

A close-up photograph of various plants with purple and red leaves, some with prominent veins, set against a light background. The image is framed by a thick pink border.

# how to transform a boring outdoor space

into a beautiful, exciting garden full  
of surprises and visual delights

Kate Naylor

21 hints,  
visual tricks,  
artistic ideas &  
common sense  
design tips for keen  
non-gardeners

# how to transform a boring outdoor space

into a beautiful, exciting garden full of surprises and visual delights.

## introduction

How often have you looked out at your ugly rectangle of grass and wanted to hurl yourself out of the kitchen window in a fit of despair?

If your garden's filling you with angst, all is not lost. This handy e-guide shows you how to make the most of it with twenty one hints, visual tricks, artistic ideas and common sense garden design tips. Everything you need to transform your depressing outdoor space into a vivid, bright place to enjoy all year round.





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# I hate my garden! Where do I start?

"First make a *much* more exciting and practical shape."

# 1

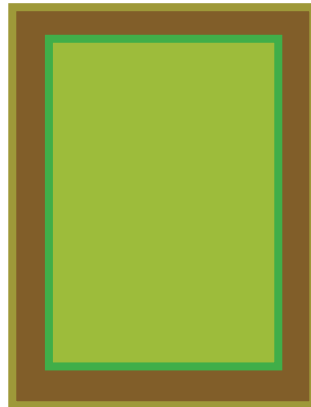
## circles and ovals

Traditional UK gardens have flowerbeds around the edge and a lawn in the middle.

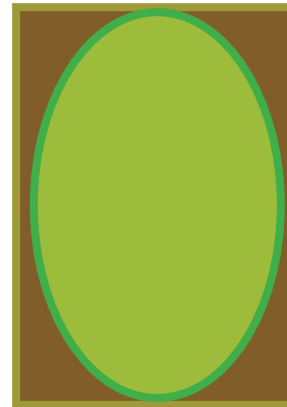
Dull, dull, dull. As dull as a dull thing from an extremely dull place. And it looks horrid in the winter. The first step towards livening things up is to change the shape radically. You can't do much better than create ovals or circles. Why? Because you instantly get:

- a shape that's natural and much easier on the eye
- the illusion of more space
- useful corners to hide your compost heap, bins, plantpots, tools or whatever from view
- lovely big, wide beds to grow more things in
- safe places for wildlife to hide
- more potential for visual surprises

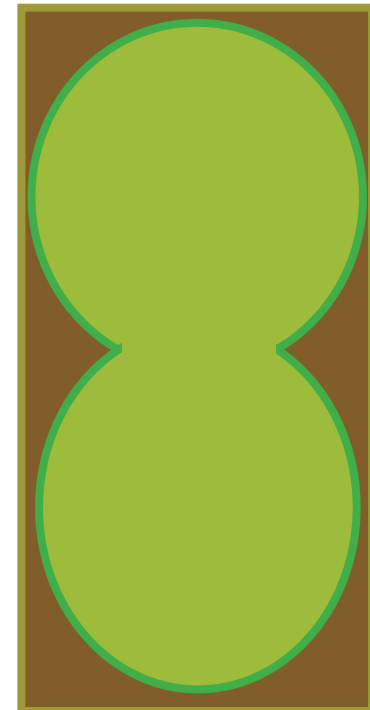
Here's what I mean.



Change this



to this.



If your garden is long and thin, make two circles.

# advice about planting

"Can you read? That's all you need."

the secret to excellent planting...

...is to follow the instructions on the label.

That's that. Let's move on.



# lovely bones!

"Who says you can't have *everything*?"

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## create your basic structure with evergreens

If you make your core design with evergreens it'll look lovely all year round.

You'll probably want to keep some areas of your garden separate, create visual mysteries or hide the less attractive bits.

Lay out your structure with evergreens and your design will work even when all your flowers and deciduous plants have lost their foliage.

Instead of a bare space divided by nothing but twigs, you retain your basic shape. Your ugly bits stay hidden, your secret path stays secret. And delicate seasonal plants are sheltered from the worst of the winter cold and wind.

There are hundreds of fantastic evergreens ranging from everyday conifers to strange, weird and wonderfully exotic specimens. Dwarfs and giants ranging from the palest pea green to acidic bright limes and yellows. Gorgeously shaped bushes in golden browns, lovely grey-blues and deep, rich forest greens. Satisfyingly round, fat, furry bushes and elegantly thin, pointed spikes. Bamboos. Flaxes. Spiky yucca-like things.

Most of them are really easy to trim and keep in shape. And many of them smell fantastic too! Mix and match colours, shapes and sizes to create splashes of colour and strong structure. Then plant your seasonal flowers, shrubs and trees so they reinforce and complement your core evergreen design.

In winter you get a dramatic blaze of colour. In summer you get a dramatic blaze of even *more* colour.



# ugly stuff...

"If you don't want to look at it, don't look at it!"

## hide boring ugly stuff

If you've used a circle or oval to create your basic design...

...you'll have at least four spacious, useful corners where you can store things that would otherwise spoil your view. Demarcate your corners with evergreens and your ugly stuff stays hidden all year round.

You can also hide things by:

- growing evergreen creepers over a trellis screen
- using a colourful beach or camping windbreak
- painting a windbreak dark green - or the same colour as your fences and walls - so it disappears into the background
- painting ugly compost bins and wheelie bins the same colour as your fence or wall so they blend in. Water based eggshell paint is perfect. Wonderfully weatherproof and fine to use on plastics, wood, stone, metal... you name it
- disguise unsightly areas using artistically-grouped planters



# views over the hills

"Give your eyes a gift - you're worth it!"

