

Photo by Jason Ingram, design by Marian Boswall Landscape Architects

