

# Selecting plants

At this stage of the design process you should be getting a clearer idea of the look you want to create in your garden, and thinking about the plants you'll need. Designers often talk about using a "palette" of plants, as if they were paints, and, in many

ways, creating a beautiful garden is like painting – except that you are visualizing three dimensions, and your materials, being living, growing things, aren't static. Use the ideas outlined here to help you draw up an inspired planting scheme.

## CHOOSING A PLANTING PALETTE

Focusing your ideas at an early stage in the design process narrows your choices and helps to guide you towards choosing the right plants. It also minimizes expensive mistakes. Sourcing plants is much easier when you have a specific theme, perhaps a favourite colour, or style in mind. A cottage garden, for example, will give you the scope to mix and match a wide range of plants in an informal setting. Something more modern, on the other hand, will demand that you use a limited number of plants in a more organized way. Designing a low-maintenance garden filled with evergreens will, again, focus your choice (see pp.126–233 for garden styles).



**▲ TROPICAL COLLECTION**  
A flamboyant display of annuals with hardy and tender perennials is high-maintenance, but the results are exciting and worth the effort.

**< EASY-CARE SCHEME**  
The established hardy shrubs and perennials in this formal planting require minimal maintenance. Their structure extends the seasonal appeal right through late autumn and into winter.

## FUNCTIONAL PLANTING

Certain garden features design themselves by default. For example, an exposed garden will need a windbreak, while an overlooked plot must have screening for privacy. Other design considerations might include fragrance by the front door, or a tree by the patio to provide shade on a hot sunny day. The design of such schemes is guided by their specific use, and this may limit your choice of suitable plants. The list below details the different design functions plants can fulfil, some of which may be pertinent to your plot.



- 1 Provide shelter
- 2 Create a boundary
- 3 Produce food to eat
- 4 Offer shade
- 5 Perfume the garden
- 6 Screen neighbours
- 7 Hide an ugly view
- 8 Provide a wildlife habitat

### SHELTERED SEATING AREA

Hedges do pretty much the same job as a fence or wall, but they have the edge when it comes to absorbing sound and wind. They also create a much softer effect.

## LAYERS OF INTEREST

When space is limited, try to select plants that have a long season of interest. As well as those that flower over a long period, there are also many shrubs and perennials with colourful autumn foliage, structural winter stems, and spring buds. Precious few plants will fulfil all your demands, but look for those that tick the most boxes.



**▲ STRUCTURE AND COLOUR**  
The most useful plants here (peonies) work on several levels, providing structure and colour. In spring, their red shoots are followed by lush green foliage, then flowers.



**▲ FOLIAGE AND FORM**  
A closer look at a peony reveals how its flowers and foliage combine to make it stand out as an individual. Peonies often provide vibrant autumn leaf colour too.



**▲ FLOWER IN FOCUS**  
Close up you can appreciate the folded and crushed petals of this peony's double blooms. With other plants, such as passion flowers, the detail is in the intricate stamens.

## PLANT TYPES AND THEIR DESIGN USES

There is, without doubt, a plant for virtually every situation, be it a tree, shrub, perennial, bedding plant, or bulb. When you're working out a planting plan, consider how best to use each plant, and ask yourself if it will create the look you are after, as well as how it will work next to other plants in the border.



**MIDRANGE PLANTS**  
These make up the majority of the plants in a garden and include perennials and small shrubs. The substance of most plantings, they fill the gaps between bigger, more structural elements.



**STRUCTURAL PLANTS**  
Plants can be structural on two levels. They can define the limits and framework of a garden, or the term can describe the plant itself, for example, if it has large paddle-shaped leaves.



**FOCAL PLANTS**  
Like ornaments, these are visual treats for the garden. It could be their distinctive colour, leaf shape, or stature that makes them stand out from other plants in the border.



**GROUND COVER**  
People tend to think of ground-cover plants as being workmanlike. But there's no reason why they can't do a great job of being ornamental while smothering weeds as well.



**SEASONAL INTEREST**  
The changing seasons make gardening a real pleasure. Choosing plants that provide an ever-changing display prolongs a garden's interest, changing its character as time passes.