



Vive la Différence

The white heat of urban fashion or a more gentle rural idyll? The differences are what makes gardening exciting, says **Tom Stuart-Smith**

The information explosion in gardening has made the job of designing gardens both more exciting and more difficult. Twenty years ago it was an uphill struggle to inject some semblance of modernity into a garden composition - now it may be the other way round. We are crowded with images of pink plastic decking, post-modern gazebos and brushed stainless steel. The designer has to play the role of editor, limiting the options so that the garden retains an overall clarity of conception. The larger the garden the greater the need for restraint.

Many current garden designs seem to be conceived in the white heat of urban fashion, with an emphasis on hard materials and an obsession with being completely up to the

minute. But most of the more artificial and exotic materials almost always look absurd in a rural context. Materials such as galvanized metal mesh and exotic polished stone can have dramatic impact in an urban garden, but moved to the country take on the appearance of mass produced commodities.

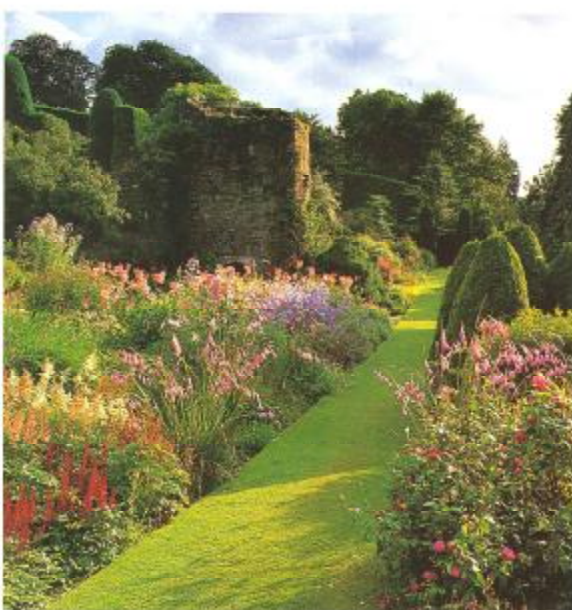
In country gardens it is often best to use less hard surface, fewer materials and to use them simply and boldly. Much better to achieve variety, drama and originality by manipulating space, texture and colour, using materials that relate to the place.

In the smaller, enclosed urban garden there is more freedom to construct a dramatic fantasy, and this needs to have very little relation to anything other than a patch of sky above and walls around. A fine example was Christopher Bradley-Hole's Latin Garden at the Chelsea

Flower Show in 1997 - an urban concept, self-contained. No need to relate to any flowing landscape because there isn't one.

In the country, design is just as important, but by virtue of the greener context. The most successful recent country gardens seem to be born of the soil, and celebrate natural diversity, husbandry and the interaction between man and the natural world. The Garden House in Devon springs to mind, as does Dan Pearson's work at Home Farm, both made by designers who have a deep understanding of ecology and natural plant communities.

Gardens at their best are glasses through which we can articulate our relationship with the surrounding natural world with fresh vigour and insight. Rural gardens and urban gardens achieve this in very different ways. *Vive la différence!*



LEFT Dan Pearson's natural planting at Home Farm. **CENTRE** A slick and self-contained urban garden. **RIGHT** Abundance from Keith Wiley at The Garden House, Devon.