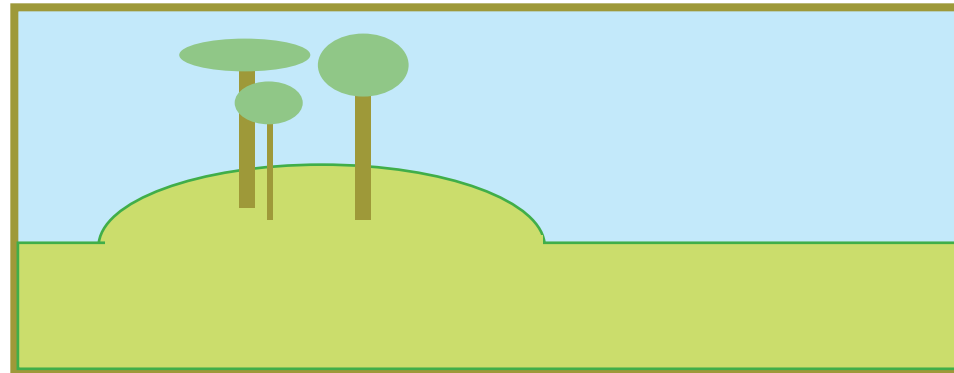
# 5

## make hills

Build hills in your garden for exciting visual treats.

There's nothing like a hill to make a flat vista into a view with a million times more visual interest. Your eyes wander up, down and around it, you can't quite see what's behind it and it'll help you create height.

Put your hill to one side of the garden or off centre rather than bang in the middle. It'll look *much* more interesting. If you want more than one hill, make three. Unless you're hell bent on being symmetrical, two hills will give you design nightmares... no matter how you arrange them, twos always look symmetrical.



Tip: use rubble or hardcore for the basis of big hills, covered with a generous layer of topsoil.

# hidden valleys, secret places

“What do you do with the hole that’s left behind once you’ve built your hill?”

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## dig holes

Create even more eye candy!

Holes are just as exciting as hills. Unless you brought in topsoil to build your hill, you’ll probably have a correspondingly big hole in your garden. Excellent stuff. Here’s a list of exciting things to do with holes:

Make an existing hole into:

- a secret space to sit with high evergreen stuff planted around the edges so you’re invisible
- a pond, rockery, bog garden or fern garden
- a miniature turfed valley to lie in with a good book, dog, cat or beer
- a place to display a sculpture or a special planter
- a shady dell of delicate trees

Dig special holes to make:

- subtle winding valleys through your lawn
- somewhere cosy to sit out of the wind
- a place with an eye-level view of your pond’s surface for superb wildlife watching, up close and intimate



# be a rebel!

"Say no to the norm..."

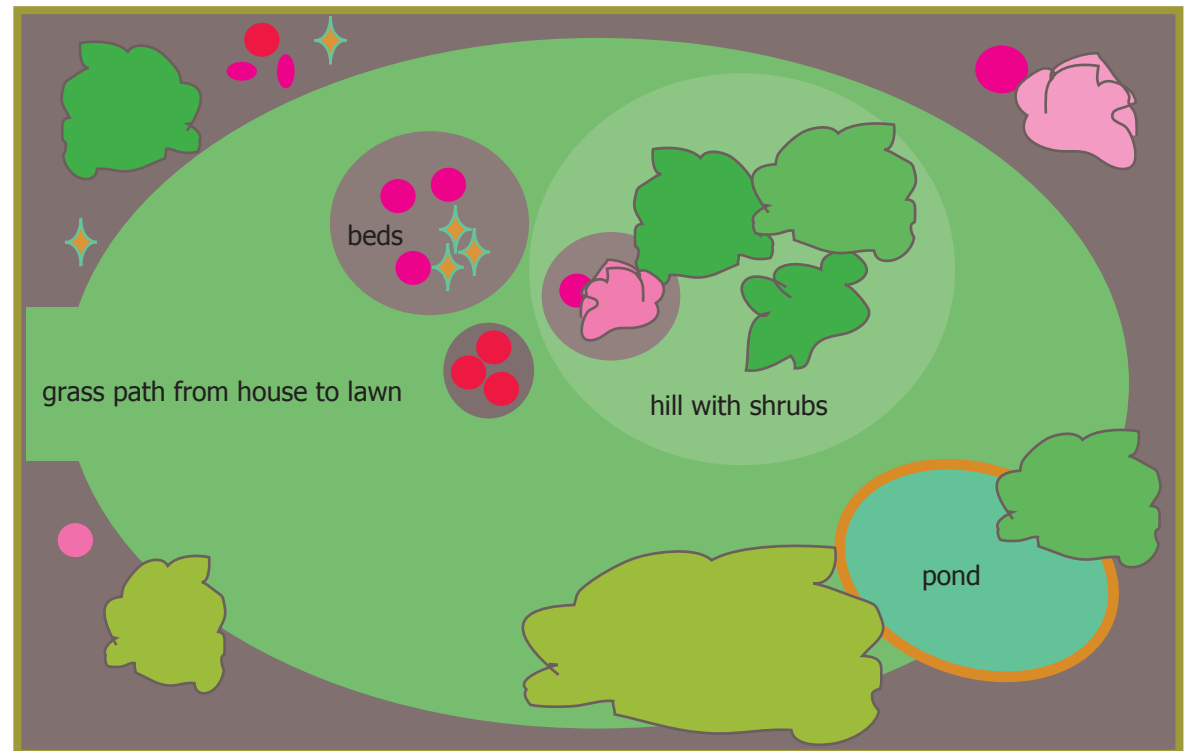
## the art of putting things in the middle

