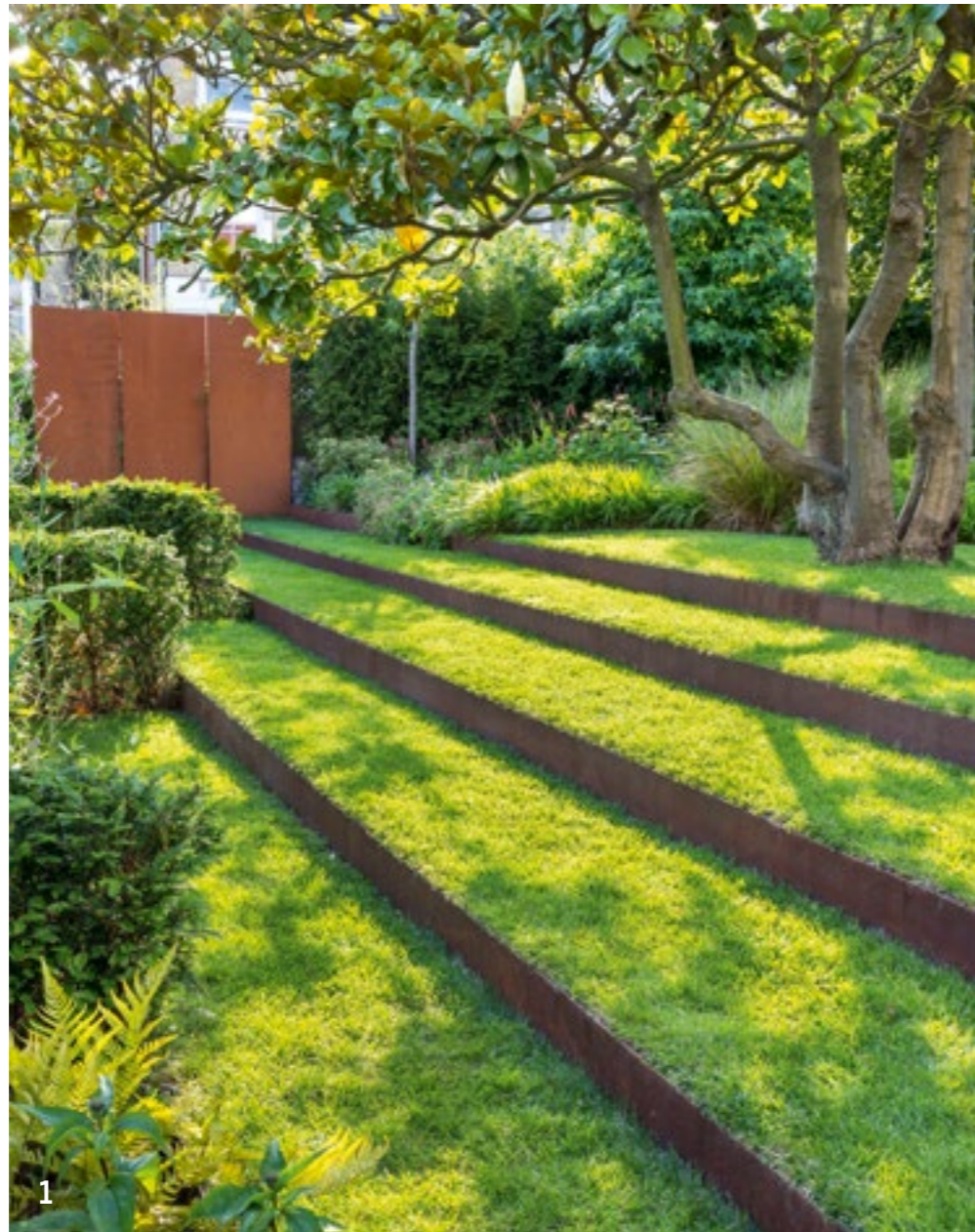


1 Straight ahead

Grass steps are always a bit tricky because you have to keep lifting the mower and then there is usually a lot of strimming to do afterwards to tidy up the corners. These handsome Corten risers make it a bit easier by defining the edges. I also love the screen made from a triptych of steel monoliths.



1 MARRANNE MAJERUS / DESIGN: SARA JANE ROTHWELL



2 HEATHER EDWARDS / GAP PHOTOS; DESIGN: ANDY STURGEON. 3 © ANNA STOWE BOTANICA / ALAMY. 4 XXXXXXXX

2 Standing tall

A very spectacular use of steel by Andy Sturgeon in his garden for *The Daily Telegraph* at the 2010 RHS Chelsea Flower Show. There were three series of Corten steel monoliths, which formed screens that stood like massive sentries guarding the gates. They also did a sterling job of framing views into the garden.

3 Crowning glory

Here's an elegant steel pergola with an apex that swoops upwards like a coronet. The secret is to have lots of horizontals to give plenty of places to tie in plants. This prevents the phenomenon of 'exposed knee' – where all the flowers are at the top, while the lower reaches are knobbly and naked.

