

THE FILET

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ARCHANT LIFE

Kirstie Allsopp
home truths

Restoration drama
Kensal House

Thoughts
on
buildings
Alain de Botton

Seasonal style

Philip Nixon looks at what's new in the world of gardens

Behind the gimmicks and pyrotechnics of TV gardening lies the real world of contemporary garden design, which represents a more understated and elegant reality for today's urban gardens. Undoubtedly the overriding theme in garden design is the use of the garden as another room. The garden is no longer something to stare out at through a rain streaked window.

Light

Lighting is so important to a well-designed garden. Indeed, many town gardens can look so much better at night as the lighting gives the space an incredibly intimate mood and allows you to use the garden when you most want to; in the evening after work on your own or perhaps entertaining others. But keep the light white. Don't be tempted to use coloured lighting – it just does not work.

Heat

You don't need to get cold. Gas heaters come in all shapes and sizes. The built in, outdoor fireplace can also have an amazing effect. If you use a gas fire it can be as easy and fuss free as anything inside the house. But try to integrate heating into the design rather than leave it as a lonely (but tall!) mushroom standing in the corner.

Water

Moving water is not always the best answer. Still, dark, reflecting pools are more likely to work in a small, quiet private space. But water is still essential in any garden if the budget can run to it. People are naturally drawn to water and flat, still water has a particularly calming effect.

Materials

The most important thing is to maintain balance in use of materials.

Last year at the Chelsea Flower show I used corrugated aluminium panels. Those who saw the garden were almost unaware of what material it was but it worked to create a calming geometry and was a great backdrop to the naturalistic planting. In a private garden I recently used horizontal battens of crisply planed hard wood with aluminium vertical supports that worked very well. The aluminium was a small, barely visible detail but it lifted the woodwork. But don't let the materials overtake the space. It is important to limit the number of materials to three or at most four and keep things in balance.

Colour

Black is the new black! Interior designers have gone black crazy and it works very well in the garden too. Black works so well as a backdrop to green foliage. Like everything, it is important to not go crazy with it. It is great as a detail.

Furniture

Garden furniture is no longer plastic and bought from B&Q. Garden designers are now more likely to be seen researching furniture at the Milan furniture fair or indeed designing the furniture themselves to fit the design concept of the garden.

Planting

Foliage has become so much more important than flower colour. Planting design has become bolder and simpler. Big broad leaves next to tall strappy leaves for example. If you clutter up a small space with too many different species the garden will look busy and messy. Not what you need when relaxing after work in your garden with a glass of something cool. ■



Philip won a gold medal at the Chelsea Flower show in 2005 and is designing a show garden sponsored by Savills for Chelsea 2006. His garden design practice is based in west London with work carried out mostly in London but also further a field in the West Country and in Italy. Philip Nixon Design (020 7371 0066; info@philipnixondesign.com)