

January 2022



## *Happy New Year...*

We kick off our 2022 newsletters with a look at designing gardens. With a new four-acre garden to create from scratch, I thought it might be an idea to share how I approach designing garden spaces.



### **Designing in general**

Firstly I would like to encourage those of you without any formal training in garden design to take up the challenge of designing your own space.

I have not had the benefit of any formal garden design training but I do know what I like. That should be the basis of any scheme, after all, it's you who will continue to develop it long after the building blocks have been put in place, so if you don't like something then remove it, or work around it to hide the problem.

I have been asked at flower shows where I studied design. I have also been asked to design gardens for customers, based on flower show displays, so believe in your own ability to create.

My problem in the past has been my lack of knowledge about plants other than hostas but that is changing. I am always discovering plants that are new to me, which motivates me to find out more about them. There is always something new to discover in gardening.

### **Designing a flower show display**

When designing a display for a flower show there are a lot of limiting factors to consider, not least of all space.

### **Starting points**

A design that works for you will be very personal, so why not start with a few basic questions to start the wheels of inspiration turning:

#### **What is your favourite colour?**

Mine is a deep sea blue-green, stormy teal. I simply cannot resist anything in this range of colour - it soothes my mind but is also exciting at the same time.

#### **What is your favourite shape?**

Mine is a circle. I love the simplicity, no sharp edges and a shape that encourages you to keep moving round it. My favourite display shape is a circular island.

#### **What spaces make you happy?**

I love the closeness and intimacy of woodland. I love the sound of running water. I love the sea but

Stand space, lorry/van space and space within which to build. Displays are staged on temporary structures and are designed to last for day rather than years, which is why visitors to floral marquees are still seeing familiar styles, which have been honed over many years. These are displays that 'work' to stimulate plant sales for the individual exhibitors and plant families. Creating a 'wow' is really important to this effort but ever more difficult to achieve in new and innovative ways.

In many ways, designing a display is very much like designing a garden but you wouldn't necessarily attempt to cram as much into a garden. The key difference between a flower show display and a garden is the longevity of the creation.

Throughout the 13 years I was exhibiting at flower shows, I became more and more frustrated by the temporary nature of flower displays and the desire to create more permanent spaces was growing in me.

### Designing a garden

My major constraint is a lack of time and, as a result, my own garden now consists of trees, shrubs and woodland plants, which do not need as much attention throughout the year.

Funnily enough, this is precisely the type of garden I love but didn't realise it. This made me think of how I came around to this conclusion and I have broken it down into a series of questions, which I have listed as potential starting blocks in the side column.

If you have lived with your garden space for a few months or several years, you will begin to understand the aspects of your own garden that make it unique - no two gardens will be the same as there are so many factors that determine the growing environment. Ultimately, only you will appreciate what does and doesn't work by a process of trial and error. This is part of the joy of gardening BUT it can be daunting to start from scratch, which is what I am facing with our north field.

The north field: physical environment

- Is flat but very lumpy
- featureless once cleared
- largely surrounded on the west and north by agricultural land with a large farm on the slight hill to the north
- has a tall TV mast to the north
- has a reservoir on the southern edge

rugged rocky coastlines rather than silky sandy beaches.

### Places that have 'wowed' you

Throughout my life I have visited many places but some have remained clear in my memory for the emotions and connections they inspired. We will all have experienced such places so try to remember what resonated with you, whether it was something physical or emotional...



**Some places that have inspired me over time:**

[Logan Botanic Gardens](#) - the choice and placement of trees and shrubs to highlight their individuality. A less is more principle that really works. Most of the photos in this issue were taken here in 2006.

[Dunster Castle](#) - Gunnera growing down by the river in the gardens and sub-tropical planting - great foliage.

[Arger Fen](#) at bluebell time and green lanes in Suffolk  
Dingley Dell, the name my friend gave to a tiny stream that jumped over rocks in the narrow valley bottom of a farm in mid wales where we spent two really

- has a feral wilderness next a lovely tended garden on the eastern edge
- entered from the nursery, alongside the east edge of the reservoir, so the field opens up to view as you enter

#### Current environment

- the driest part of the UK
- drier summers and wet winters as climate change impacts East Anglia
- undisturbed clay soil
- well managed agricultural farmland on most of the boundary
- well populated and varied wildlife habitat

In the side column I have listed things I like in a landscape but I do have to tailor them to the constraints I am facing with the north field.