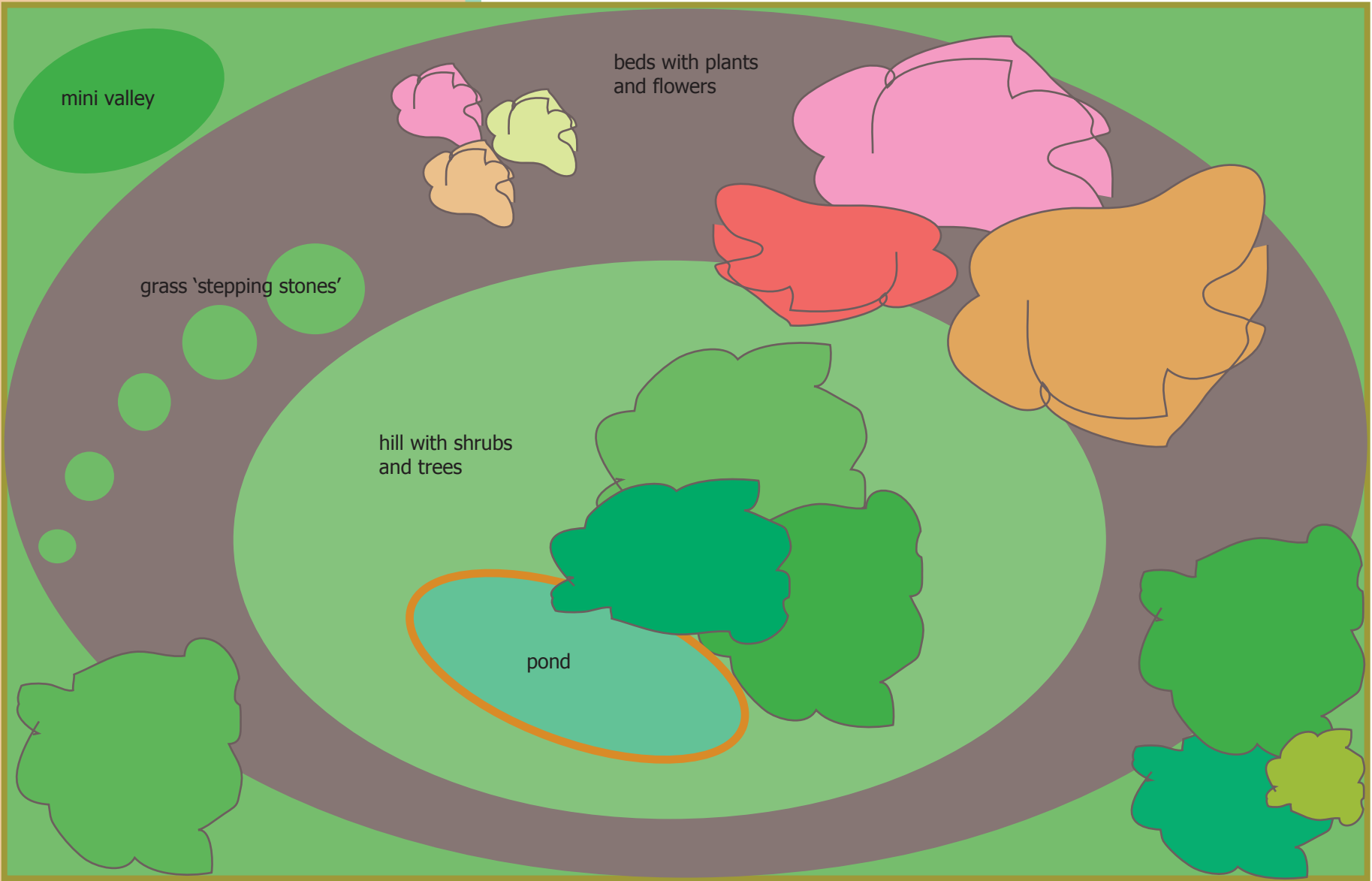
One of the single most exciting and immediate things you can do to make your garden sing is rebel against tradition and bung things in the middle.

Not *right* in the middle. That'll send you into symmetry overdrive. Just discard the notion that unless you have a grassy bit surrounded by flowerbeds, the world will end.

Tip: move cut-out paper circles around on a piece of paper the same scale as your garden until you make a design you like.

Here are a few ways to break the mould...







Groups of planters and pots look fantastic placed in the middle, much better than lining them up along the edge of your garden with military precision.

# working hard behind the scenes

“Wow... the power of colour!”

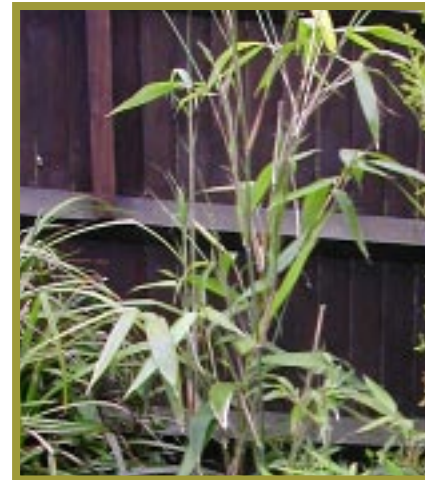
# 10

## walls and fences

Make your backdrop earn its keep with bold, deep colour.

If you paint your garden walls or fences a pale colour, or white, your space will look smaller. And it'll make your lovely rich greenery look wishy-washy. Wood preservatives and paints come in a wonderful array of vibrant colors. The best colours to show off your plants are:

- rich dark browns
- velvety aubergines and purples
- very deep pinks, reds, greens and blues



# just green...

"Feast your eyes on a world of green"

## control your horizon

Make a big green box.

Your garden looks gorgeous. But your neighbours' horrible greenhouse sticks up above your fence and spoils your view. Aargh!

Grow evergreen climbers and creepers up your walls and fences and all you'll see when you sit down is a sea of pure green. No interruptions. Climbers and creepers make great hiding and living spaces for wildlife too.

Some creepers smell fantastic. Others have amazing flowers. Plant different perennial climbers amongst your evergreens for an ever changing year long display of colour and scent.

Use tall evergreens to mask prominent eyesores. There are also some fantastic large bamboos around. They grow high very quickly. And some do well in pots.



