

ELEMENTS OF GARDEN DESIGN



Changes in level can dramatically affect our perception of space. Although sloping sites may be difficult to deal with, they can be exploited to bring a whole new dimension to the garden. Used well, this element can be the designer's trump card, opening up endless

possibilities.

Since the earliest recorded gardens, levels have been employed to create terraces and water cascades, engineered simply using the law of gravity. Italian Renaissance gardens exploited this with gusto and we have our own fine example at Chatsworth in Derbyshire. Designed on a grand scale, a great deal of work (not to mention money) is needed to realise gardens such as these.

However, even slight changes in level can have a notable effect, particularly in small urban gardens. Just one step down can make a surprising difference, distracting the eye, making you focus on a particular area, and helping to create a sense of privacy and seclusion. If you decide to raise levels, be sure to test your new view by standing on a bucket or a ladder at the proposed height. Looking over someone else's garden can be even more uncomfortable than being overlooked. Other changes, such as raised beds and retaining walls, provide more dramatic visual stimuli, creating new areas to be explored and obstacles to be negotiated and thereby creating the illusion of space.

Slopes rising up from the house generally present more possibilities and a greater sense of enclosure, with shortened views being particularly useful in long, thin gardens. Where the ground falls away from the house, the garden becomes increasingly beholden to views of the surrounding landscape. This can be good or bad news depending on your aspect!

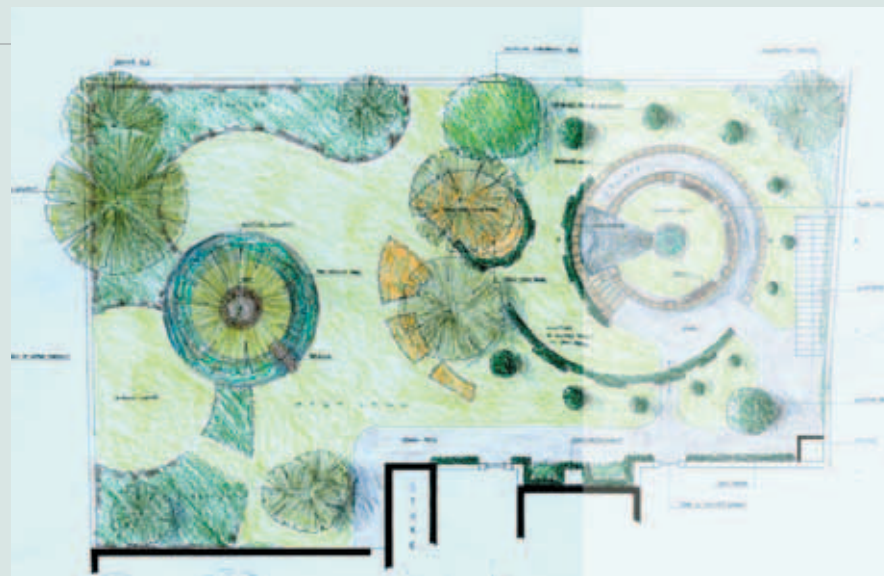
Attention to levels is crucial at the planning stage (even if you don't plan any significant changes), to take into account knock-on effects in terms of preparation and materials. For example, the level of a newly constructed terrace will need to facilitate access to the house and the rest of the garden, while allowing a gradient away from the house to shed rainwater. For more significant changes the knock-on effects become even greater.

For this reason, whether levels are to be imposed on a site or created from natural slopes, much thought should be given to the implications of 'cut and fill', where soil is taken from one part of the garden and moved to another. It makes sense to use existing levels to your advantage wherever possible; unless the soil is particularly poor it's always preferable to work with indigenous material. Access to, from, and around the site will have a bearing on what might be possible. Don't underestimate the extent of the preparation involved in landscaping projects. Excavations need to allow for wall foundations and a good sub-base for terraces. Drainage may also become an issue and a drain or soakaway might be necessary to take rainwater away from terraces laid at a lower level than the rest of the garden.

Raised beds, besides being easier for elderly or disabled people to tend, can dramatically change a garden's

LEVELS

WHETHER THEY ARE THERE BY NATURE OR DESIGN, DIFFERENT LEVELS IN A GARDEN CAN PRESENT A CHALLENGE. CLEVE WEST EXPLAINS HOW TO USE LEVELS TO CREATE NEW PERSPECTIVES AND AN ILLUSION OF SPACE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLEVE WEST AND DEREK ST ROMAINE



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: SEMICIRCLES IN THE FORM OF YORK STONE STEPS AT THE HARPERS & QUEEN GARDEN, CHELSEA 1996. SEATING AT ROSEMOOR CREATES

INTEREST BETWEEN LEVELS. ABOVE: PLAN OF A GARDEN SHOWING CIRCULAR DESIGN ELEMENTS INCLUDING A SUNKEN LAWN. LEFT: RAISED BEDS BREAK UP THE VIEW.

perspective. Well designed and executed, they can be focal points – exaggerating the stature of plants, enclosing a space, directing movement and providing valuable seating areas. Badly designed and built with a weak planting scheme, they can look like coal bunkers, disproportionate to the space in which they sit and the plants they contain.

