

## HAS YOUR GARDEN GOT ENOUGH STRUCTURE?

*Stephanie Lee*

Winter is the time to identify the permanent features that give structure to your garden. Already, in March, we are focusing on the daily appearance of blossom, bulbs and plants with the usual delight that accompanies their re-appearance, but let us spare a thought for those unsung heroes that are the backbone of the garden all year round.

### **Entrances and exits**

These are the first and last impressions that your garden gives. We all know that feeling of coming into the house and feeling happy to be home, but equally, do you come into the garden and feel the same as you close the gate? Is it welcoming to visitors? Is it surrounded by scent throughout the year? In winter, *Viburnum bodnantense*, *Lonicera fragrantissima*, *Daphne odora* 'Aureomarginata' or *Sarcococca confusa* can all make your head turn!

### **Paths**

These are hopefully practical, to get you down to the compost heap or the washing line without getting your feet wet in the winter, but do they give a sense of mystery, making you look forward to going round the next bend to see what is revealed? Do they enable you to reach into your borders without always having to step on the soil? I have found putting paths through borders creates more space for plants rather than less, and reveals new angles to view the garden.

### **Boundaries**

In winter, deciduous hedges still give a sense of structure, and an opportunity to underplant with bulbs. Box hedges become more important as an outline to borders, and suddenly fence panels with trellis are exposed while the climbers are resting. A well pruned rose, cotoneaster or pyracantha covered in berries can look good throughout the winter. Ivies and winter-flowering clematis and honeysuckles still adorn, and the highly valued x *Fatsyhedera lizei* 'Variegata' can look stunning.

### **Pergolas and arches**

These provide useful passages throughout the garden, and support climbers, creating vertical accents. Consideration should always be paid to the width and height, thinking about two people being able to walk through side by side, and underplanting roses and climbers: the taller and wider the structure, the better - even in a small space!

### **Seating**

You can never have enough seating. Consider sun and shade at different times of the day, from breakfast through to sundowners, where would you move a chair to? Not that we gardeners have a lot of time for sitting, but they are also useful for resting your bucket and secateurs!

### **Water features**

We do not all have grand lakes or even ponds, but there is always space for just a pot for water lilies, or a small wildlife pond in the border. You can even have a dry slate water feature to give an impression of a stream.

### **Bird features**

There is a great deal of pleasure to be had from feeding the birds in winter, and even more from siting these where you can see them from your kitchen window or other places in the house where you often sit. Different kinds of food will attract a variety of birds, and of course a bird bath close by gives endless pleasure.

**Statuary and driftwood**

Whether it be a gnome or a nymph, a lantern or an urn, these certainly stand out in the winter, although they may all but disappear in summer, so the siting of these again can be critically viewed at this time of year to maximise their potential.

**Raised bed**

Breaking up the garden, creating a transition from one area to the next, raised beds give an opportunity for a different kind of planting and, indeed, soil conditions. It is important to make them in keeping with the rest of your garden, rather than standing out.

**Windows in the garden**

This is quite easy if you are lucky enough to have a landscape to 'borrow', but if not, you can achieve the same effect by giving a glimpse of a different area of the garden through a hole in a hedge, trellis or wall.

**Pots**

These are moveable structures, and can of course be replanted to suit the seasons, with grasses or evergreens underplanted with bulbs for the winter and into spring.

**Backbone plants**

Evergreen plants tend to fade into the background in the exuberance of summer colour, but throughout the winter months they are essential. Variegated evergreens can really brighten the garden, and several come to mind. *Euonymus fortunei* 'Emerald 'n' Gold' and 'Emerald Gaiety'; *Eleagnus x ebbingei* 'Limelight', and *Aucuba*, *Ilex* and *Pittosporum* also have lovely variegated forms. The strappy *Phormium*, *Cordyline*, *Libertia*, *Astelia* and winter grasses look good, as well as structural plants like *Fatsia japonica* and *Melianthus major*. Euphorbias come into their own, as do hellebores, *Vinca* and *Lonicera*, not to forget the fragrant shrubs I mentioned earlier. Evergreen and beech hedges look marvellous all winter. Suddenly it is spring and the first bulbs begin to show, the *Cynara cardunculus* has new basal growth as does *Ferula communis*, and the whole exciting cycle begins again.

It is not too late to examine and even re-think those permanent features in your garden, before we get too distracted by the seasons to come. Take a good look at yours.

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