# short, medium and tall

"Plenty of exciting variety to keep your eyes entertained"

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## use height

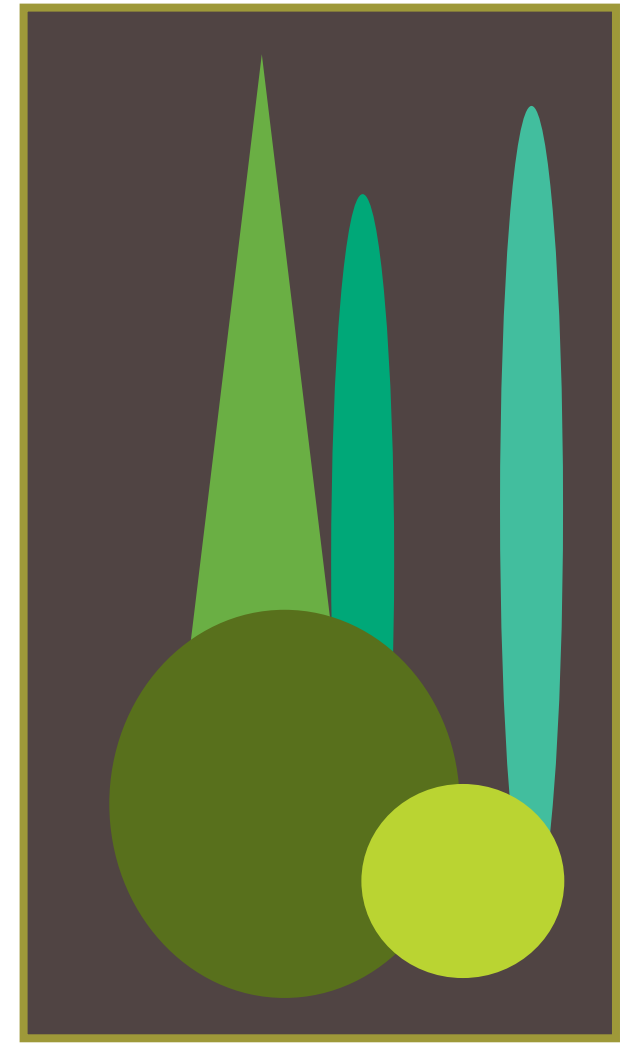
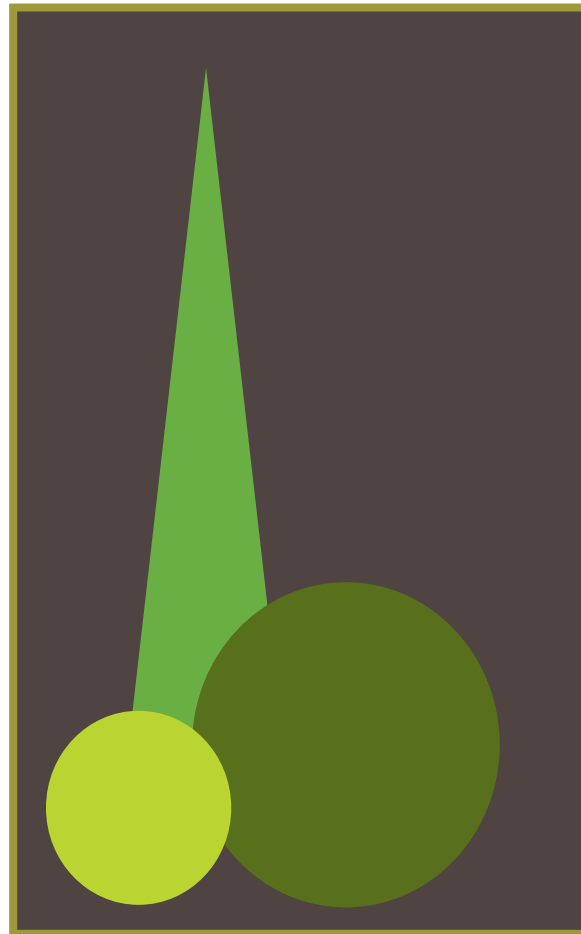
Group different heights together for visual interest.

Another wonderfully simple way to add instant design oomph is grouping plants of different heights together.

