

VIEWPOINT

What do you think? Why are some older gardens intrinsically more enjoyable than new ones? Which gardens created in the last 20 years are worthy of note? How often do you change elements of your outdoor space?

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Age before beauty?

The much-vaunted quality of age is seen as highly desirable in most gardens, but does our romantic view of the past mean many modern gardens of worth are unfairly disregarded?

JAMES ALEXANDER SINCLAIR asks if age is, frankly, overrated

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEIL HEPWORTH

THERE IS A MOMENT in the lives of all controversial public figures (Tony Benn or footballer Vinnie Jones, for example) when they cease to be a threat and become – often to their annoyance – national treasures. It is the same thing with gardens: if you stop 100 random gardeners in the supermarket and ask them which is their favourite garden, then I give you my guarantee (backed by a shiny pound coin of my own money) that 99 percent of them will choose a garden that has been around for at least half a century.

Age is deemed an important quality as it implies something has been tried in the fires of life and come through unscathed. By contrast, anything created in the last few decades is often regarded as a bit parvenu and untrustworthy. Should gardens really be honoured just because they are aged and respectable? Are newer gardens not just as beautiful and inspiring? Can gardens that, like James Dean, live fast, die young and are then bulldozed in exchange for a newer model be taken as seriously?

Gardens for now

All the great gardens of the past 1,000 years have been constructed on a grand scale ('Capability' Brown never troubled himself with a patio garden in Hackney), put together over many years by generations of the same family. Most people did not have gardens: they had back yards. Perhaps the greatest revolution we have seen in gardening over the last century is that now almost everybody can have their own garden: washhouses and

lavatories have come into the house and the back yards have become gardens. The difference in scale means today these gardens are sometimes treated like another room to be redecorated and refurbished according to whim: in these cases gardens are less about horticulture and more of a lifestyle extension. The look often changes as the fashion of the time dictates. People, especially in urban areas, do not tend stay in the same house for a lifetime and it is probable that each time a house is sold the garden will be refurbished,

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at least partially, according to the tastes of the new owners.

This is no bad thing: just because something is old there is no reason why it is any good. I have wandered round enough historic gardens to realise that many of them are tired and badly designed – a lot of energy is often expended by some well-meaning people in order to preserve the mediocre. The idea of a disposable garden may stick in the craws of some gardeners but, in these days of distractions and little time, it is an attractive option for some people. Although I, personally, have always thought that one of the

most important things about gardening is patience, I can, having made many of them, understand the thrill of creating an instant garden. What was a barren site weeks ago is now alive with newly-laid old stone, instant hedges and towering trees – true, the trees may be planted a little too closely and the herbaceous planting will be a tangle in a year or so but (right now) everything is flawless. The owner can carry his gin-and-tonic into a perfectly-formed garden.

