



Water Wise Gardens

Designing for the future

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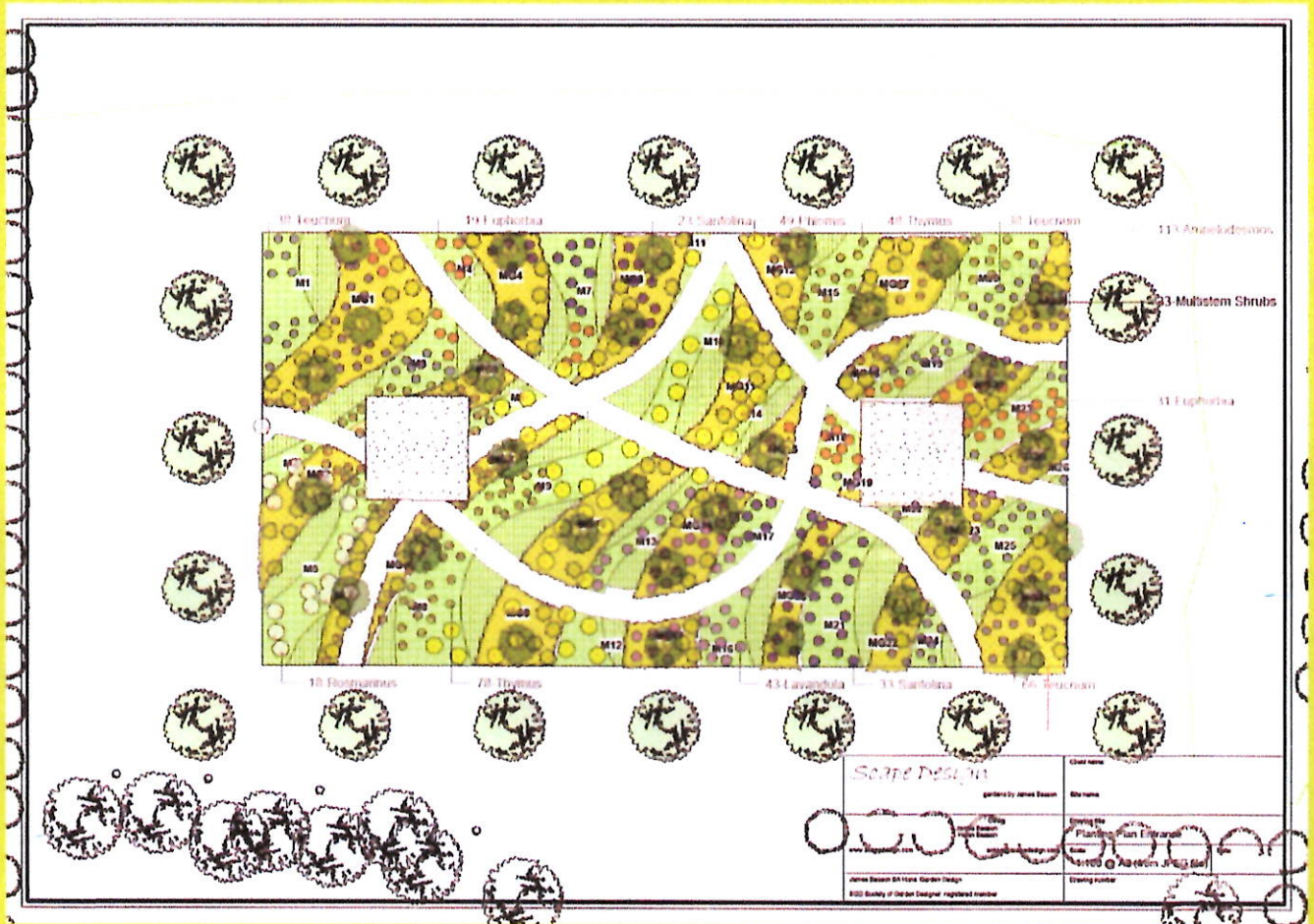
We cannot deny that the climate is changing, resulting in many Mediterranean plants starting what is known as 'the great march north'.

