

ELEMENTS OF GARDEN DESIGN



A HA-HA, THE ULTIMATE COUNTRY BOUNDARY.

BOUNDARIES AND SCREENS

A WELL-CHOSEN BOUNDARY OFFERS MUCH MORE THAN THE PRACTICALITIES OF SECURITY AND PRIVACY. CLEVE WEST ADVISES HOW TO CHOOSE FROM DIFFERENT TYPES OF WALLS, FENCES AND SCREENS AND SUGGESTS HOW TO USE THEM CREATIVELY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLEVE WEST AND DEREK ST ROMAINE



Enclosure has occupied our minds ever since the first boundaries were erected to create a safe environment from the ravages of the outside world. Now, while safety is still a consideration, boundaries are generally seen as a way

of demarcating property, providing privacy by way of walls, fences and hedging. The sense of enclosure can be enhanced by screens and other forms of division that will also help arrange the garden into compartments to obscure, channel or tease a view.

Your choice of boundary depends on what lies outside your garden. Blessed with a

view of open countryside it would be a waste not to exploit it and diffuse your boundaries to blur the point at which your garden ends and the natural wilderness begins. In large gardens this has traditionally been achieved by building a ha-ha, a ditch to prevent animals encroaching the property that, when viewed from the house, blends seamlessly with the countryside beyond.

Being in the garden is a sensuous experience, where light, shade, sound, silence, smell, touch and taste unite to bombard the senses. While there are people who take enormous pleasure from seeing every aspect of the garden from their kitchen window, I personally feel that seeing the garden in one hit – especially in a large garden – always seems a wasted opportunity. I want to be drawn in, seek out secret spaces, find the perimeters and

discover what lies beyond.

Even without a view of the countryside, a neighbour's garden could provide a focal point. For example, you could plant two or three silver birch trees on your side of the fence to match an existing one next door. This would add some sense of continuity, making it look as though the trees were there before the fence was erected while providing a dappled canopy that will enhance the sense of enclosure. It's a simple way of smudging the boundaries, bringing the outside in rather than trying to compete with it. Taken to the extreme, friendly neighbours could share space, with a serpentine fence or a pond that bisects the boundary, providing a dimension that would ordinarily be impossible to create.

Choosing the right materials to blend or contrast well with those of the house and the

ELEMENTS OF GARDEN DESIGN



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A WINDOW IN A DARK HEDGE FRAMES THE VIEW AND CREATES A FOCAL POINT. HEDGES, TREES AND A RUSTIC SCREEN IN A CONSIDERED COMPOSITION. VERTICAL

PLANTING BY A YEW HEDGE. A PARTIALLY HIDDEN VIEW IS MORE DRAMATIC. A WATTLE FENCE IS IN KEEPING WITH THE TIMBER-FRAMED COTTAGE.



rest of the garden is crucial to its success. A wrong choice here will be difficult and costly to rectify. Walls need careful consideration at the design stage and often need planning permission, especially if you live in a conservation area. Let the house and local architecture influence the type of material you use. Urban gardens will take brick, rendered blockwork and concrete. A rustic stone wall could grate, as might a concrete wall in a rural setting.

Timber fencing panels, though less durable, are significantly cheaper and therefore probably the most popular garden boundary. Again, certain styles have their own local distinctiveness. Larch-lap panels look acceptable in town gardens but slightly odd surrounding a country cottage. Likewise, a wattle fence from the Somerset Levels will look lost and somewhat embarrassed in a busy metropolis.

With solid boundaries and screens some thought must

be given to the plants around them. A sunny aspect can be suddenly thrown into shade and this may adversely affect plants that have grown accustomed to their fair share of light. See-through screens and boundaries can overcome this problem while allowing the freedom to be more creative. Contemporary materials on the market such as glass, Perspex and polycarbonate, (generally more applicable to urban gardens), can be used as solid barriers, the translucent nature of the materials allowing diffuse views of plants, water and other elements. Sculpted forms can also be used as screens that, while not a completely solid barrier, can be dynamic and visually powerful enough to divert and hold attention.