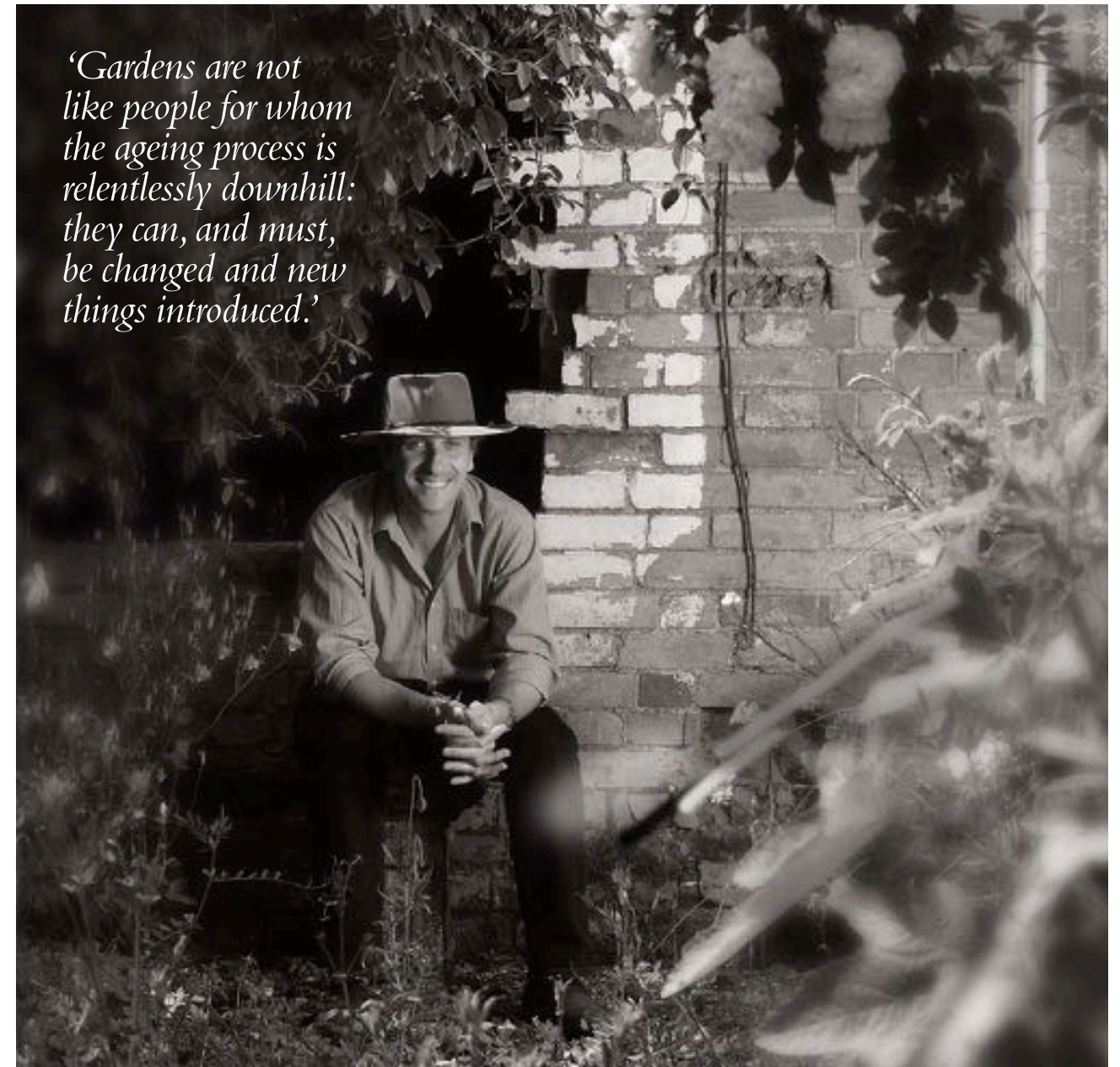
Revolution or evolution?

The danger with this sort of garden is that, while conforming to the aspirations of the householder, it may ignore the simple truth that a garden should always be in keeping with its surroundings. If you have a modern house then balustrading and Elizabethan knot gardens may well look foolish. You should take the opportunity to make a modern garden using new ideas and new materials. If your house is older and surrounded by well-settled landscape then you have two choices: either to maintain the status quo and preserve what you have – the lawn remaining the same size, the borders containing the same plants and the paths leading to the same places – or to slowly develop and change things. The first option is safe but dreary; the second much more interesting. Gardens that do not change run a risk of stagnation: the change does not have to be terribly dramatic but an occasional facelift will help keep an established garden fresh, glamorous and appealing.

Gardens are not like people for whom the ageing process is relentlessly downhill: they can, and must, be changed and new things introduced. This is the only way a garden, no matter how historic or respectable, can be kept alive and exciting. There should always be room for the new: there is no earthly reason why modern materials (such as stainless steel and glass) should not sit comfortably with mellow stonework provided that the design is intelligent and sympathetic.

The secret of success and any chance of longevity in a garden has to be good design. This is not necessarily a skill confined to the professional – many outstanding gardens exist

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that are totally untouched by any sort of garden designer – but the best gardens are a combination of good structure, sympathetic layout and sensitive planting.


The effects of fashion

Like most things in life, garden design is subject to fashion. Some fashion is popular and successful and some – as those of us who have photographic evidence of the 1970s know full well – is not. Over the years styles have come and gone and only the best remain; anything that is faintly gimmicky tends to fall early. It is almost always the case that the simpler the idea the longer it will

last: some ideas will become 'contemporary classic' and will be being admired for years to come; others are merely 'contemporary temporary' and are designed to fulfil an immediate purpose and then to be demolished to make way for the next wave.

Whether your garden be ancient or modern, whether you intend to grow old with your plants or change everything every few years, the most important thing to remember is that what you do in your garden is entirely your own business. If you want a clinically modernist chill-out area just for this year – that's fine. If you want to watch seeds turn into a rampaging wilderness

of flower and colour – then bully for you. If you like to plant your bedding in serried rows – then good luck. Nobody is going to come and arrest you, and if it makes you happy then who am I to quibble?

However in my opinion, the undoubted thrill of creating something new and instantly impressive can seem fleeting compared to the contented smile brought on by watching a wizened brown bulb transmogrify into a perfect tulip glittering in the spring sunshine. 

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