

Using structural plants

Structural plants are the backbone of a garden, forming the framework and helping to anchor other plants within a defined space. A beech hedge encircling a garden works in this way, as does a low box hedge around a border. By their sheer physical

presence, individual structural plants – such as a *Gunnera* or *Cordylone* – can give focus to a planting scheme. Identifying key plants and deciding where to position them is the first step towards organizing a planting scheme for any garden.

CREATING A FRAMEWORK

Hedging is ideal for defining the boundaries of a large- or medium-sized garden. It also provides shelter and increases privacy. Strike a balance between evergreen and deciduous species: evergreens are effective year-round screens, but because of the low winter sun they can cast a dense gloomy shade, while deciduous hedges allow in some light for most of the year, and can offer seasonal colour, too.

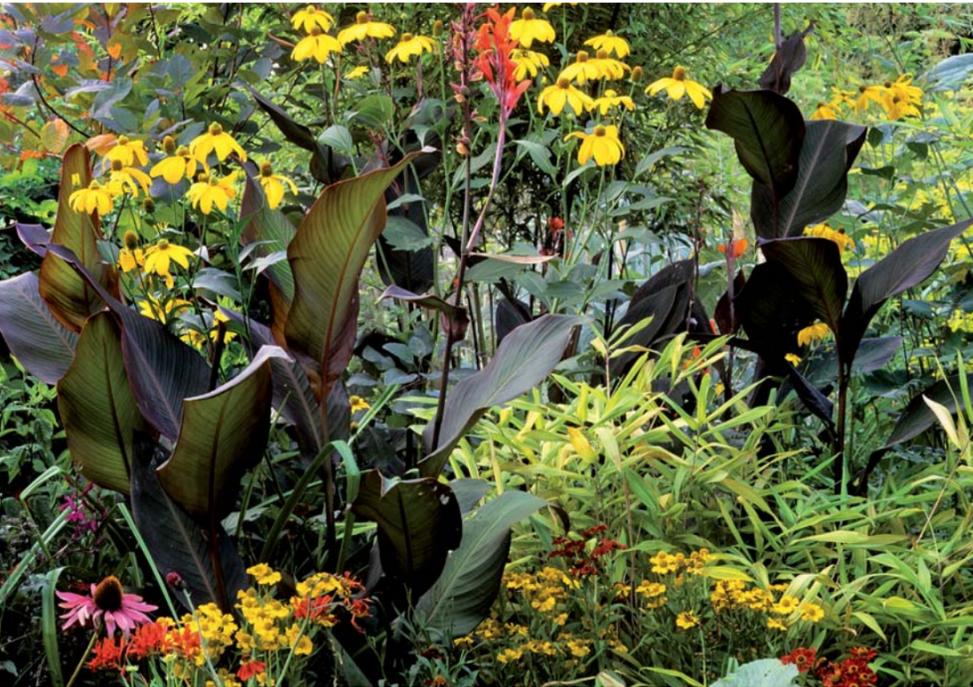
Use structural plants within the garden to frame (or block out) views and to lead your eye around the design. Shrubs in a border, perhaps forming a low hedge, provide a setting for midrange plants, and repeating planting helps to create visual reference points. When planting trees, consider their eventual size and the shade they will cast.



^ **HEDGES FOR DEFINITION**
Hedging plants, both small and large scale (in this instance, beech), can be used to define the internal structure of a garden.



> **STRUCTURE IN A BORDER**
Here, green and purple maples (*Acer*) frame a stone statue, while the sculptural *Gunnera* at the back forms a focal point.



^ **STRUCTURAL ACCENTS**
Clumps of bold foliage (here cannas) in a busy planting scheme act as a foil for slim-stemmed flowers and provide structural accents in a border.

TEMPORARY STRUCTURE

While the main framework of a garden should be permanent, much of the planting within it is seasonal, emerging in spring and dying down in winter. Some perennials provide vital structure for all but a few weeks in spring, when, as is the case with many handsome grasses, their stems are cut to make way for new growth. Large, shapely foliage plants, such as *Miscanthus*, act as an anchor for smaller species, or contrast with leafy flowering shrubs like *Deutzia*. Airy plantings also benefit from the occasional strong shape as a visual counterbalance to their wispy forms.



> **RECONSTRUCTING NATURE**
Using plants in broad interlocking swathes prevents an over-fussy effect, and the resulting planting, although strongly structured, looks natural.

YEAR-ROUND INTEREST

While evergreens may seem the obvious choice for year-round interest, visually they can be leaden and static. Deciduous trees and shrubs, on the other hand, may perform for several seasons, with new foliage in spring, followed, perhaps, by flowers, and then berries in late summer and vibrant leaf colour in autumn. In addition, trees often have a beautiful winter silhouette. Many species of *Sorbus* offer these benefits, and are ideal four-season trees for a small garden.

A winter garden may not offer the obvious charms of summer, but there can still be sufficient interest to draw your eye into the garden – perhaps even enticing you to pull on a coat and venture outside.



> **COLOUR AND FORM**
If you mix deciduous and evergreen species, the garden in winter can be both structurally interesting and surprisingly colourful.

∨ **SPRING OFFERING**
Trees form an important element of the spring landscape, some offering blossom, others vibrant green new growth.

∨ ∨ **FORMAL TOPIARY**
Formal planting is the ultimate in structural design. This row of clipped evergreen trees is balanced and restful, and the effect can be enjoyed during all four seasons.