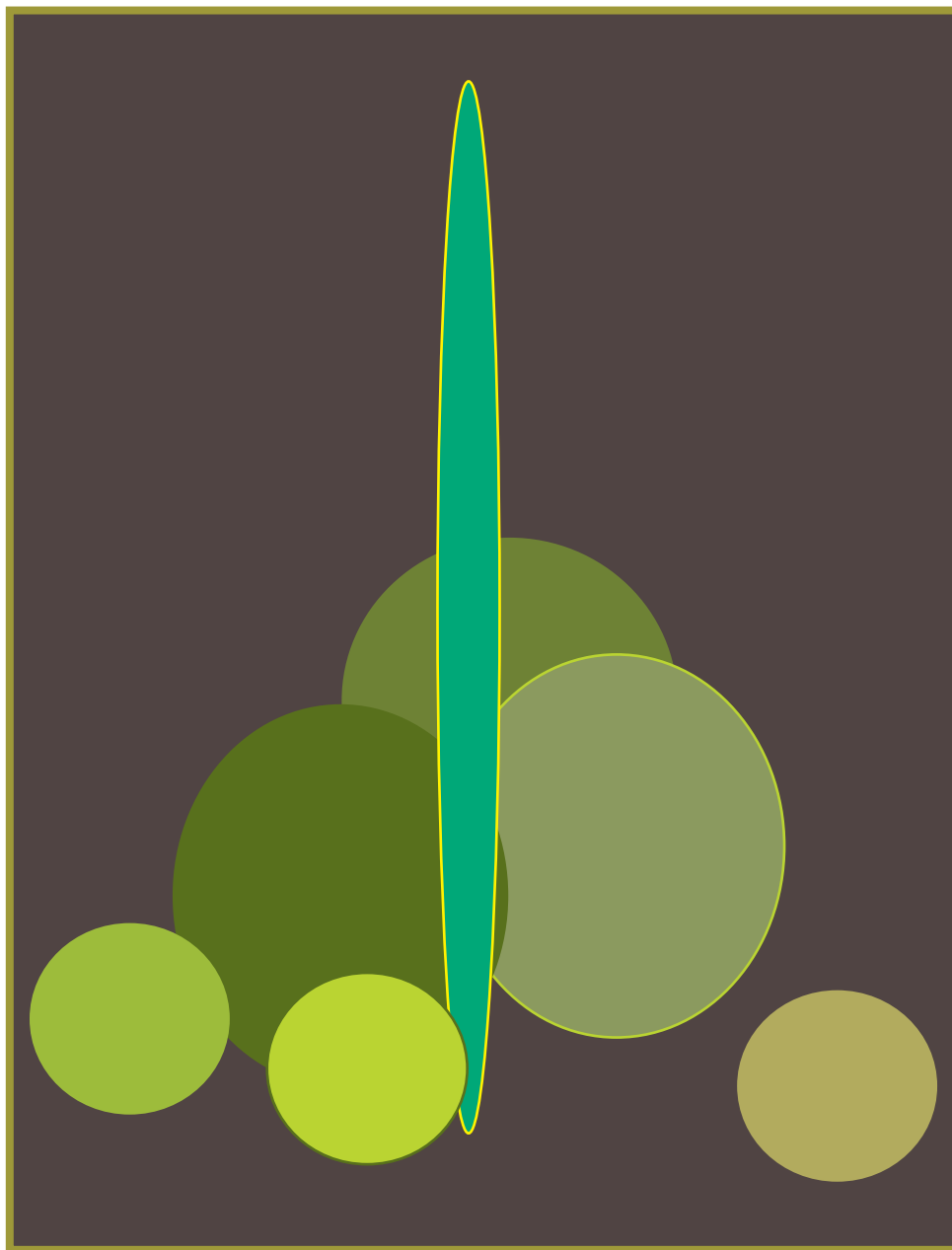
You can't go far wrong with short, medium and tall.

Arranging even numbers of things into pleasing patterns is a real challenge. So make groups of three, five or seven.

Some examples:



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# make mystery

"Break the rules. Use depth to make unexpected views."

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## create depth

Instead of planting beds with tall stuff at the back and low at the front, do the opposite for variety.

This is a great way to create visual interest and create a variety of conditions for planting. Plant taller stuff at the front of wide beds and tuck shorter plants further back.

You get brilliant views through tall foliage to shady areas, perfect for forest floor plants that enjoy dappled sunlight.



# neglect your lawn

"You can't beat a nice weedy lawn."

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## bonsai your weeds!

Save yourself endless hours of faff, gallons of revolting chemicals, water and a whole load of stress.

Most lawns are stuffed with weeds. Getting rid of them and *keeping* them at bay is an ongoing battle. Mown weeds learn to grow smaller to survive. They go bonsai! Eventually you end up with a really exciting lawn full of miniature local wild stuff. Truncated violets, short dandelions, squat clover and more make a gorgeous colourful display throughout the year. It's much more drought-tolerant than grass. And it's great for wildlife.



# ponds up, ponds down and ponds in pots

“Even tiny pools attract wildlife.”

# 16

## ponds

Five ways to make ponds...

- dig down to create ground level ponds: circular or square for a dramatic contemporary look, random curved shapes for a more natural style
- build upwards to create walled ponds: any shape, size, height and depth - oval, square, diamond, ellipse...
- fill large planters to create deep pools
- disguise low cost black plastic planters with walls of rock or bury them in the earth and take your turf right to the edge
- fill small planters and make mini-ponds to scatter throughout the garden, some in sunlight and some in shade



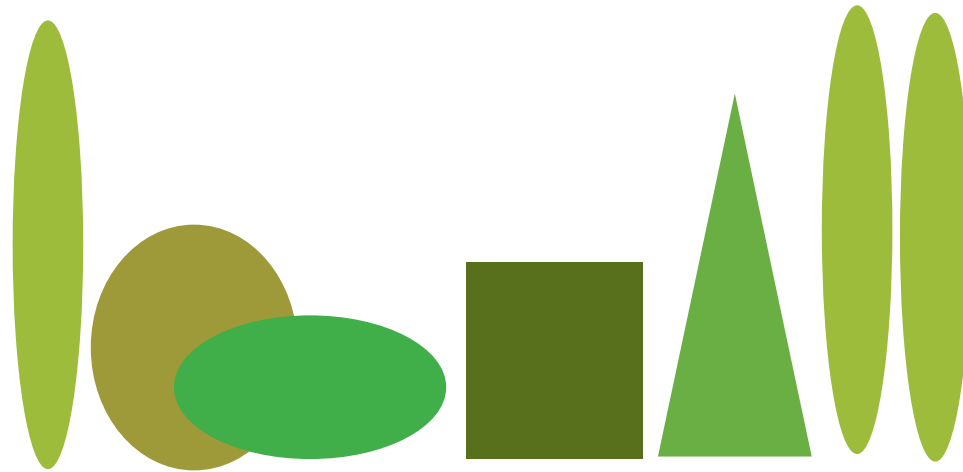
round,  
fat, thin,  
squat...

"Mix and match shapes."

## shapes

Group different shaped plants together for a dramatic impact.

Or repeat the same shape 3,5, 7 or 9 times to make a different but equally exciting statement



# a shady, dappled forest floor

“Cool, ferny, winding paths.”

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## secret pathways

Make secret pathways for cool, dappled shade. A great place to grow ferns and forest plants, even if it's only a short six foot stretch.