It would be difficult, and expensive, to re-create dramatic level changes in the field and there isn't enough space to do this without losing a lot of planting space.

My experience of creating mounded planting areas in the south field has had mixed results. The main reason is lack of moisture in the mounded areas. This is partly due to the more friable mounded soil draining too readily but also the maturing self-sown trees are dominating the battle for moisture in the clay subsoil.

As our summers get drier and the winters wetter I thought I would resort to a landscape feature that has worked in agriculture for centuries to help drain the land whilst retaining moisture at the margins; ditches.

#### **The overall design concept**

I want to create a long, meandering ditch through the field as the key feature. The ditch will alternate in width and depth throughout its journey with two or three ponds along the way.

I will plant the top of the ditch slopes with hostas as they like passing water rather than sitting in moist soil. They will be able to sink their roots down through the clay to the base of the ditch, and beyond.

The wood will be planted around the ditch to create vistas that will open up as you walk through the space. Planting the trees and hostas at the same time will enable them to both fight for moisture as they mature. Large trees will be planted further from the ditch to punctuate the canopy, which will develop over time.

memorable holidays.

[The High Line](#) in New York - how green spaces can be created anywhere and sometimes in the most unpromising of places - I find the idea of a river of garden exciting.

[Coleton Fishacre](#) - a National Trust property with a fabulous sloped garden leading to the sea. [Barnsdale Gardens](#) - 'rooms' where different garden ideas can be experimented with but linked to create moments of pleasure as each unfolds.

[Fuller's Mill](#) - repeat planting to maximise the feeling of space and coherence. Clever use of different foliage types and winding pathways. Never far from the sound of running water.

#### **Find connections**

Look at your list and see if you can identify key elements that repeat themselves.

For me:

- Highs and lows - gardens that have 'levels' of planting, slopes and gullies.
- Curved pathways and vistas that 'open up' as you travel through a space
- Lush foliage and different textures
- The drama of rocks and plants that drape over them at a water's edge
- Spring flowers and autumn colour

#### **How to apply them to a design for your garden**

Not all of the things you like will translate into a design for your own space so try to refine your list into elements that would work given the constraints you will



Creating highs and lows with the trees and hostas will give the illusion of an undulating space whilst making it fully accessible to less able-bodied visitors.

### **Maintenance**

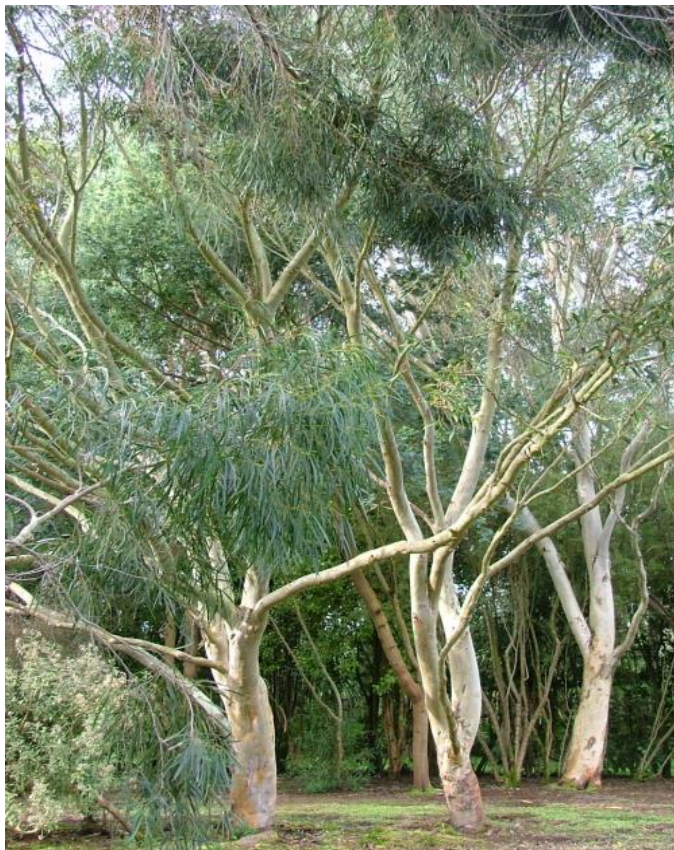
I need a design that will be easy to maintain, rather like my own back garden has become over time. Keeping a simple design should make maintenance easier.

