

1 Dark arts

These are a pair of pretty perfect bridges – beautiful charred timber planks cross the clearest water I have ever seen at Chelsea. They notch into chunky slices of granite paving. They were in the Royal Bank of Canada garden at this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show. It was designed by Charlotte Harris and inspired by Canada's boreal forest.



1 MARIANNE MAJERUS / GAP PHOTOS. ROYAL BANK OF CANADA GARDEN, RHS CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW 2017 / DESIGN CHARLOTTE HARRIS



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.

Border crossings

Whether it crosses a grand lake or moat, or simply links two paths across a border, a bridge can make a stylish statement and persuade busy gardeners to pause and enjoy the view

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR



2



3



4

2 RACHEL WARNE / GAP PHOTOS. 3 MARIANNE MAJERUS / GAP PHOTOS. FURZELEA, ESSEX. 4 ABIGAIL REK / GAP PHOTOS

2 Royal romance

This is Hever Castle – childhood home of Anne Boleyn (although it was later snaffled by another of Henry VIII's wives, Anne of Cleves, which has always struck me as being a bit unfair). It is now home to a pretty staggering garden – particularly if you have a fondness for roses. This is a bridge over the moat decorated with the rambler *Rosa* 'American Pillar'.

3 Cut across

Sometimes you need a short cut rather than having to walk round a pond and this simple metal grille bridge at Furzelea, near Chelmsford provides an understated yet stylish solution. It also means that you can do a bit of mid-pond maintenance without having to find some waders.

4 Tread softly

I love these – they look like building pallets. Big and chunky wooden stepping stones that seem to be floating on the surface of the water. I particularly like the very simple idea of rotating each one so the planks run in different directions. This is definitely a bridge for dawdling.

Once made a garden that was basically just a big bridge over a flower-filled crater – it was for the late lamented Westonbirt Festival in around 2004 so it stayed there for about three months, which gave time for the planting to change from spirals of modestly sized geums to a cacophony of dahlias and grasses. You could walk over the bridge and look down on to the blowsy heads of the plants or go under and gaze up at the sky. It summed up everything I loved about bridges: leaning on the parapets of rickety wooden numbers, walking across Westminster Bridge with the sun glinting off the Houses of Parliament, the dramatic echoey world of surreptitious teenage cigarettes and graffiti beneath railway bridges and cosier memories of warm afternoons playing Pooh sticks.

We have all had our lives touched by bridges – Bridge of Sighs, Brooklyn Bridge, *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, *The Bridges of*

Madison County, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, London Bridge is falling down, Jeff (and Beau) Bridges... I could go on but you would probably all get bored and wander off to shuffle the compost so I will stop there.

These are, of course, all memorable bridges but, before we go too far down this month's maunderings, I do know that not everybody has room for a bridge in their garden. "We don't all have lakes and rushing rivers you know," I can hear you say with incredulity dripping from each syllable. Believe me, I am aware of this and would love to boast about my personal bridges and huge water features but that would, sadly, be pure flimflam and I would be sure to be found out afore long. I am talking more about something more modest – more like a crossing point rather than a full blown suspension bridge. This crossing ▶

Was bridge designed by both or did Rupert design the bridge and Paul the garden??

5 Vital link

This is a very modern take on the idea of a garden moat: the bridge spans both a pond and the basement well of this house in Spitalfields, east London. It may not be much use at keeping out barbarians but it is a beautiful thing – with Rosa ‘Sander’s White Rambler’ growing along the overhead steel girders. It is designed by **Rupert Wheeler and Paul Gazerwitz**.



5

6 Step back in thyme

Stepping stones make the simplest bridges. Here the same stone is used in three ways – as a terrace, as a bridge and as stepping stones through gravel. There are two clumps of thyme as you approach the pond so any misplaced footsteps will release a scratch of scent as you pass.



6

7 Crossing continents

This is a lovely twist on the Japanese plank bridge – a traditional design of eight narrow wooden planks that form a zig-zag pattern. Designed by Vladimir Sitta for the Garangula Garden in New South Wales, Australia, it uses big chunks of stone to help you across a dry river bed. The fact the bridge does not quite meet in the middle makes it more exciting.