- Plant a winding row of shrubs parallel to your fence so the fence acts as one side of the secret pathway
- or plant two rows for your secret pathway to run between
- or bend willow withies to make arches
- or grow evergreen climbers into and over arches
- Add roses, honeysuckle, clematis etc for extra colour in spring and summer
- Pave it with odds and ends of rock, patio stone, pebbles or gravel, or turf it with soft green grass
- Put a surprise at the end of the path: a view, a sculptural chunk of wood, shady seat, feature plant or pond



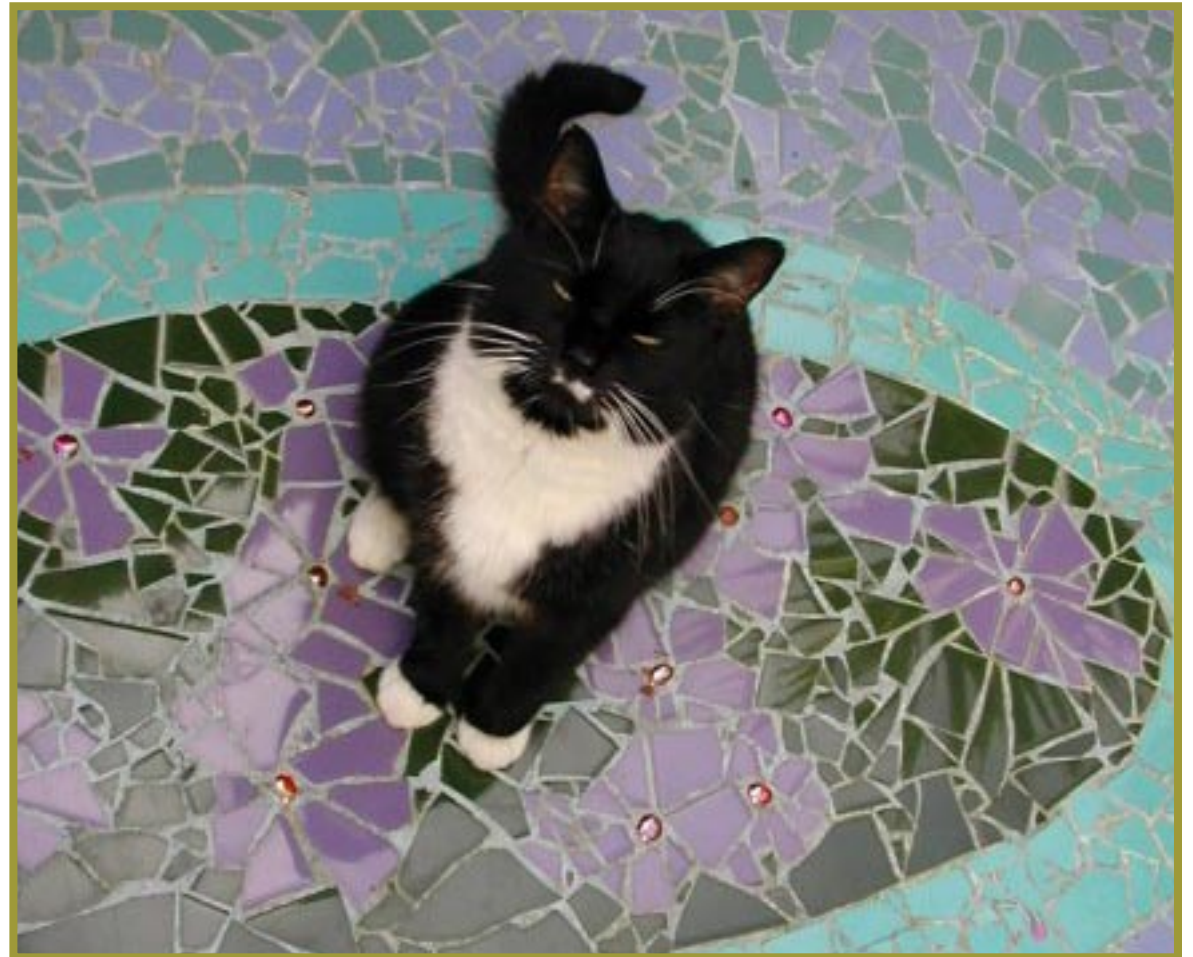
# you don't need to be arty...

"Just choose your favourite colours - you can't go wrong"

## simple, stunning mosaics

Mosaic is a brilliant way to make a feature of walls, stepping stones, patios and ceramic planters.

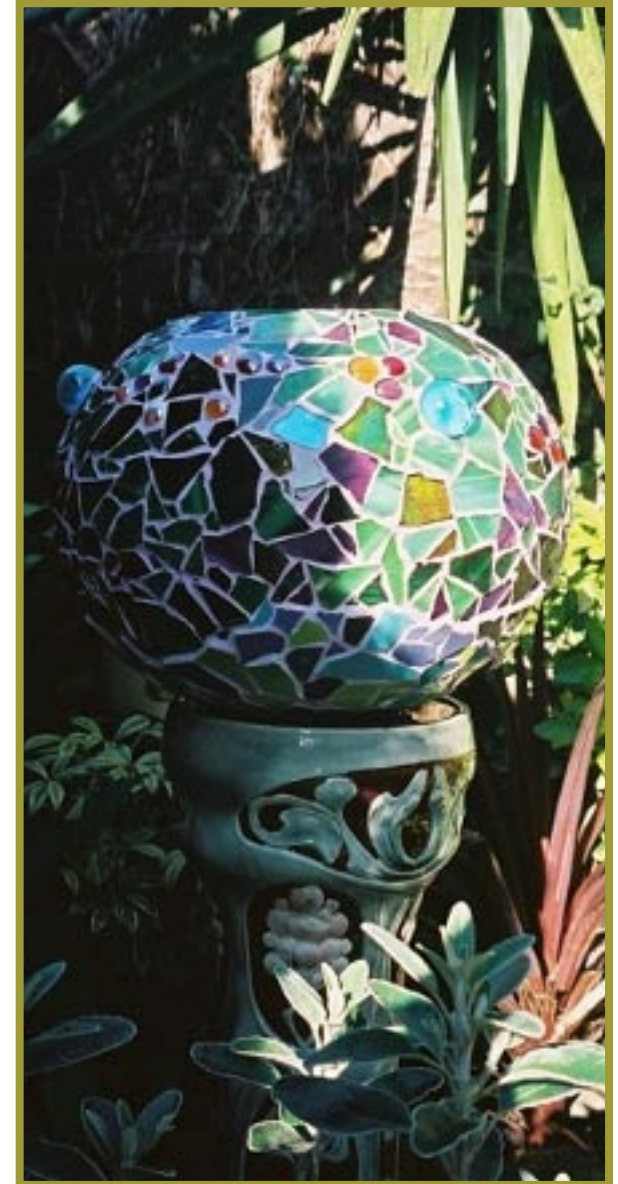
- random patterns are gorgeous. You don't need to be an artist. Use your favourite colours and you can't go wrong
- use broken mirror, tiles, plates or coloured glass. Johnsons bathroom tiles are perfect



