

# A Sense of Enclosure

How to create spaces that are intimate and personal without being claustrophobic. Stephen Anderton

WITHIN EVERYONE'S IDEA of a garden is the longing to be safe and enclosed. Only occasionally will you find a garden that eschews all enclosure. The seaside garden of filmmaker Derek Jarman was a perfect example, set on a barren shingle beach under the eye of the breakers and a distant power station. But even in gardens like that there is enclosure—in the house itself, a black tarred timber cottage. For Jarman, stricken with AIDS, it was too late for safety, and the philosophy of his garden was to look nature hard in the eye and only find sanctuary indoors. Most of us are not so brave. We can afford to be more romantic in our gardens. We want our green cocoon.

## *Enclosing the Whole Garden*

Ideally it must be a cocoon with outward views, if there are any, carefully framed by judicious planting to focus on the best parts and to hide unwanted parts. But many of us garden in places so surrounded by urban hardware that to make any kind of green cocoon depends upon shutting out a great deal of urban landscape. So we plant until we are surrounded with greenery.

With those walls of greenery can come claustrophobia. Is it we who are shut in, or the urban landscape that is shut out? To avoid that sense of impenetrability, it helps to plant boundaries that feel as if they are not solid, boundaries which may (or seem to) offer



an extending maze of paths, between trees or among bamboos. Eight or ten feet of planting depth is quite enough to achieve this. If that planting can be tall enough, or raised up on a berm so that it becomes your skyline, then who is to say the city lies just behind?

Remember that in gardens heavily planted for enclosure, it is always the corners that present the greatest sense of imprisonment,

for they are the most obvious spatial dead ends. But if the corners of the planting can always be left open, at least in the first layer of that planting, then the garden will have a greater sense of freedom, despite being enclosed. Is not an octagonal prison cell less daunting than a square?

## *Enclosure within the Garden*

The purpose of enclosure can sometimes be to emphasize the space that follows: the dark tunnel leading to the bright open space. Sometimes the most important aspect of enclosure is its point of release—a gateway or door, which directs people with greatest benefit into the next part of the garden. A garden that makes you stop to close a door or adjust to the light in exactly the right place can focus you on the best prospect across the garden or on the planting that follows.

A modern garden may choose to make its entrances and exits informal in themselves, to produce an effortless transition between spaces. But still they will be

there—the tempting narrow walk between the mass of house and hedge, the path winding under a group of white birches. Traditional gardens may rely more on a firmer kind of punctuation, using doors, gateways, steps between hedges, pergolas, and terraces.

Sometimes the enclosed place can become a major feature in itself. It might be a hedged grass walk in which are displayed a collection of beautiful empty pots or sculptures. It might be a long tunnel dripping with wisteria and laburnum, or a long shallow staircase descending in a curve through a grove of bamboo and hung with electric lanterns. Such features are delightful, but to make sense they always need to connect two spaces in a useful way. Tunnels and pergolas that float in the middle of a lawn, with no reason for ending or beginning, are always a disappointment. Enclosure is a contrivance, and works better when its *raison d'être* is clear.

Tunnels are all the more dramatic when enclosed above as well as on the sides. Instead of enjoying the strip of sky above, between avenue trees or hedges, the eye is focused headlong on the light at the end of the tunnel. Little can grow in the heavy shade below, and planting detail is almost bound to be suspended until you reach the light once more.

On the other hand, it is possible to create stilted hedges that meet above the path but allow enough light under their sides for a planting of woodland perennials. It might be hellebores, or *Euphorbia amygdaloides* var. *robbiae* or pulmonarias, or even just spring and autumn bulbs.

## Cul-de-Sacs

Beware of the enclosure within your garden that is no more than a dead end. A large hedged or walled enclosure that has no way out or even a view from the far end will not be used a great deal, however perfect its

proportions, however delightful its volumes of clipped evergreens or carpet of waving prairie grasses.

Enclosures that are dead ends must be given an internal focus of their own to make them attractive. There are many ways of doing this. Water makes an excellent focus in an enclosed space. You might make a formal pond at the center, perhaps with a population of fish, and with a seat looking into it at the far end. In a smaller space there might be just a gurgling, fern-clad basin into which to dip your hand and enjoy the coolness and sound of the water. Small sounds make more impact in such a small space.

You might choose to populate the space with some kind of simple statuary, a mournful maiden or some heathen juvenile with wings on his feet and perfect proportions. Plain enclosures are the perfect place to set complicated abstract sculpture that invites intellectual thought, for it is a rare garden indeed that can bear to have such intellectual provocation slapped, out in the open, on top of its own artistic agenda. Good gardens are not necessarily improved by having to bear other artistic endeavors.

## Built Enclosures

The most compelling of all garden enclosures are those summerhouses and seats that set out to offer great privacy. Simply by letting the vines hang low, you can turn a trellis-covered seat from being a reflector at the end of a vista to a secret trysting place. When the vines hang lower than eye level, anything can happen.

Some of the most memorable garden buildings are those that also serve as transitions, which are entered as the focus of a vista, only to open, on the other side, onto a greater open space or a view over radically different planting. To sit here and eat at night, with a foot in both camps, so to speak, is thrilling. It is safety and sanctuary and temptation and choice, all at once. ♡

