



1 ROAD TO ROMANCE

The stuff of children's adventures and romantic dreams. A winding grass path fringed with winking daisies leads seductively to a creakily rustic gate. This is the sort of path that should ideally be walked while wearing a straw hat with the last warmth of a summer day on your back. It is at The Mill House, Little Sampford, Essex.

HOWARD RICE / GAP PHOTOS

PATHS

From ambling routes mown into grass to ramrod-straight thoroughfares, paths can be either practical or divertingly scenic – or sometimes both

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR

Unless you garden on a very small – very crowded – balcony, you will undoubtedly find yourself in possession of a garden path. We all have them: they lead us to and from doors, washing lines and compost heaps. They give us hard surfaces in wet weather and grassy paths along which we can wander barefoot on hot June afternoons. Without them, we would be crashing through shrubberies and tripping over things.

In essence, garden paths fall into two categories: the practical and the diverting. The practical paths are the ones that take you where you want to go in the shortest time possible. For example, when you return home tired and laden down with children/shopping/the cares of the world, you really need the shortest distance between you and a gin and tonic: this is not the time for the scenic route. Equally, when it starts raining and you have washing outside, speed is essential, and a diversion via the shrubbery would quickly become annoying. You often see lines through borders at shopping centres or across lawns where the soil is compacted or the grass worn away. These are desire lines – the way that people want to walk to get to their destination rather than using the pretty pathways that have been designed for the purpose. Never fight against desire lines, or you will lose. Maybe you have a deep border with a hedge at the back – you need a path in order to access the hedge for cutting without trampling all over your precious plants. All this may seem a bit dull, but it is really important – without such byways your garden will not work properly.

Conversely, the diverting paths are much more exciting. These are ones along which you wander hand in hand with your beloved, paths that entice you towards a shaded bench or summerhouse. These paths can also be used as a visual 'come hither' – a straight path that leads you directly to a focal point, be it a sculpture, a building, a view or a tree. This is usually quite a formal and straightforward arrangement – what you see is what you get. However, a curved path is much more seductive, especially one that disappears around a corner to arrive at... a shaded bench? A tree? A view? Who knows what? Remember, however, that it needs to lead somewhere good if disappointment is to be avoided.

I have a troublesome path in my own garden: it guides you through emerging perennials, established trees and past a pond. So far, so delightful. But the problems arise when it gives you no choice but to wander into the composting and general storage-of-junk department at the end of the garden. We need a path to this area, but it cannot be part of the main pathway network as not every visitor will find my rubbish that captivating.



James Alexander-Sinclair is a garden designer, writer, broadcaster and founder of into-gardens.com. He has served on the RHS Council for the past five years.

The solution – which I decided on yesterday, so this hot off the press – is to push a new path through the middle of a newly planted border: painful, but not onerous. Gardens are constantly evolving and something decided a year or so ago might not be appropriate today. At least, that is my excuse.

If I may digress for just a moment, while it is important to think of visitors to your garden, it is far more important to think of yourself, as you will walk these paths much more often than your mother or the vicar. They need to make you happy every time you wander off for a quick pootle round the garden.

This brings us to materials. There are so many options: paving, gravel, bark, bricks, grass, timber, chamomile – pretty much anything. I made a wonderful path out of steel washers a few years ago: it clinked when you walked on it, as if you were wearing spurs. The important thing is that you keep it simple

and do not mix up your materials too much. If it is a path that will be used all year round, it needs to have a hard surface that drains efficiently – you don't want to get muddy shoes 'twixt front door and car. More than anything, I tend to use gravel (especially in country gardens), as it goes well with most paving stones and is cheap and easy to lay. Make sure you have a good solid edge (steel is simple and unobtrusive) and a decent sub-base.

So there we have it. And while we're on the subject of paths, this is where my path through Design ideas ends. It has been a delightful couple of years and I thank all of you for coming with me. You may have learned something, you may have been stirred to apoplectic rage, but I hope that whatever happened you had fun. I look forward to seeing you all again soon. □

FURTHER INFORMATION

One of the most striking paths I have ever come across is at the charity Perennial's **York Gate Garden** near Leeds. Comprising simple gravel and granite setts, it borders on the iconic Back Church Lane, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS16 8DW. Tel 0113 267 8240, perennial.org.uk
Sissinghurst Castle Garden has great paths: old York stone flags and mellow Kent bricks. The plants are fabulous too. Biddenden Road, near Cranbrook, Kent TN17 2AB. Tel 01580 710700, nationaltrust.org.uk
 The **Geffrye Museum** in London has good brick paths. 136 Kingsland Road, London E2 8EA. Tel 020 7739 9893, geffrye-museum.org.uk

Further reading

Hardscape: Innovative Hard Landscaping Materials for Gardens by Ann-Marie Powell (David & Charles, 2001).
Driveways, Paths and Patios: A Complete Guide to Design Management and Construction by Tony McCormack (Crowood Press, 2005).
Alan Titchmarsh How to Garden: Lawns Paths and Patios by Alan Titchmarsh (BBC Books, 2009).



Left Hand page

*PATHS NEED TO MAKE YOU HAPPY EVERY
TIME YOU WANDER OFF FOR A QUICK
POOTLE ROUND THE GARDEN*

② TO THE POINT

Almost the opposite of the previous page – this is a ramrod-straight, no-messing-about path that takes you straight to your destination.

