

A formal garden – composing a picture

Anthony Ewin

To say that we have been fortunate in our site is perhaps an understatement. We have a view of one of the finest cathedrals in Europe; in fact the view from the terrace is of the cathedral alone surmounting the wooded valley, and all else is hidden (fig. 1). The site itself is part of an historic garden which dates back to the seventeenth century. We have old stone walls, a piece of a ruin (fig. 2) and, next door, a gazebo which has been faithfully restored (fig. 3).

A brief history is called for. A small mansion was built at Old Durham in about 1650 by the Heath and Tempest family, and a formal garden was laid out on a terraced site with a gazebo overlooking the River Wear. The mansion was demolished in about 1750, no longer needed by the family, but the gardens continued in cultivation for reasons that remain obscure. In the 19th century the gardens became a place of public resort where music was performed on summer evenings. A public house was established and public entertainment continued until the 1940s. Thereafter the gardens fell into disuse and decay. They were eventually acquired by the council who undertook a modest restoration scheme. However, approximately a quarter of the original garden remained in private ownership, attached to the house that we acquired in 1999.

This ‘quarter’ was a square grassed plot 30m by 30m with old stone walls on two sides and a wooden fence and a Leylandii hedge on the others.

In this place it can be appreciated that the *genius loci* was strong; it seemed to me that to be consonant with its setting the garden had to be formal; it would be quite inappropriate to have winding paths and flowing borders. Therefore the plot would be



Fig. 1 View of the Cathedral from the terrace

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Fig. 2 The ruin

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divided into quarters, also square. This would reflect the fact that the garden is one quarter of the whole of Old Durham Gardens. Each quarter would be enclosed by yew hedges. The wooden fence would be replaced by a stone wall and the *Leylandii* by yew. There would be a central axis with a circular pool in the centre of the garden and a terrace at the far end to take advantage of the view.

I drew up a detailed design brief and commissioned a garden designer, Barbara Beaven, who prepared drawings for the hard landscaping. Each quarter had a different but formal design (see the plan opposite). A contractor built the walls, terrace and pool, and laid the sandstone paving, which was prodigious in extent. All the paths are comfortably wide at 1.2m, with a ramp to the terrace and no steps so that all areas are accessible for wheelchairs and wheelbarrows. There is no grass, but consequently a lot of planting. The four separated quarters provided the opportunity to have discrete colour schemes. I had visited Sissinghurst many times and this was my inspiration, in particular the hot garden by the cottage, and the purple border.

What am I attempting to create? I am trying to make a work of art in the manner of a painting. It has a frame – the yew hedging – to provide background but not to distract from the composition; it is a plain frame, not a gilded one. However, unlike a picture it has innumerable viewpoints, including looking at the arrangement from opposite sides, which makes the act and the art of composition much more complex. It should look good from all angles.

A painter uses colours; a gardener uses plants. Of course, if the plants are simply colours then the composition becomes a tedious carpet-bedding scheme; or it involves the use of plants that merely provide ‘a splash of colour’; for example, *Forsythia* provides a crude yellow in flower and an ugly-shaped bush when not.

So the plants must be beautiful in themselves. They must have beauty of form, of leaf, of flower. There is such a range of plants that it should be unnecessary to have to sacrifice

one of these attributes simply to put in a particular colour. Beauty, of course, is in the eye of the beholder, and over many years I have been noting plants that I admire.

Thus the picture should consist of an assemblage of plants, each individually beautiful, but in aggregate making a pleasing and artistic composition. However, not only is there the problem of multiple viewpoints, there is also the fact that plants go out of flower and are constantly changing. It is