- put your tiles in a bag and smash them up with a hammer
- make sharp edges safe - add a few handfuls of sand to water, swirl the broken glass or tiles for two minutes and all the scary bits are magically made smooth
- use outdoor grout and adhesive
- coloured tiles chip in a hard frost but glass and mirror are fine
- use white adhesive for glass mosaics so the colour shines through



- make a stunning sculpture by mosaicing a large, rounded rock or a group of three rocks



# piles, stacks and standing stones

“Add drama and variety with rocks, pebbles and stones”

## rocks, stones and pebbles

You can have all sorts of fun with stone.

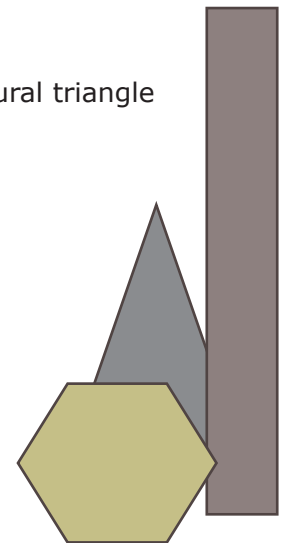
Random heaps of rocks look interesting and make great hiding places for insects and amphibians as well as for interesting, wild, self-seeding plants.

Some tips and ideas:

- pile stones and pebbles into winding, sinuous patterns
- make your own mini stone circle or monolith
- create a loose circular dome of rocks, stones and pebbles



- stack large, flat stones or rocks into a tower and put a planter on top - No More Nails glue is brilliant for fixing them together firmly, as is sand and cement
- stand big boulders in sculptural groups of 3, 5 or 7
- use local rocks that you find in the soil to edge your beds
- group three large different shaped and sized rocks into a sculptural triangle



# reflect light and create illusions

"Mirrors throw light around in unexpected ways for surprise views"

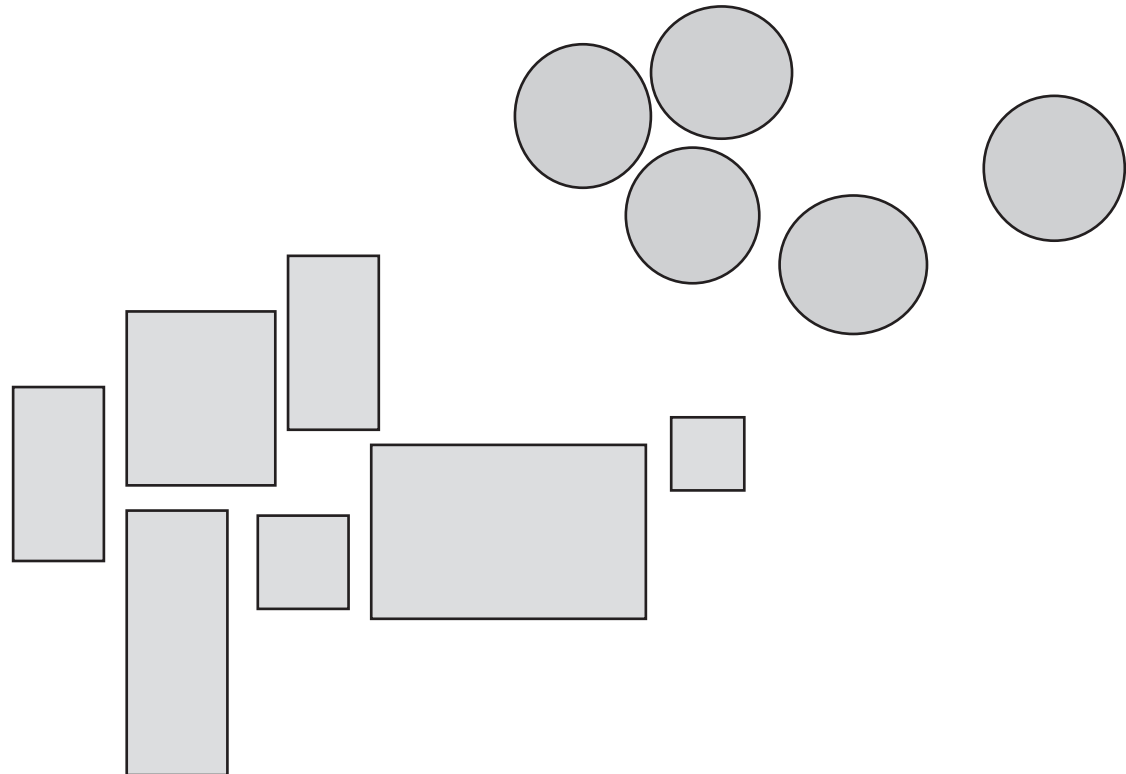
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## mirrors

How to use mirrors without making your garden look naff!