4 Brain wave

Part arch, part garden building, part shelter. From a practical viewpoint this is a good combination of steel supports and wafers of timber to give shade. Aesthetically, it is innovative, exciting and sculptural. What more could you possibly wish for to enhance your outdoor space?



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.

Industrial revolution

Historically steel has not been widely used in gardens, but, argues James Alexander-Sinclair, the contrast of the man-made against the natural can work surprisingly well

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR

I have a friend who likes to pepper his garden with steel structures. When wandering through his bucolic acres it is fun to be surprised by shards of mirrored steel or laser-cut and powder-coated archways, all beautifully sited to make the best of surrounding shrubbery or distant views. This is nothing new: people have been populating their gardens with such things for centuries, if not millennia. The difference is in the materials. In olden days there was marble and finely crafted stonework in abundance, but not much in the way of steel, at least not obviously. It was there, of course, in the pins that pinioned the putti and the skeletons that supported the buildings. But it was chorus line rather than prima donna.

The more prominent use of steel in gardens is a 20th-century phenomenon. It coincides, I suppose, with the Richard Rogers idea

of putting all the pipes and services on the outside, as he did with the Pompidou Centre in Paris and London's Lloyd's Building. Think of it as a version of the classic (though possibly no longer politically correct) movie scene where the frumpy secretary shakes loose her hair and removes her horn-rimmed spectacles. The bones of the industrial revolution are finally laid bare in all their glory and, my goodness Miss Jones, you are beautiful!

There are various types of steel available to use in our gardens. Stainless steel is unashamedly modern, slick and clean. Galvanised steel is rugged and ages to the graceful grey of an old bucket, while powder-coated is practical and allows us to have any colour we want without the pain of actually having to paint the stuff ourselves. There is also Corten steel, which is the ruffly tufty hipster of the bunch, much loved by show garden designers

5 Overarching

Jamie Fobert's bronze pavilion for the Laurent Perrier garden at the 2010 RHS Chelsea Flower Show is made from folded sheets of bronze to contrast with a rectangular pool and classic Tom Stuart-Smith planting.



Art: has pic been flipped?

6 Pole position

A clever use of scaffolding by Alex Bell at the 2011 RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show. It's modern and functional as a fence, plant support, pergola or dividing screen.



5 MARCUS HARPLUR / GAP PHOTOS / DESIGN: TOM STUART SMITH; 6 ROB WHITTY WORTH / GAP PHOTOS / THE DEPTFORD PROJECT AN URBAN HARVEST GARDEN DESIGNED BY ALEX BELL AT THE RHS HAMPTON COURT FLOWER; 7 ANDREA JONES & XXXXXXXXX