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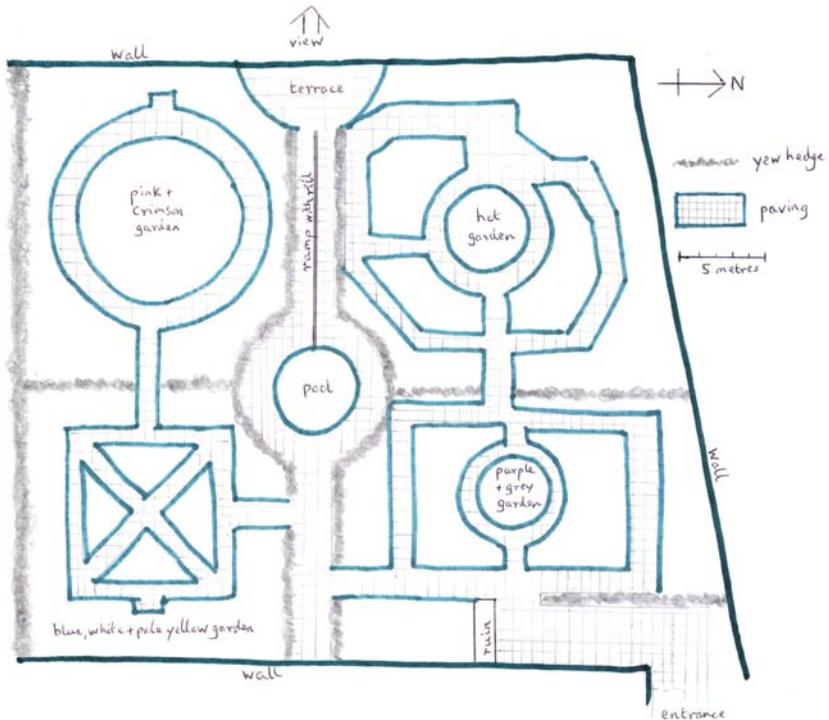
Fig. 3 The terrace and the gazebo

therefore easier to compose a picture for a particular time; for example, Gertrude Jekyll's September Michaelmas Daisy border. But that is an extravagance of space that even I cannot afford. Nevertheless, the composition must of necessity be focused on at least a particular season. For example, my 'hot' garden, like other people's, will be focused on late July, August and September, when heleniums and other composites are flowering.

In fact I conceive of the whole of the formal garden as a summer garden, because it is away from the house and probably not somewhere to linger in the cold spring winds, let alone in winter. But a summer garden where the interest starts in May and builds to a peak in August, and is still pleasant to be in September and October. (Our autumns are often kinder than our springs.) It follows that a garden that needs to look good for the four months of June to September will have to rely on foliage as much as, if not more than, on flowers.

The four quarters follow these colour themes:

1. purple and grey and silver
2. blue, white and pale yellow
3. scarlet, orange and bright yellow (the hot garden)
4. pink and crimson



Why have I adopted a restricted colour range? Because I feel that colours look better if they are with complementary shades and not in savage contrasts. Of course I am following the tenets of Gertrude Jekyll, which I prefer to Christopher Lloyd's desire to shock. I am looking for harmony rather than contrast. Until I have seen it well established in practice, I don't know if it will work here.

The purple and grey garden should have been the easiest to stock (fig. 4). There are numerous plants with grey or silver leaves – *Artemisia*, *Santolina*, *Pyrus*. They tend to be fine leaved, even filigree, so there might be some problem in finding broad-leaved plants for contrast. *Celmisia* and *Astelia* are possibilities, but not easy to grow well. Yuccas are dark green but might be considered to have a little grey-green tone. There are purple broad-leaved plants such as *Sambucus* f. *porphyrophylla* 'Guincho Purple' and 'Black Beauty'.

My matrix for the purple and grey garden involves the recurrent theme of purple *Sambucus*, *Artemisia* 'Powis Castle' and *Salix exigua* to provide the context for the

purple flowers of *Iris*, *Campanula*, *Aster*, *Clematis*, etc. The subtly coloured leaves of *Rosa glauca* and *Vitis vinifera* 'Purpurea' fit in well and provide variety.

The blue, white and pale-yellow garden (fig. 5) has glaucous (i.e. bluish) leaved plants but there are not enough to furnish the whole garden without becoming tedious. I have planted many *Ruta graveolens* 'Jackman's Blue' (fig. 6) which has beautiful blue foliage; and there is also *Berberis*

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Fig. 4 The purple and grey garden with *Aster* x *frikartii* 'Mönch'

temolaica. There are a number of conifers, including *Juniperus horizontalis* and *J.* 'Grey Owl', *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Boulevard', and the very glaucous *Picea pungens* 'Koster' (which would be too stiff), but too many conifers make the garden feel dead.