7

5 MARIANNE MAJERUS, SPITALFIELDS, LONDON / DESIGN RUPERT WHEELER, PAUL GAZERWITZ; 6 MARIANNE MAJERUS, DESIGN: GARTENBAU LEUGEN; 7 JERRY HARRUP / GAP PHOTOS, DESIGN VLADIMIR SITTA

▷ point would ideally be over a stream or rill but could also span a ditch, a dry garden or, indeed, a border.

If you are lucky enough to have a stream or river (or even moat or canyon) then you are a lucky person and you should be as indulgent as possible. One of the most famous garden bridges in the world is, I suppose, in Monet’s garden at Giverny where the spectacular frog-green bridge has a triple purpose. To cross the pond, to give a perfect viewing spot across the water lilies, provided that your vista is not too encumbered by tourists wearing jaunty caps, and also as a pergola to support the amazing wisterias.

However, no matter what size, the job of a garden bridge is to make you pause. It stops even the busiest person and makes them lean on the rail and look down upon shimmying pondweed or whatever. It does not have to be a grand affair with niches and pillars

in fact some of the best bridges are just a couple of planks thrown across a ditch. I am particularly fond of the simple Japanese plank or *yatsuhashi* bridge, which consists of zig-zagging planks with each turn being a place to pause and look – if you don’t the likelihood is that you may well fall off as there are seldom handrails. It could even be something as basic as some stepping stones. I have some that cross a border towards my chicken run so, every morning, I negotiate them, and every morning I am surprised by how they make me slow down and appreciate the little clover that grows between the stones. A small caveat is that stepping stones should always be laid so that they are comfortable to walk on: if you have to jump for the last one or take unnecessarily small steps they quickly lose their charm.

I know that not every garden will have a place for a bridge – and nor should it as a bridge that is purposeless will always be a



8

8 MARIANNE MAJERUS, GARDENS OF GOTHENBURG FESTIVAL, SWEDEN 2008 / OZLANDSKAP

8 Walk on high

This is an exhibition bridge designed for the 2008 Gardens of Gothenburg Festival in the historic Liseberg Park. It looks almost as though somebody has crashed into it so the steelwork is pleasingly crumpled and uneven. Makes it look much more naturalistic especially with foliage from the overhanging trees.

Further reading

Bridges Explained: Viaducts – Aqueducts (Britain’s Living History) by Trevor Yorke. (Countryside Books, 2008).

Garden Design: A Book of Ideas by Heidi Howcroft and Marianne Majerus. (Mitchell Beazley, 2015).

The Garden Source: Inspirational Design Ideas for Gardens and Landscapes by Andrea Jones, foreword by James van Sweden (8 Books, 2011).

grave disappointment. If you still remain to be convinced then let me try one more angle: bridges are good for the thrill seekers among you. When we built a house about 20 years ago we ran out of money before we could do the garden so the access to the house was via a scaffold plank across a disused sheep dip. This was quite a nerve wracking crossing – especially in winter while carrying shopping or toddlers.

As gardeners we experience very few moments of pure adrenalin-pumping fear but there is always something that’s just a little bit scary about crossing any bridge. What if I fall off? Or what if the bridge suddenly gives way beneath my feet? Such moments of danger are probably terribly good for your circulation and if they are also combined with taking in a lovely view then that is all the better. □

Gardens with great bridges

- Alnwick Castle**
Alnwick, Northumberland NE66 1NQ.
Tel 01665 511100, alnwickcastle.com
One of its many delights is a rope bridge leading to the tree house.
- Monet’s Garden at Giverny**
Rue Claude Monet, 27620 Giverny, France. giverny.org
Home to the impressionist painter from 1883, and site of possibly the world’s most famous garden bridge.
- Wrest Park**
Silsoe, Bedfordshire MK45 4HR. Tel 01525 860000, english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/wrest-park/
Gardens hold a Chinese Temple and Bridge that once formed part of a tableau imitating scenes found on Willow pattern plates.