I have always been fascinated by the way simple upright timbers can form a variety of interesting screens, contrasting with surrounding plants and adding a touch of drama to any size of garden. Such features are



ABOVE: THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN NEIGHBOURING GARDENS HAS BEEN REPLACED WITH A WATER FEATURE, WHILE DENSE PLANTING PROVIDES PRIVACY. LEFT: PLAN FOR A GARDEN WHERE TALL, FREE-STANDING TIMBER POSTS CREATE A CURVED SCREEN SEPARATING THE PAVED AREA AND STEPS FROM THE SOFT LANDSCAPING BEYOND. WHILE DIVIDING THE GARDEN INTO DISTINCT AREAS, GLIMPSES BETWEEN THE TIMBER POSTS INVITE FURTHER EXPLORATION.



either be bold and make a statement with it, or don't use it at all. Many gardens (and even some well-designed ones at that) are spoiled by a finicky sliver of trellis tacked on top of fencing panels to provide support for a climber that won't even reach it for three or four years. It's a fussy, ill-proportioned detail that just irritates. Well-made trellis panels will hold their own whether partially or completely covered by plants and have the added quality of letting air through, so will be less liable to damage in windy conditions.

The colour of your boundary is worth thinking about too. Orange-stained fencing and trelliswork really does look misplaced in the garden, dominating the space and detracting from any sort of planting no matter how many climbers you plant against it. A neutral or dark colour will make boundaries recede, allowing plants to have centre stage. If you are fortunate and have your fences clothed with climbers already, then you'll know there is nothing to beat a green boundary. It needs a certain amount of clipping but, despite encroaching on your physical space, will make

simple and relatively inexpensive and are another way of allowing the beauty of an adjoining property into your space.

Hedges, fences and walls can also be made permeable by angling for a louvered effect or cutting views through them. The availability of container-grown pleached trees means that this can be achieved almost instantly and has become a popular effect for gardens of all sizes.

If using trellis or latticework,

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: COLOURED PERSEPX SCREENS AT THE 2003 WESTONBIRT FESTIVAL. DENSE PLANTING CAN CREATE DIVISIONS WITHIN A GARDEN, WHILE THE FENCE IS DELIBERATELY OPEN. MISCANTHUS PLANTED AS

AN EVER-CHANGING SCREEN. RIGHT: A WALL OF LOCALLY QUARRIED STONE AND CHESTNUT FENCING SHOW HOW BOUNDARIES RELATE TO THEIR LANDSCAPE.



a garden feel larger and bring an added dimension that will make it feel more comfortable. A living screen of willow, woven on site, can create a solid mass of foliage in summer with views through a decorative framework for added interest in winter.

Simple planting schemes can also form screens and barriers – from a strategically placed clump of bamboo in a small garden to a copse of trees in a larger space. If trying to mask an unsightly building beyond, remember that the closer you plant your tree or shrub to your house the larger an object it will obscure outside your garden. Even herbaceous perennials planted in staggered drifts across the garden can screen a view. Miscanthus will do a good job, though there will be a large gap for a few months when it is cut down each spring. However, the fleeting nature of these and other perennials makes them all the more captivating. Ever-changing as they respond to the varying light and weather – you'll never tire of



DO'S AND DON'TS.

Do...

- Look beyond your plot before you box yourself in. See what's there that you might be able to make use of in terms of borrowed scenery.
- Spend as much as you can afford in terms of quality and pay particular attention to maintenance where posts are liable to decay. Replacing fencing after just a few years is not only a thankless task, it will disturb maturing plants and upset the balance of the garden.
- Choose materials that are sympathetic to the house and the surroundings. If it is your intention to create a visual shock think hard about what you are trying to say and make sure the view is acceptable from your

neighbour's perspective.

- Think about using screens so you can't see the whole garden from the house. Used well they can give an air of mystery, challenging you to explore the space while providing a backcloth for placing plants, ornaments and other focal points.
- Remember that dark-coloured fencing gives plants centre stage.
- Have patience when planting hedging such as yew or holly. You will be well rewarded.

Don't...

- Make screens and boundaries an afterthought. They are powerful tools when it comes to dividing space, channelling movement and creating vital structure

- in the garden.
- Plant a leylandii hedge unless you plan to maintain it properly at a manageable height.
- Use unfamiliar products until you have seen them in situ or as samples.
- Build anything against a fence that will make it rot.
- Think that screens and boundaries always have to be solid. Views through can add an interesting dimension to a space.
- Try and extend the height of an existing fence by tacking on a flimsy piece of trellis – it will simply draw attention to itself as a fussy detail.
- Forget that plants can be used as effective screens on their own.
- Be afraid of using sculpture, reclaimed timber or metal as a screen.



Peter Barlow