Thus there are some good low-growing glaucous plants – which could be used repetitively – but there are no large shrubs which could be used in that way unless I was prepared to put in a lot of conifers – which I was not.

In contrast to the glaucous leaves are the yellow leaves of *Sambucus racemosa* 'Plumosa Aurea', *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea', *Cotinus coggygria* Golden Spirit, and various grasses. Too much yellow foliage would look anaemic (not to say

jaundiced) and some plants in their yellow-leaved form, such as *Choisya ternata* Sundance, can look decidedly ill.

With the lack of glaucous plants and the need to go easy on the yellow-leaved plants, of necessity I had to fall back on more green leaves. Some are emphatically handsome, such as *Magnolia grandiflora* ‘Victoria’, and there are four dark-green yew pyramids forming in each corner.

Although this garden is nominally restricted to pale yellows, it has to accommodate some euphorbias, that problematic but indispensable tribe. Their flowers are usually acid yellow (as in *E. polychroma*) or lime green (as *characias*). *Myrsinites* has the benefit of glaucous leaves. The trick will be to keep the acid yellow away from the pale yellow (and the white). Both will happily contrast with the blue.

For the hot garden I looked for foliage that will keep up the temperature and not offer respite in the way that lush green leaves would. So I want truly bronze leaves which have an element of brown in them, rather than purple leaves. *Physocarpus opulifolius* ‘Diabolo’ seems to have the right tone. *Euphorbia griffithii* ‘Dixter’ has a hot tone to its leaves and stems. Scarlet flowers backed by bronze leaves as in *Dahlia* ‘Bishop of Llandaff’ are ideal. (Figs 7 & 8.)

By contrast, in the pink and crimson garden I wish to indulge in lush green leaves. The main bed, which is circular, is edged with dark green box (figs 9 & 10). Four mop-headed *Prunus lusitanica*, also dark green, are planted symmetrically at either side of the garden. There are a



Fig. 5 The blue, white and pale-yellow garden



Fig. 6 *Ruta graveolens* ‘Jackman’s Blue’

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number of *Cotinus coggygia* ‘Royal Purple’ with its dark red leaves. (I cannot understand why this is described as having purple or even bronze leaves, when in fact they are a beautiful matt dark red.) There will be a few white flowers so that the overall effect is not too sombre.

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Fig. 7 The hot garden

Within the rigour of the colour schemes and the formal design the planting is both informal and eclectic: herbaceous plants, bulbs, shrubs, small trees, roses, climbers. Annuals are used to fill the gaps and provide extra colour, particularly for later in the season. Herbaceous plants are planted in groups of three or so of the same variety where I have sufficient

numbers. I feel I have the freedom to try any combination of plants provided they conform to the particular colour scheme, but I admit that this doesn't always work.

I have tried making a planting plan and working to it. However, I found that once I was working on the ground the perspective seemed quite different and I kept changing my mind. I found it easier to place the plants on the ground and try to imagine what they would look like in the future. Moreover, it is a question of supply rather than demand; if I have a stock of certain plants then they will be used if they fit in. (I have built up a stock of plants from seed, cuttings and the HPS North East Group's plant table.) Of course I often plant things too close and have to move them the next year.

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Fig. 8 Looking from the hot garden towards the cathedral

The yew hedges were planted first. Then in order to prevent takeover by weeds we covered all the soil with black woven plastic sheeting, using two 2m wide 100m rolls. After we had extracted 20 cubic metres of rubble, the soil was thoroughly dug and manured. The black plastic was replaced to keep the weeds out and then removed as each section was planted in turn. This spring, 2011, we began planting the last area, the pink garden. (This leaves the interesting problem of what to do with a vast quantity of black plastic.)



Fig. 9 The pink garden before planting

So what is the result? I sit down and look at what has been done. Sometimes I think that the picture is the one that I had in my mind's eye: that the restricted colour schemes really do work. I look at other parts of the garden and I think that the plants are in the wrong place and they will have to be moved, and there are still places to be filled. But of course, moving plants about until they are in the right place is what gardening is all about. 🌱



Fig. 10 The pink garden with many annuals filling the spaces

Anthony and Barbara Ewin garden at Pear Tree Cottage, Old Durham, and are members of the North East Group. Anthony can be contacted at tony.ewin@gmail.com