Some taller tree species including the Mediterranean oak (*Quercus frainetto*) have been experiencing reduced growth and considerable die back in the last couple of decades, as soil becomes too dry and the summers too hot for them to maintain previous levels of growth. Research has also shown that in areas of Switzerland and Sweden - spruce that is gradually dying back is now being replaced naturally by oak species that would have been inconceivable 20 years ago. It is now becoming completely feasible to envisage a Mediterranean garden in Northern Europe and indeed quite possible that we should be looking more and more towards this style of planting to keep watering to a minimum. There are a few important considerations that need to be taken into account to start working towards successful dry gardens.

Dry gardens are all about drainage. If climate change continues on its current trend, northern Europe will not only start to experience the hotter drier summers that we are used

to in the Med, but it will also in turn, have the heavy rainfall we experience in autumn and spring, rather than the drizzle and gentler rain that is currently the norm. At present the soils in Ireland and the UK tend to be rich and fertile, a complete contrast to the steep terraces and barren, poor soils of the Mediterranean that offers little potential for growth. Water drains freely through the rocky scree of the Med, but risks becoming waterlogged in richer or more clayey soils. Adding a gravel and sand mix to the soil can help with this as soil needs to be impoverished, it's not enough to simply have warmer weather.

When designing a dry garden, we tend to try to blend a mix of different styles of Mediterranean landscape into the garden so that it feels more natural, ranging from steppe to prairie to shrubland. Combinations of these make for a never-ending source of inspiration for creating gardens and give variety in levels and plant types.



Low level plants that survive in very shallow soil with a high level of diversity are found mostly in the Steppe landscape. These can be used to provide a source of alternative options to our traditional northern European lawns, which as water becomes scarcer, and hosepipe bans more common, is something we all need to be thinking about. It is perhaps also time to rethink the balance of spatial division, and start creating larger areas of vegetation that require little or no irrigation, potentially with smaller zones nearer the main living areas that are watered slightly more often to increase summer flowering (after all we have to keep the clients happy!). Then complimenting this with swathes of plants that require much less irrigation than traditional lawns such as, *Zoysia tenuifolia* or thyme but that still give an open, greenish, low level space. More and more however, we try and encourage our clients to embrace the varying tonality that comes with the heat; the browns, silvers and golds that the summer dormancy naturally gives us in these dry environments is beautiful in its own right and then we don't need to water anything at all!

If we move on to the slightly higher level of planting of the prairie landscapes, we tend to see one or two dominant species

which would usually be a grass of some sort, interspersed with self-seeding annuals and perennials. These give a beautiful golden haze, adding architectural interest and movement, in what can otherwise be a static picture of goat pruned shrubs in the extremes of the summer climate. Two of our favourites are *Achnatherum calamagrostis* (*Stipa calamagrostis*) for its grace, and the interesting, elegant *Hyparrhenia hirta* which does well in well drained and poor soil, though can get a bit top heavy if the soil is too rich and wet. It is particularly successful on rocky steep banks.

Once the soil gets a bit deeper, sub-shrubs start to appear and these are the plants that become part of the key structure of the planting scheme through the hot summer months; the part that holds it all together. A combination of natural domes such as *Dorycnium hirsutum* contrasts with grasses and perennials for example, a wide range of *Phlomis fruticosa* and *Lomelosia cretica*, stunning in flower, but equally as beautiful when the dried seed heads hold their own throughout the winter months. Slightly lower down we find excellent fillers such as *Teucrium flavum* and *Teucrium x lucidrys* that keep the ground covered and the weeds to a minimum. Most of



Maybe it is a scene we will see in the next 30 years in Ireland; clients playing boules, whilst sipping Rosé wine that was produced locally, standing under a sunshade to protect them from the scorching summer sun!