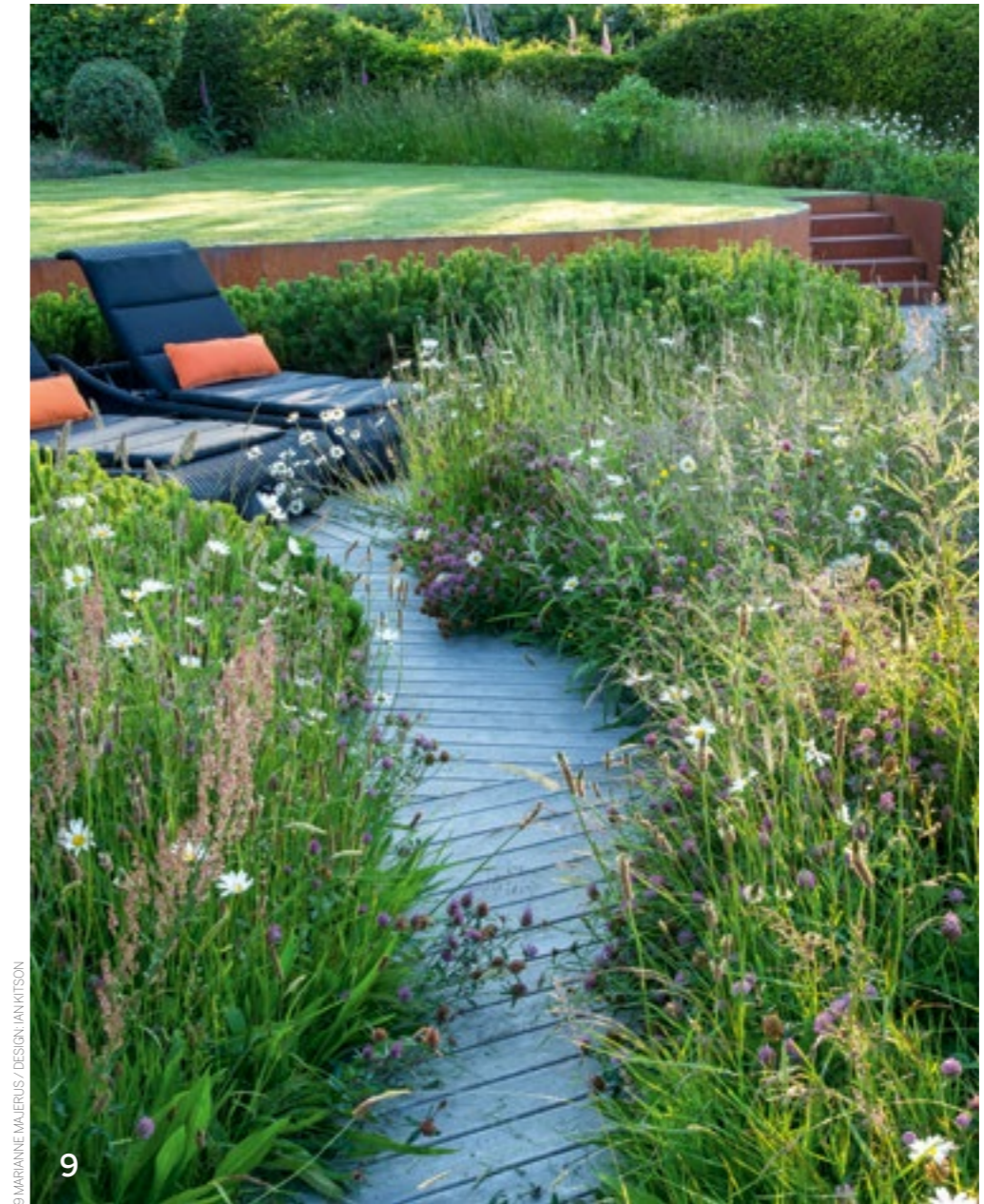
7 Shining example

My client didn't like the idea of the timber to edge the pathways so we clad it with a bit of folded stainless steel. It reflects the gravel and the box and the client could admire his reflection. The only dissatisfied party was the gardener who had to polish it!



8 Keeping ahead

This is one of my favourite fences; so simple and yet so effective. I love the way it sashays off into the distance with only the most fleeting of backward glances. It may not keep rabbits off your lettuces, but it makes an elegant feature from something that is usually purely functional.



9 MARIANNE MAJERUS / DESIGN IAN KITSON

9 Follow the curve

A wall of Corten steel – look at the way it curves. You would have trouble doing that with stone or railway sleepers. It will, however, need good supports to hold up under the pressure of the soil.

▷ and the groovier architects. It is basically a steel alloy that takes on the attractive colour of rust without the inconvenience of decay. It is a material that works particularly well in gardens as the colours of the steel and the sheer bulk of the metal seem to contrast well with plants.

In the hands of a skilled craftsman steel can be transformed into pretty much anything – squares, curves, walls or edges. There are lots of good blacksmiths dotted around the countryside who can do clever things with metal (although pretty much any steel fabricator can help, given a sketch and a decent brief). Steel also has excellent environmental credentials as it can be recycled into other things. If I remember my school scripture classes correctly, it is even mentioned in Isaiah: 'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.' I once had a

whole lot of obelisks made from parts of old Citroëns and we have all seen structures made from old horseshoes and farm machinery. It does not even have to be that complicated – if the idea of welding, bending and folding brings you out in a cold sweat, there are readily available pre-manufactured options.

I once made a garden that consisted mostly of scaffolding poles and chains. It was fun to do, but slightly annoyed the neighbours. What it did achieve, however, was to show that scaffolding was a simple and adaptable way of building things. Since then I have made climbing frames, handrails, furniture and pergolas from scaffolding. It works like a grown up, heftier sort of K'nex (a 1990s version of Meccano, but with no fiddly washers). It bolts together quickly, is very stable and easily changed. The things I learned about using chain in a garden have not been

quite so useful, but I live in hope as it makes a satisfying screen: relatively weatherproof and it rattles soothingly in the wind.

If you want something a little less outré, then a classic pergola or arbour can be made from sections of steel as thin and elegant as a whippet's leg. This is particularly useful in smaller gardens where you may be a bit short on available space. There are many companies who will happily knock you up an arbour or a gazebo in a variety of different shapes and patterns.

In short steel is wonderful stuff – for structure, for elegance, for utility and for sculpture. Pretty much anything that can be made from wood or timber can be made from steel, but without the weight or the bulk. Once you get the hang of it, steel makes superlative raised beds, benches, walls and border edges as sharp as a freshly pressed trouser crease. □

Useful information

If you are looking for someone to make a bespoke steel structure for your garden try Hot Metal Engineering, based in south Oxfordshire. Tel 01865 400753, hmeng.co.uk

For simple but effective steel pergolas and arches try Harrod Horticultural. Their products are stocked at RHS Garden, Wisley, Tingleton Lifestyle, Dorchester, Dorset and Burford Garden Company, Burford, Oxfordshire. Tel 0333 400 1500, harrodhorticultural.com

If you fancy having a go at making something yourself, there are one day metalwork taster courses on offer at West Dean College. West Dean, nr Chichester, West Sussex PO18 0QZ. Tel 01243 811301, westdean.org.uk