

## IS LANDSCAPING RELEVANT TO AN URBAN GARDEN?

No natural landscape can ever be reproduced because particular combinations of meteorological, biological, geological and human influences are never likely to be repeated. The concept of a natural landscape can therefore never be absolute, and on an island like Great Britain where every part of the terrain has at some time in the past been altered by human activity, landscaping is best seen as an element of land management, as with control of coastal erosion or estuarine flow. One aspect of landscaping is controversial, and that is aesthetic landscaping, whose origins are often associated with Capability Brown, who thought he was 'improving' the British landscape. His actions are now being reassessed, amid accusations of destruction of the natural environment, because he worked on such a large scale. Now we find that so-called landscape gardeners are invited to ply their trade in small urban gardens, but is landscaping appropriate in such small spaces?

Any degree of earth movement disrupts and inverts soil structure and populations of soil organisms, like redistributing the residents of a tower block. It takes years for soil strata, soil communities, and food-chains to re-establish, and for the terrestrial organisms that depend upon them, both animal and plant, to recolonise. Fungal recycling has also got to restart from scratch, which may reduce soil fertility for years. This scenario is what will happen in your garden if you undertake landscaping. A similar situation obtains in allotments, which are the least natural of gardening plots. Massive soil movement and treatment is done to prepare for crops, which create a soil invertebrate refugee crisis that will not see restoration while intensive use of the plot continues. It is these valuable soil communities that pay the price for the desire to grow prize-winning pumpkins.

A complete garden make-over may seem an attractive prospect, but after the job is done you may be left with plants you have never seen before, all alien or modern cultivars, and some possibly short-lived or untried as long-term residents under British conditions. Any established native plants and the cultivars that have been conditioned over centuries, with their thriving micro-communities, will have gone. By the time a landscaped garden has matured in the ecological sense you may well be ready to move house, and you will not see the benefits of the changes, if indeed there are any that one can name for a plant community less stable than what was there before. What is visually appealing is judged by totally different standards to what is ecologically desirable in the area where the garden is situated, and that is the dichotomy that the garden owner must resolve.

Just as landscaping is an artificial process, so traditional gardening consists largely of artificial practices. Whether your garden has been landscaped or not, before you put a fork in the ground, or take hold of your trusty pruners, think what would be normal in relatively unspoiled countryside. Does any digging or pruning happen there? Of course not. Many jobs done in the garden are for the personal vanity of the garden owner, and are of no benefit to the garden itself, including its wildlife. In fact, many of these jobs disturb the comfort of wildlife and drive mobile wildlife away. If trees lean or fall over in strong wind nobody in the countryside props or saws them up, so just leave them. How will our woodpeckers survive if all dead trees are removed? Thinking in this way will greatly reduce your work and create a more interesting wildlife-friendly garden. If your garden looks like your lounge made ready for a visit by Great Aunt Agatha, with fluffed-up cushions and not a speck of dust in sight, you do not have a natural gardener's mindset, and you will probably have more wildlife in your lounge than in your garden. Almost nothing that is done in a typical British neat and tidy garden would ever happen in a natural landscape, which makes it all the more remarkable that wildlife ever ventures in.

Am I arguing for overgrown gardens? Certainly not. A 'no grass' garden is relatively easy to manage, and yet British gardeners have mostly not discovered this yet. A garden can be teeming with wildlife yet be totally under control, with no areas where rampant plants have taken over. In a confined space like an urban garden, highly invasive plants can cause problems, by overwhelming less vigorous plants, swamping large areas of ground, and reducing biodiversity. These must be dealt with, for your sake and

for the sake of your neighbours. Then, you can pursue a policy of minimal intervention to maintain variety of species, habitats, food-chains, and cycles of growth and decay, and you will, over time, discover that to a large extent a natural garden manages itself.

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