



Ideas for PNW Gardens – from England

By Karen Chapman CPH

Once hailed as *the* style, English gardens went out of favor in the late 90s, considered to be too labor intensive due to their reliance on an abundance of perennials or endless clipping of topiary structures. Yet there are many lessons to be learned including maximizing small spaces, layering, and using sight lines and focal points effectively. This presentation features both public and private gardens from across England to help you glean dozens of take-home ideas for your garden whatever your preferred style of garden or level of maintenance.

Small Space or No Space? No problem

Lack of space needn't cramp creativity. If you are restricted to container gardens and hanging baskets repeat key colors and/or plants in ALL those vessels for a unified look.

Look for awkward nooks and crannies that can become impromptu planters like the ancient wells built into English stone walls. Do you have an old built in BBQ perhaps? Or a bird bath? An old fire pit that could be modified?

If you can't go out, go UP; vertical gardening has been practiced in England for centuries! Use parallel rows of galvanized wires on fences and walls to train climbing plants. Consider a pattern of two climbers alternating down the length of a long wall for interest.

"Borrow" the view from your neighbors, the larger landscape or another part of your own garden by creating windows to allow peek-a-boo views beyond boundaries. Keep hedges low and simple so the eye travels over them to the view beyond.

Layering

Even the smallest gardens in England are composed of layers: plants of different heights ranging from towering trees to ground covers, although mass monoculture using a single species of groundcover is less popular. Where a space is too small for a tree, a house wall or fence can assume the role of greatest height and be a frame for climbers.

Layers can be lower maintenance by focusing mainly on trees and shrubs, or if you like the cottage garden look, use more perennials of varying heights.

Any design style can benefit from layers from traditional herbaceous borders to gravel gardens.

True layering includes “succession planting”; planting an earlier blooming perennial or bulb eg English blue bells, adjacent to something with later interest such as a hosta or Rodgersia. The fading bulb foliage will be hidden from view by the emerging perennial foliage and no gap will be visible in the border.

Try growing ferns through a carpet of lower shade loving perennials for layers at the ground plane. In England, if there’s room for one plant, there’s room for 3!

Layering climbers is another great way to maximize the space and extend seasonal interest. The first climber eg a rose, is typically tied onto the wall or fence. The secondary climber will typically use the first as a trellis and be self-supporting. Popular combinations include rose + clematis, honeysuckle + clematis, ivy + climbing nasturtium (ivy is not considered invasive in England). You can also grow climbing nasturtium through evergreens eg yew hedge + flame nasturtium. For rose/clematis ideas, look for the out of print book [*The Rose and the Clematis as Good Companions*](#) by John Howells (2007). Lots of great combinations based on color, timing, structures etc.

Plant Tapestries

Carpets of a fairly uniform height but varying in color and texture are popular, each species woven together like an intricate tapestry. This can be done as a ground cover, streamside planting or large sunny border. The aim is to completely cover the ground so no bare earth is showing. This has the benefit of reducing weeds too. Larger scale tapestries benefit from occasional punctuation by trees or other vertical elements.

Foliage Framework

Not all English gardens include flowers! The color and texture of foliage offers much longer seasonality than blooms. Colorful foliage can be used to link areas, draw the eye through a space or act as a focal point.

Sight Lines

What can you see from your window, your armchair, the patio? These lines of sight – or sight lines are key to good design. English garden examples shown includes a series of vine-clad archways with a clear path leading through them all, black mondo grass flanking a mosaic-laid pathway, and a narrow, stone-lined rill. Symmetry can be used to enhance the power of these sight lines.

Focal Points

These are often used in conjunction with sight lines – many of the examples noted above culminate in something significant such as statuary, a fountain or a gazebo.

Focal points are used to draw attention to a specific area – or to distract the eye from unfavorable views eg utility poles.

Budget Friendly

Make every penny count! Consider stout marine rope held in place with landscape pins as pathway edging. Or use tree and shrub pruning's to make gourd tunnels, trellis systems, peony cages or to hold plants back that are flopping over a pathway.

Mini-Meadows

No-mow May in England created a community initiative to build pollinator corridors and many home gardeners loved the results so much that they continued beyond May into the summer. The wispieness of a meadow often looks best with a counterpoint such as a tightly mown path running through it, a piece of sculpture emerging from it or a boldly colored bench to one side.

Color Restraint

Restricting the number of colors – but varying their shade results in a more cohesive look. Consider harmonious shades of apricot, buttermilk and soft raspberry, or cooling blues and silver with salmon accents. For a contemporary feel white, silver, and chartreuse are striking especially against a charcoal home or fence.

FUN!

Brits are known for their dry sense of humor and this often extends to their gardens. Don't be afraid of adding a little whimsy to your space – something that reflects "you".

Gardens for the Soul

Wherever you go in England you'll be offered a cup of tea and a biscuit (aka cookie) or slice of homemade cake, so it's no surprise that sitting areas are important in an English garden. Yet these are immersive spaces not just to savor that cuppa but also to experience the garden through fragrance, touch, and sound. Wrap your patio with the garden to create a similar effect, using containers if necessary to bring the plants up close.

Perhaps consider a labyrinth mown through a loose meadow – kick off your shoes and enjoy the meditative stroll.

Want more ideas?

- Come with me to England! I have two tours this year in May and July. Details are on my travel page. (PS there's also a tour to South Africa this fall)
- I offer a number of [online workshops](#) on landscape and container design.
- My [books](#) are full of creative ideas.
- Check out my [website and blog](#) for inspiration, upcoming events, newsletters, **garden tours**, and free stuff!
- **Questions?** Email me karen@lejardinetdesigns.com