I will link the start of the ditch system to a water tank so we can flood the system if we get a prolonged drought. Maintaining the reservoir will also give us a source of water to play with, if needed.

Once the trees are planted it will be a matter of regular mowing to encourage light to reach the ground. The trees will have an area around each base clear of grass to enable ease of mowing but, more importantly, to prevent the tree roots being choked with grass.

The hosta leaves will be removed at the end of each season and the ditch sides kept free of growth to prevent pests over-wintering in the area, and the weeds from taking over.

In season maintenance should be relatively straightforward with regular mowing and weeding - well that's the theory anyway.



### **Gardening with hostas**

Understanding what hostas need to flourish is important, as with any plant. However, one of the best things about

need to work around. I have explained how I went about creating the backbone of a design for the north field in the main part of the newsletter using my list. I will try to incorporate more elements as time goes on and the first plantings mature.



### **Sources of inspiration**

[RHS gardens](#) (Wisley in the photo) and [partner gardens](#) are a great all year round source of inspiration, as are [National Trust](#) properties.

Indeed many gardens are designed for specific environments so it is well worth investigating gardens such as [Beth Chatto's](#), which has been designed to cope with very dry conditions.

[National Garden Scheme](#): perhaps the best way to gather ideas, especially in gardens near to your own. This is a great way to understand what grows well for others with similar soil and climate conditions. More importantly, NGS gardens vary wildly in size and individuality. The NGS raises significant sums of money for charity but at the same time is allowing us all to indulge our love of gardening - a perfect combination.

[Perennial](#) are doing a similar

hostas is their tolerance of different aspects, from deep shade to sun, and their ability to flourish in rubbish soil. I have grown hostas in all sorts of environments and my experience has led me to the following key points:

- Dappled shade - hostas need the full spectrum of light in order to look their absolute best. Too much sun and the leaves can bleach - too much shade and the colours can be more muted.
- Slopes that can encourage root systems to seek moisture at depth - hostas like passing water and nutrient. They will sink their roots deeply to maintain access to these elements and the deeper they root, the stronger they become, lasting decades.
- Avoid planting too close to mature trees and shrubs as the hostas need room to grow. Even the tiniest of cultivars can have quite a spread if encouraged to do so.

Given these key considerations, the ditch system should work well. The dappled shade will develop over time as the trees mature and keeping a good distance between the plantings will encourage good root development.

I want to be able to walk through the wider sections of the ditch, when it is dry, to see the hostas from below. This will create a different perspective to experience and over time might give a jungle like quality to this part of the garden.

That I love hostas is no surprise as they encapsulate so many of the things I like and they are a great way to create a lush foliage experience when space is at a premium.

Although an arboretum was the long-standing wish for this space, I am hoping the inclusion of the meandering hosta ditch will give it an unexpected twist.

I hope you have found this a useful issue of the newsletter and that you have some exciting plans for your own gardens in 2022. We will bring you up to date on the arboretum and garden progress next month.

**All the very best wishes for a happy and healthy 2022  
Team Mickfield Hostas**

thing, and their gardens are well worth exploring. Fuller's Mill is a one such delight.

Most importantly, don't get hung up about styles or trying to interpret a design movement - if you like it, try it. Gardens should be as individual as you are.

### **Using flower shows for inspiration**

Flower shows are useful for gathering ideas for your own spaces. I have found them great places to discover plants I was unaware of and hopefully find out more about them.

An important point to note with flower show displays is that plants are often forced or held back from their normal seasonal habit. Sometimes plants shown together that wouldn't ordinarily grow side by side in a garden. Also, exhibitors often use immature plants to work within the scale of the display. If an exhibitor plans to 'sell off' their display then immature plants are often grouped together to create the effect of a mature version of the plant, which is then broken up for sale at the end of the show.

To a novice gardener, this can be a minefield but with so much information readily accessible it only requires a little homework. Take photos of things that inspire you, especially the labels of plants that strike you. There is nothing more frustrating than trying to identify a plant after the event, especially without a photograph.