

CRAFTING THE GARDEN

What makes a garden special, says **Arne Maynard**, is getting the detail right – thinking about vernacular styles and using the knowledge of skilled workers

Photo: Britt Willoughby Dyer



Arne Maynard is an international garden designer known for his ability to create gardens with a particular sense of belonging

FOR A GARDEN to have longevity, it has to be properly crafted. Naturally there is a level of competence needed to make a newly built garden fit for purpose, but to create something that will last, and in fact get better with age, takes skill and artistry. This applies not only to the hard landscaping and the craftsmanship of the architectural details,

but also to the nurserymen who provide the plants and, possibly most importantly, to the gardening itself.

There are many different disciplines that come together when a garden is made and for each of these we try to seek out specialist skilled workers, who will not only follow instruction, but bring with them experience and pride in their trade. I'm always actively seeking the mark of the maker, something other than the bland standard details that we see again and again in gardens all over the country.

When I start on a new project, I always look for local vernacular details, finding out about materials that are used in the area, unusual building styles and even special local plants. Sometimes it feels appropriate to copy a detail directly. Sometimes I take the reference as a starting point, and work with a craftsman to create something new – an interpretation of the original for a garden of today. At every stage of a build, there is

the chance to make something that is more special and unique to that particular garden, and the more that happens, the more interesting our gardens will be.

Regional distinctiveness is gradually being eroded. Today it is quite as likely that a garden will be paved with Indian limestone as it will with sandstone from the local quarry, but the former lends no intrinsic sense of belonging. Stone varies greatly in the UK, even over a relatively short distance. Walling made from stone that splits naturally into thin pieces, for instance, will vary greatly from that in an area of hard granite that has to be cut into blocks. We must treasure these wonderful peculiarities, the regional variation of how the wallers lay the stone, because if we don't use our craftsmen and women, we will lose the resources that we do still have.

In the details of the garden, like the finials on posts, gates and even latches, the designer has a chance to add another layer of individuality. It's so important to like the feel of the ring or handle in your hand, and for the weight to be correct so that you enjoy the sound of the dropping of the latch. Similarly with tables and benches, pots and planters, and even taps and water troughs – working with craftsmen to create bespoke pieces gives you the opportunity to build a specific and lasting identity in the garden.

Then we come to the actual gardening. The craft starts with the understanding of the soil and how to bring it into the right structure and

fertility for what the design sets out to achieve. From that point, it is about the plants and the way they are grown – the care of them. For the plants themselves, we are lucky to have such a wealth of fantastically knowledgeable and skilled nurserymen. Specialist nurseries, carpenters, blacksmiths and wallers give us the opportunity to enrich our gardens. They allow us to seek out particular varieties with a subtle difference in colour or habit, adding rare and unusual plants we can weave into a rich tapestry of planting, which is how we can really make the gardens exceptional.

The planting is what creates the most impact, but it is also the most fragile part of the picture. From one gardener to another there will be a difference in the way a plant is grown, how it is staked and trained or clipped. Yet another craftsman, the coppicer, supplies fresh hazel rods and pea sticks for the gardener to weave supports for roses and in the vegetable garden. The sensitivity with which this is done is where the magic happens. Hedges and topiary are shaped at least once a year, more if it is made from fast-growing material such as hawthorn or beech, and when clipped there is an intangible rightness of the shape to be achieved. Truly a craft.

The role of a garden designer is to open the eyes of an owner to the details of their particular house and the landscape in which it sits. It is our job to look for the unusual and search out that which will withstand the test of time and not be tempted to bow to fleeting fashions. Craftsmanship permeates everything. It is the time, care, love, knowledge and skill that goes into every garden that makes it unique. ○

Tell us what you think of Arne's ideas – email gdj@jppublishing.co.uk

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