A sloping garden will almost certainly require a means of traversing the various levels – such as steps, ramps or platforms – and these can be as simple or as elaborate as the situation dictates. Step risers and treads have a particular influence on how we negotiate them. The steeper the rise and the shorter the tread, the more one has to concentrate when climbing or descending. Shallow risers with a generous tread allow a more relaxed transition, slowing the pace and allowing space to pause. While many people have their own preferences for step dimensions, I've always used this popular formula: twice the riser plus the tread equals 65cm. That means a riser of 10cm will have a tread of 45cm and a riser of 15cm will have a 35cm tread. Occasionally, you have to bend the rule to make it work for a particular situation, but by and large it is effective. A slight pitch on the step (included in the riser dimension) will stop water collecting, and a slight overhang will cast a shadow making the steps more visible when ascending.

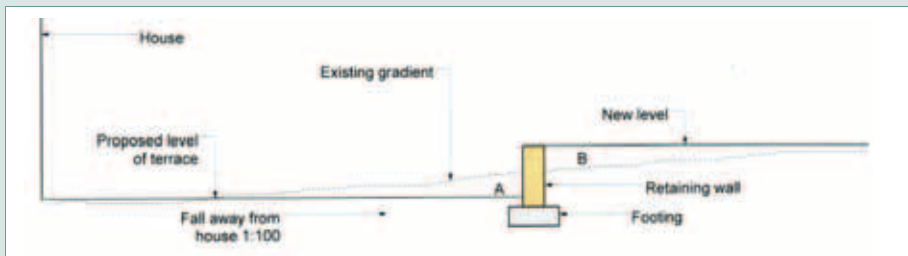
The width of your steps will also say much about the feeling of a garden. The wider they are the more spacious

ELEMENTS OF GARDEN DESIGN



ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: WIDE STEPS CREATE A FEELING OF SPACE. EXAMPLES OF STEP DIMENSIONS. WOODEN STEPS AND RAISED BEDS IN LAMBETH HORTICULTURAL

SOCIETY'S GARDEN, CHELSEA 1998. CONTEMPORARY CANTILEVERED STEPS. BELOW: PLAN SHOWING THE CREATION OF A NEW LEVEL, USING SOIL FROM A SLOPE (A) TO FILL A VOID



LEFT, FROM TOP: WOODEN STEPS BETWEEN LEVELS. A CURVACEOUS HAND-DUG STREAM COMPLEMENTS THE

CONTOURS OF THE LAND. AN ACER AT WESTONBIRT IS BROUGHT INTO FOCUS BY A SCULPTED GRASS CRESCENT.

and elegant the garden will feel. Building steps the full width of the garden to divide two terraced areas can work particularly well in a contemporary, minimalist setting. On steep slopes with deep risers it's a good idea to incorporate a larger step to act as a small landing, allowing a place to pause to catch your breath going up, or to quell feelings of vertigo coming down. A handrail (not the most attractive of garden fixtures) may also be necessary for safety.

Ramps are increasingly being used to make gardens more accessible to wheelchair users. I have incorporated them into a couple of designs for both practical and aesthetic reasons and was pleasantly surprised at how useful they were for wheelbarrows and slowing the pace when viewing a garden. The drawback is that ramps require much more space than steps (the gradient should be no steeper than 1:12) and this can make them more difficult to incorporate into a design; it is crucial that steps and ramps blend fluidly with the space available without constricting other elements or compromising safety.

Situating raised beds on either side of steps may help to divide small level changes, but quite often a retaining wall is needed to divide steeper slopes. Where a house has a basement or occupies a site on a slope it is common to find that the minimum amount of soil was excavated during construction. A retaining wall and a flight of steps along the boundary can often leave an uninviting claustrophobic space immediately outside the back door. A solution might be to excavate enough soil to build a larger terrace with a new wall and steps. Removing soil from the site is not a project to undertake lightly, but it can make a tremendous difference to the feel of a garden. Walls need to be strong enough (reinforced if more than a metre high) to withstand the pressure exerted on them, with weep-holes to relieve the build up of water behind them if necessary. Steps can be built as part of the wall itself – running across the garden to save space on the terrace – and can even be cantilevered (this is possible only when building a new wall) for a contemporary look.

Where space is abundant, artificial contours – from subtle land ripples to a dramatic amphitheatre – can create stunning effects, exploiting the light at dawn and dusk.

Finally, you may be tempted to use water in a design that involves changes in level. This is an element that will be covered in more detail later in the series. However, it's worth mentioning that water features are generally more successful when worked into existing contours rather than artificially made slopes, where they can not only look contrived, but also need more care during construction to avoid problems with subsidence. ■