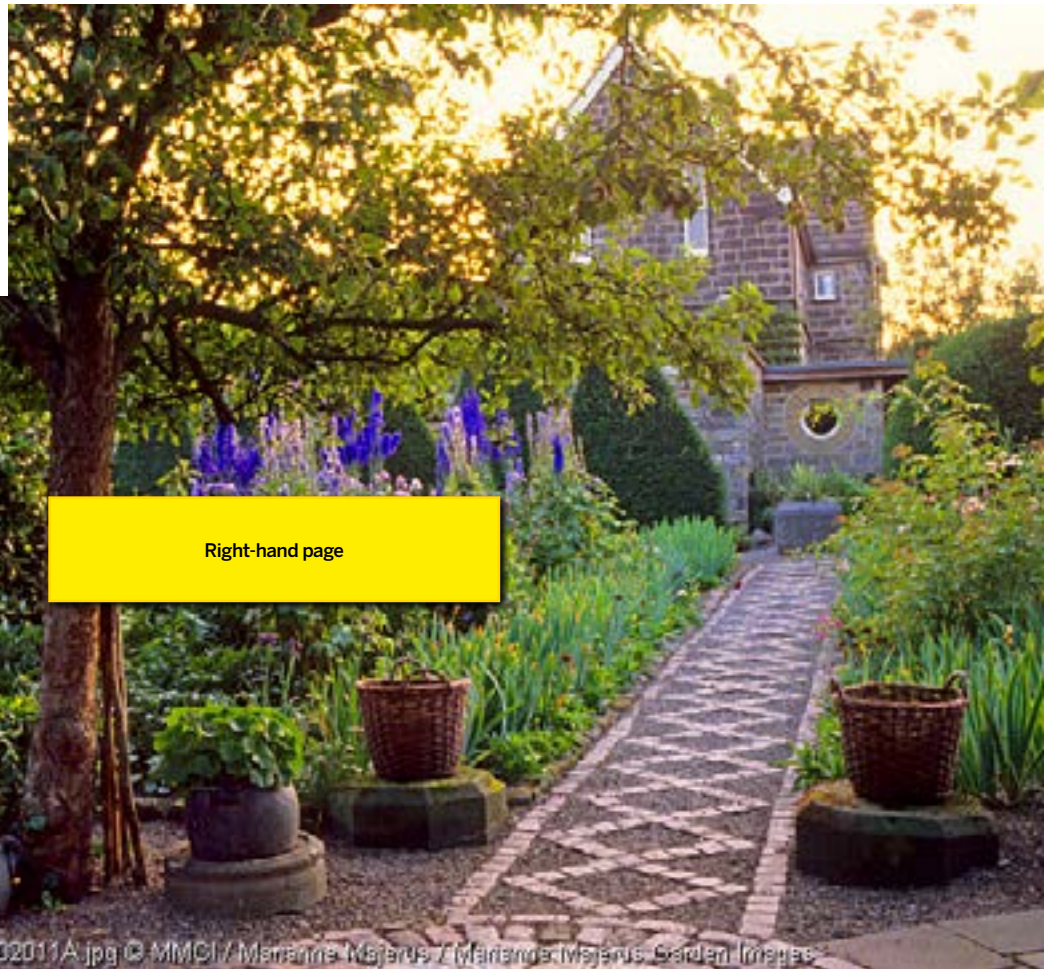
However, a bit of cunning planting and the edges are softened so it still seems like an invitation rather than an order. It looks like aged timber

but actually it is made of Millboard, which is a very convincing composite decking.

DESIGN

3 LEAD THE WAY

One of my favourite paths, a really strong and effective design it can be found at York Gate, the garden run by the charity Perennial. The diamonds help to point the way (and the eye) directly to the well positioned stone basin and I particularly like the little round window.



Right-hand page

GYGA02011A.jpg © MMCI / Marianne Majerus / MarianneMajerus.Garden.Images



5 STEPPING OUT

This is Alys Fowler's small Birmingham garden. Within the standard rectangle (18 x 6m) there is a rough (in a good way) path made from recycled materials that veers and slides its way through deep borders. The purple jobs are chives.

4 HEAVEN SCENT

A scented path with thyme planting in between the flagstones. As you stroll along you brush past the herbs releasing the scent – while doing so, however, you should beware of bees as there will be loads of them.



3 XXXXXX MARIANNE MAJERUS; 4 SARAH CUTTLE / GAP PHOTOS; DESIGNER: ALEX BELL
GARDEN DESIGN; 5 NICOLA STOCKEN / GAP PHOTOS; DESIGN: ALYS FOWLER

*A CURVED PATH IS MUCH MORE
SEDUCTIVE, ESPECIALLY ONE THAT
DISAPPEARS AROUND A CORNER*



**6 WALK ON THE
WILD SIDE**

Everybody loves gravel. Great for self-seeding plants, a good moisture-retaining mulch, easy to maintain and definitely the cheapest path material you will find. This is in Tom Stuart-Smith's garden at Broughton Grange and if it is good enough for Tom then it is good enough for everybody.