

COTTAGE GARDEN RESTORATION

Whilst Romantic Victorian and Edwardian "Chocolate Box" watercolours provide an aesthetically pleasing inspiration for modern cottage gardens, realists rapidly identify the falsehoods portrayed by these overly romantic artists in a bid to attract their socially blinkered patrons. In reality a cottage garden reflected their functional and utilitarian lifestyle.

In designing a Cottage Garden we must decide whether we are accurately restoring a period garden, imitating the "Chocolate Box" type watercolour or constructing a modern garden with a cottage ambience. The answer will lie between the stage of restoration or modernisation of the dwelling and the examination of our own image of the finished product. Regardless of which, the overall 'feel' should remain similar and the following principles should be of assistance.

Countless books purport to detail and determine what exactly constitutes a "Cottage Garden" but most, if not all, focus on the planting, therefore I shall initially focus this article on the hard elements of the landscaping.

Pathways, driveways, seating areas and internal walls provide the structure to the garden producing naturally divisions and backdrops to the soft elements of the landscape. Existing 'authentic' features should always be retained if at all possible, if modifications are unavoidable they should be in keeping and kept to a minimum.

The first clue to creating an authentic 'feel' to the garden is to ensure that every feature is utilitarian and justifiable. Pathways should lead somewhere and take an obvious route. To provide interest and further planting potential, pathways may divert around an existing substantial feature. The design 'secret' is to place an object adjacent to the apex of a curve, once it is determined, to give the impression of the object pre-dating the pathway. Similarly patios and seating areas should be given a history even if it is a fiction.

Secondly, the scale of the pathways are much smaller and narrower than the usual 1.5 metres, reduced down to perhaps 0.9m, thus creating a more intimate atmosphere. Driveways and car parking areas detract from this effect and consequently we should not attempt to pass them off as wide footpaths. A more realistic historical analogy would be a cart track or stable yard. It follows that the design should reflect this with the possible use of troughs or redundant farmyard paraphernalia underplanted by herbaceous plants.

Finally, the materials used should wherever possible be contemporary with the period of the property, of a similar nature and colouring, be utilitarian and most of all indigenous to the area. If you wish to create a path which appears a century old, lay it on a soft base with a slight concave cross section and to complete the effect, top dress the surface with topsoil, working it into the cracks and sow with a grass or wildflower seed mix.

To summarise, the framework of a cottage garden should be utilitarian, indigenous, justifiable and of an appropriate scale, but do not forget that rules are there to be broken. It is only through innovation and rule breaking that garden design develops.

Gardenesque provide a design, construction, maintenance and advisory service, plus a Gardening Club each Friday at 7.30 p.m. in Shipton Village Hall. They can be contacted on 01993 831587.

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