

1 Scented seat

The bench must serve more than one purpose. In this garden by Stella Caws, it is not just a place to perch and watch the bees teem all over the lavender but a perfect focal point for the end of a path. In time it will be shaded by the parasol leaves of the fig and the world will be a much better place.



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1 GARDENPHOTOS / CHARLES HAWES. DESIGN: STELLA CAWS



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2 MARIANNE MAJERUS GARDEN IMAGES. RHS CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW 2009. 3 HAY. 4 GREEN OAK FURNITURE



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2 Ahead of the curve

The first time I sat on a Gaze Burvill bench I found it so comforting to both buttocks and spirit that I have sought them out ever since. Made of cleverly steamed oak they are as solid and dependable as chunky-cut marmalade on a wet morning. This one is on one of its RHS Chelsea Flower Show stands.

3 Sleek style

Of course benches do not have to be wooden. This is a sleekly lined steel number with wide bands – often if the strips are too thin then they dig in and are not only uncomfortable but also cause unsightly striations to the posterior. This is designed by Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec for the Danish company, Hay.

4 Staying put

This is a very sculptural piece by Chris Nangle for Green Oak Furniture. If you need to move a bench around the place as occasional seating then this may not be the wisest choice. It is a hefty chunk of charred green oak that will age stylishly and look amazing especially in front of a landscape where the waves will mimic the distant hills.



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Sitting pretty

At their best benches should represent the perfect fusion of form and function – not only somewhere to sit and while away an hour or two, but also sculptural pieces in their own right

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR

I have a life-changing theory about garden benches – this may be a slight exaggeration especially if compared to the pantheon of post-Aristotelian philosophy but bear with me... We all, no matter if we garden rolling acres and swooping valleys or an inner city postage stamp, have various seats scattered across our gardens. The intentions behind all these chairs and benches is so that we can spend time relaxing and admiring the scenery.

However, the reality is that none of us actually spend much time sitting on the things, mostly we just look at them. This is not because we lack the desire to sit down, it is simply because, firstly, the weather means that for about 232 days in any year they are too damp or the temperature too inclement. The second reason is that, as gardeners, we are easily distracted from sitting by the appearance of urgent bit of pruning that we can see in our

peripheral vision. Therefore – and this is where the theory comes in – we should make sure that any seat we own should not only be comfortable but also beautiful. That bench is not just a bench, it is also a sculpture and therefore is one of the few occasions when function can be allowed to follow form.

Fortunately this is quite an easy goal as there is an enormous range of garden furniture available to us from timber to stone and from corian to Corten steel (although I would not recommend sitting on the latter while wearing white trousers – especially after a rain shower). There are waterproof bean bags, director's chairs, thrones, stools, hammocks, settles and frankly precarious cafe tables. So the world is, to quote the great Arthur Daley, your lobster when it comes to choice. However, it would be wise to make sure that the style of the seat suits the general feel of

5 Height of design

Even though it has only been there for the blink of an eye the New York Highline has become an instantly recognisable garden. Not just because of the views of the city and the sensational Piet Oudolf planting but also because of the distinctive rising benches that pop out of the ground with such poise.



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6 Divided passions

This is called the Romeo and Juliet bench as the trees are destined not to touch: which seems a little misguided considering what R & J got up before all the lark and nightingale stuff. Nevertheless it is a clever thing with the trees' containers doing most of the heavy lifting. They are modular so you can easily extend the run.



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7 Coming up roses

This clever twist on the classic tree seat from RaymentWire has a sprung metal seat and a skeletal umbrella above into which you can weave your chosen climber. This is obviously a gorgeous rose but if you wanted something a little less hazardous then it would work well with *Wisteria*, *Clematis* or a finely scented *Trachelospermum*.



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5 TERRAMA.COM, 6 MODERN GARDEN, 7 RAYMENT WIRE, JACQUE GORDON GARDEN DESIGN



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8 THE GARDEN COLLECTION / FP / UTE KLAPHAKE

8 Rising star

A very clever bit of design from Sam Ovens for his The Sky's the Limit garden at the RHS Show Tatton Park in 2014. The seating rises from a bed of ornamental grasses like islands in a restless sea and is accessible from stepping stones. Undoubtedly one for the nimble, but what a perfect place to rest. Bring cushions, though, as the square timbers may be a bit sharp.

Suppliers

- **Barlow Tyrie** teak.com
- **Gaze Burvill** gazeburvill.com
- **Green Oak Furniture** greenoakfurniture.net
- **Greenfingers** For a good range of budget garden furniture try greenfingers.com
- **Habitat** has a range of simple concrete garden furniture habitat.co.uk
- **Hay** hay.dk
- **The Modern Garden Company** holds a good selection of furniture from many designers and are a good one stop shop. moderngardencompany.com
- **RaymentWire** metal garden benches raymentwire.com
- **TerraMai** reclaimed teak terramai.com

▷ your garden – it does not mean that a traditional garden need only have teak benches but you don't want them to look out of place. Pay attention to colours and textures and, ideally, comfort for the precious moments when you actually use the thing. Some seats have hard edges that dig into the less squishy parts of our anatomies so try before you buy.

Taking my little theory to a further point then, we need to make sure that this chair/sculpture is placed to its best advantage. Obviously it should be somewhere with a decent view, somewhere worth the effort. This can be anything from a distant vista to a dingle inside a border – I always maintain that the best place to sit is always in a flower bed so wrapping the planting around your seat is always effective. Another thing of which you should be aware is that the view back towards your house is often

as interesting as the view from the house – sometimes much more so as looking at your own dirty windows is infinitely preferable to looking at someone else's. It is relatively easy to experiment with a bench as they are usually easily moved but, to save a bit of time and swearing, I find that walking around the garden with a chair and trying out options is always time well spent. Make sure that you leave no viewpoint unexplored and that there are both sun baked and shady seats as there is the odd day during summer when you want to be out of the glare.

Humankind in repose is generally quite a lazy species so beware of anything that involves too much effort on behalf of your client – or yourself. Do not put your table and chairs too far away from the kitchen – nobody wants to have to carry heavy trays and laden salad bowls all the way across a lawn, up some

stairs and around a pond. There is always a place for a distant chair gazing over a perfect valley but try and make sure that is on a frequently used path rather than a neglected cul de sac.

In this, as in so many things in gardens, we are spoiled for choice and have to edit carefully as few of us have enough space to indulge our every whim. Personally, I like a swinging chair – hammocks are a bit precarious and lose whatever romantic promise they may have had when you get to my age – but a gently swaying cushioned bench, maybe in a verandah or under a canopy is a wonderful thing and the perfect place to sleep off lunch or pass a peaceful morning. If, that is you can resist getting up at frequent intervals because you have just spotted an errant weed or a bit of deadheading that cannot wait a moment longer. □

Further information

- The landscape architect Michael Balston wrote an excellent book *The Well-Furnished Garden* (Mitchell Beazley, 1990). Sadly no longer in print but worth hunting down a second-hand copy if you can.
- If you want to make your own furniture then consult *Making Garden Furniture from Wood* by Anthony Hontoir (Crowood Press, 2005).
- Wooden furniture will usually age to a disguised silvery grey but every so often it will benefit from a rub down with a wire brush (not too coarse) and sand paper to remove dirt and bird poo. After this a coat of oil (teak or Danish) would be a good idea, think of it as moisturising to keep them looking fresh for longer.
- Make sure that none of your wooden furniture is standing in water – no matter how tough the wood it will rot over time.