



GARDEN DESIGN MASTER CLASS

100 LESSONS FROM THE WORLD'S FINEST DESIGNERS ON THE ART OF THE GARDEN



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Introduction

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*“If you have a garden and a library,
you have everything you need.”*

—MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO

Amid the bustle of our twenty-first-century world, Cicero’s two prerequisites for a fulfilling life—the garden and the library—resonate more than ever. From the ancient Orto Botanico di Padova in northern Italy, which featured medicinal plants, to Piet Oudolf’s elevated railway garden on the High Line in New York City, the idea of cultivating plants has fascinated nearly every society since the birth of agriculture. At the same time, the spread of printed literature—from the Library of Alexandria in ancient Egypt to Oxford University’s vast Bodleian Library in England—has given us a treasure trove of books about gardens and garden design.

With Cicero’s words in mind, I asked 100 preeminent contemporary garden designers to share their thoughts on key elements of garden design, from color and light to the complex relationships between plants, humans, and structures. These thought-provoking essays provide an insider’s look at the design process while evoking the magical experience of cultivating the natural beauty of plants. Together, they represent a comprehensive study of garden design.

When I was researching this book, I asked James Brayton Hall, the president of the Garden Conservancy, to share some of his favorite works on garden design. The first writer he cited, Thomas Jefferson, may surprise some readers who know Jefferson primarily as a Founding Father and U.S. president. But as Hall points out, Jefferson was a “scientist, statesman, explorer, and gardener.” His *Garden Book* and *Farm Book* provide a glimpse of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century American gardening and

farming while also showcasing Jefferson’s view that horticulture could play a key role in shaping the new nation and its inhabitants.

Fast-forward a century, Hall told me, and delve into novelist Edith Wharton’s vision of grand American gardens as heirs to the European aristocratic gardening tradition. In *Italian Villas and their Gardens* (1904), Wharton helped to shape a Gilded Age vision of American upper-class life—in Hall’s words, presenting gardens “as visible symbols of power and as enormous symbolic canvases upon which to play out the rituals of their milieu.”

In our own time, Michael Pollan captures the spirit of the postmodern approach to gardening in his *Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education* (1991). As Hall says, Pollan “brilliantly takes on the self-conscious fashion for gardening among post-urban intellectuals,” which often takes the form of a search for personal meaning.

Many of the designers whose ideas are captured in this book have also found inspiration from master gardeners. In their conversations with me, several names came up again and again. Beth Chatto was a pioneer of environmentally friendly gardening techniques, emphasizing the importance of choosing plants not only for their visual appeal, but also their suitability to local conditions. The legendary gardener Russell Page also drew inspiration from the surrounding landscape while embracing an unabashedly formal design aesthetic. The gardens Christopher Lloyd created at his parents’ English manor house, Great Dixter, are world renowned, as are his many books.

It is my hope that through the evocative writing of the master gardeners in this book, new generations of designers and garden enthusiasts can draw aesthetic and practical inspiration and this book can join the many classics on the shelves of devoted gardeners everywhere, providing instruction and delight to professionals and laypeople alike.

The south facade of the main house and terrace at Salubrity Hall in Augusta, Georgia, as seen from the fragrant flower border, designed by William T. Smith. The brilliantly blooming beds are edged in clipped boxwood and conical foster hollies in a style that reflects the old-world charm of the mansion’s Tudor architecture. Henry VIII would have been delighted!



Estates

WILLIAM T. SMITH

“... and Botany I rank with the most valuable sciences [...] refreshments from our orchards, the adornments of our flower-borders, shade and perfume of our groves ...”

—THOMAS JEFFERSON, 1814

As a landscape architect, I have the wonderful opportunity to design gardens every single day. Over the years, I have received the amazing gift of working with beautiful properties of all sizes, from the very small to the very large. Each size has its own design challenges. While every square inch can be crucial in a small space, there is usually enough space on an estate for several different gardens.

Many elements are basic in all pursuits of garden design, but scale and proportion are among the most important. Often the success of a plan depends on geometry, sight lines, and focal points—all very strong elements that yield simple yet bold solutions. However, a thorough understanding of scale and proportion is essential in designing an estate and must be used with absolute authority.

There are two essential considerations in designing an estate: the needs of the family and the architectural style of the house. These aspects always sculpt my final plan for the property.

First, an understanding of the family life is essential, such as parking for guests, entertainment spaces for large and small gatherings, play areas for children, and gardening plots for parents.

Second, the particular architectural features of the house dictate the plan. I always let the house whisper what it expects from its garden. The result is a connection of strength and continuity between home and garden that is essential to any good site plan.

A case in point is the garden of Salubrity Hall, the home of Karon and Don Williamson in Augusta, Georgia. King George III deeded this property to the Earl of Sandwich, where he built Mont Salubrity, a young ladies' seminary. A grand Tudor-style house was subsequently built in 1928, utilizing materials salvaged from the dismantling of the original structure.

Salubrity Hall comprises enough acreage for several garden rooms, all seamlessly linked like a grand park. A visitor begins the journey through a white perennial garden, then a shade grotto, a guest cottage and garden, a rondel orchard, a central allée, and a fragrant flower border which could easily be found in any period Renaissance garden.

These areas are dynamic yet comfortable spaces where one does not feel overcome by the vastness of the property. Each room is designed to be able to stand on its own merit and be a destination in its own right. However, a landscape architect must be able to adapt design principles to any size property. While a well-conceived site plan will have gardens of various sizes, any one of the vignettes should be applicable to a smaller house and property. It can be as simple as changing the scale of a larger space by making slight modifications.

An illustration of a smaller garden is the grotto—a compact, shaded retreat, with its seating, shade plantings, and koi pond. It would be beautiful on a property of any size. Conversely, the large flower border could be finessed into a smaller one by simply changing the scale and proportion of the dimensions.

One attribute of a well-designed plan is the configuration of spaces in such a way that all the garden rooms cannot be seen at once. Surprise is an element I attempt to incorporate in all of my designs. I appoint the spaces with walls, buffers, or elevation changes to ensure that the curiosity of the visitor is piqued on a garden tour.



Yet the true success of an estate might be fully appreciated in the dead of winter, when the design reflects a simple yet bold solution. If the garden looks alluring under a thin sheet of snow, it's a resounding success. If the same garden looks beautiful without a single blossom, imagine its triumph with flowers!

It can be said that the objective of a successful design is the pleasure of the journey. The estate garden becomes a narrative of the experiences and the personalities of the owners. After all is said and done, it's about hoping that one day you will relive this enchanting garden experience.

The shade grotto at Salubrity Hall, in Augusta, Georgia, as seen from the rondel orchard. The brick-and-bluestone walk leads one through natural perennial plantings toward seating and a sunken koi pond. The retaining wall of the white perennial garden above provides a beautiful architectural backdrop to the space. Here, visitors can admire the flowers, rest in the shade, and enjoy a kaleidoscope of colorful koi swirling in the pool.