These photos are all the same garden but show seasonal changes due to the diversity of planting. The gravel mulch keeps moisture in and weeds out, as well as adding volume with areas that are mounded in an otherwise flat environment.

these plants tend to be evergreen, so really do provide year-round structure and interest.

This idea of form is of utmost importance in a dry climate and is what makes the difference between a garden and a landscape. Olivier Filippi, author of 'Planting Design for Dry Gardens', is the first to admit that it is the form of the plant that provides interest rather than its flowers and colour in the heat of summer and early autumn. What's more, by pruning intelligently post-flowering, we can really emphasize the contrasting shapes in the garden, all the traditional Mediterranean aromatics; lavender, rosemary, Cistus and Salvia thrive in poor soil and lend themselves to being lightly pruned. Euphorbia is another great plant when it comes to form, Euphorbia rigida, has a great leaf structure and self-seeds without being too invasive, if the conditions are right. It reacts well to being pruned after flowering and holds its dynamic form better than its fellow Euphorbia myrsinites.

When it comes to the deep-rooted taller shrubs, these are the plants that form the skeleton upon which the Mediterranean landscape hangs, as with the grasses in the prairie landscape. Again, one or two species dominate;

Pistacia lentiscus, Teucrium fruticans, Bulpleurum fruticosum, Olea europaea or Phillyrea angustifolia are amongst the most common. They are low in density, but still cover the ground successfully, thus decreasing weed competition. They need only an occasional prune to retain a loosely manicured quality and require no water once established.

Potentially taller than we would traditionally expect to plant, these species are the most efficient and cost-effective way to cover the surface area of the garden, with one plant per m2 in comparison with 9 per m2 for prairie areas. By using these taller plants in greater volume and decreasing the lawn areas, we suddenly start changing the entire spatial feeling of a garden. They grow more or less to the desired height due to lack of water and poor soils, thus requiring a lot less maintenance than traditional hedging for example.

The more diverse the planting palette, the more resistant it is to climate change. Deciduous oaks may start to decline in the north as a result of warmer, drier temperatures, but evergreen oaks will gradually work their way in and become more dominant. Diversity gives us more interest in colour, texture and tone, but also increases the potential for natural



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selection as evolution occurs due to the ongoing changes, since all plants will have a different rate of capacity for change. Not to mention the advantages for insect life, which is another consideration to bear in mind.

Finally moving on to a crucial part of the discussion on dry gardens - acknowledging the importance of the mineral elements. In the Mediterranean area, we are naturally drawn to open areas which we can easily access due to shallow soil and the presence of rock and scree. Replicating this in a garden creates a pause in an otherwise complex landscape, offering another alternative to the aesthetic use of lawn. Is it possible we may see the Northern Europeans turning to Pétanque rather than football and cricket, as the climate changes and land use has to adapt accordingly; no more soft landings on the rugby pitch!

Gravel is our first choice of material when it comes to the mineral element in the garden. It not only helps with drainage, particularly if, as per Filippi's guidelines, we dig out paths and mound the resulting soil on either side to create channels for water to flow. As previously mentioned, good drainage is essential in a dry garden, and the latter method leaves raised areas for planting, whilst allowing roots to stay high and dry.

At the same time, it adds an interesting visual dynamic to the landscape, a kind of sculpted landform that allows dry garden plants to thrive. Plants should be planted small, and in the autumn, thus giving them time to establish their roots over the winter months, ready to burst into growth in the spring.

Climate change is happening, but it will not occur from one day to the next, it is a gradual process which we would be wise to start thinking about now. Certainly, some areas of Northern Europe are more suited to a Mediterranean planting style than others - the poorer the soil, the greater chance of having a successful dry garden. For example, the chalk landscape of the South Downs and the barren acidic soil of Dartmoor, have more ecological potential to recreate the Mediterranean landscape than the rich loamy fields of Kent, where historic, rich organic matter would encourage a wealth of thistles and competitive weeds that would overtake the drought tolerant plants of the Med.

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