Mirrors are tricky. They can so easily look naff. Here are some tips to help you use mirrors effectively without making your garden look tacky or childish:

- cover a brick or stone wall in mirror mosaic - use black or dark grey outdoor grout for extra drama. Mirror is 100% weather resistant
- attach interesting groups of 3, 5 or 7 round mirrors, different shaped mirrors or different sized mirrors to walls or fences with No More Nails glue
- place large mirrors strategically in unexpected places like at the end of a secret pathway, at the bottom of the garden or around a sharp corner so they reflect plants back at you and give the illusion of extra space. Grow climbers around the edges so the mirrors eventually blend into the background. Ivy is great because it's so easy to trim



# shaping plants to do what you want

"If you want an arch, gently bend your plants so they form one."

## weaving, trimming and bending

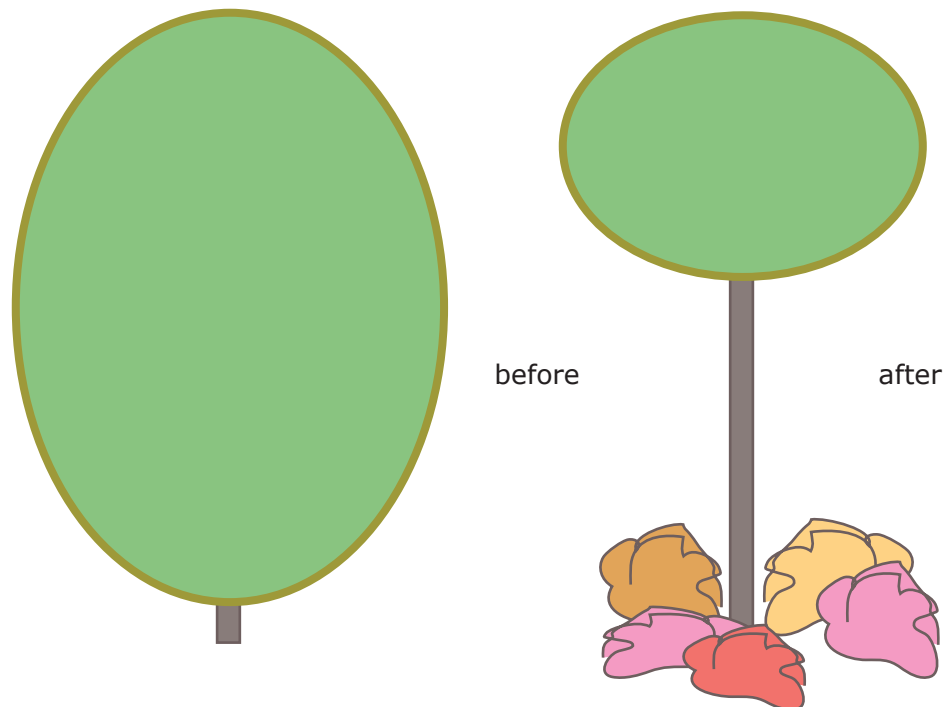
Most plants are bendy... so bend them!

As long as you're careful and treat them gently, you can bend most plants to your will. Some are more flexible than others. Test them and see.

Willows are just about the bendiest of all. Use willow withies to create all sorts of wonderful swirly, sculptural shapes. Make living willow huts, dens and shelters. Use it to form the basis of green archways and cool tunnels.

Topiary sounds daunting until you think of it as simply trimming. Most bushes, trees, shrubs and creepers can be trimmed - try it and see what happens. As a general rule cutting back plants makes them thicker and more lush. If a plant's getting out of hand or sprawling, just trim it into a neat shape. It's actually quite difficult to kill plants. They're incredibly resilient. Because they almost always grow back it isn't the end of the world if your trimming goes pear shaped.

Tip: trim blobby bushes from the bottom up to make a lollipop shape and free loads of space for planting underneath as well as making interesting views. Here's what I mean:



# strange, weird and wonderful

"Some weeds are gorgeous. And they're free."

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## weeds

There's a wealth of free plants in the countryside.

Best of all, because they're growing locally to you, weeds should also fare well in your garden.

Most people spend a lot of time and effort getting rid of weeds. Some weeds are ugly or madly rampant, worth digging out or pulling up. Others are absolutely delightful.

A short walk along the verge of a country road will provide loads of brilliant finds, most of which grow wonderfully well from seed. Just chuck the seeds around casually and they'll grow.

Bindweed is dreadfully invasive but as long as you keep it under control by planting it in a pot it delivers a stunning display of delicate, white, trumpet-shaped flowers.

Some of the prettiest common UK wild flowers and plants are:

- Ragged Robin
- Columbine
- Kingcup
- Vetch
- Ladies Slipper
- Campion
- Field poppies
- Foxgloves
- Ferns and grasses
- Violets
- Daisies
- Wild roses
- Cow parsley



# smooth, warm, sinuous wood

“Why spend a fortune on garden sculpture when you’ve got gorgeous bits of wood?”

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## wood

Use wood to create fabulous garden sculptures.

Driftwood is delicious stuff. Worn planks and chunks of tree trunk are just as lovely. They provide a brilliant home for all sorts of mini-beasts and often, as they rot, become covered with colourful fungi and lichens.

- group interesting chunks of wood together in 3s, 5s and 7s
- use a single huge piece of wood as a dramatic statement
- pile up tree trunk sections on top of one another to create a plinth, then grow climbers up it for an ever-changing living sculpture
- use pieces of wood to edge your beds or pond
- even raw, new wood will quickly wear to a mellow silver-grey or grey-brown



# be happy in your garden

"If you want to be happy for a short time,  
get drunk.

If you want to be happy for a long time,  
fall in love.

If you want to be happy for your whole  
life, do gardening"

## happiness is green

There's something about green-ness that soothes the spirit.

I spend hours on end in the garden. Intending to pop out and do a quick bit of weeding in the morning, I eventually surface to find that the sun's gone down and I'm working in the dark. Contented, happy and fulfilled.

Any garden is powerful medicine. But a *beautiful* garden is pure magic.

Here's to many happy hours of peace, joy and pleasure in your lovely new outdoor space.

Kate Naylor

