

Large Garden Project

For the large drought resistant garden project we will consider and review a real life project planned, designed and planted by Sara Jane Rothwell of Glorious Gardens. The original garden was a pretty basic affair as you can see from the 'before' photo below. It consisted mainly of a large lawn with a group of mature beech trees at the end away from the house, with bushes and shrubs to one side and untended bare soil, ivy and a few straggly self seeded young trees to the other side. Developing this simple, unstructured space into a well designed, low maintenance, environmentally friendly and drought tolerant garden posed an exciting challenge.

To begin with, some basic construction and erection of new boundary fences was required to better define the garden space. The decision was made to opt for one-meter high oak posts, spaced out at 2.5m gaps, with three rows of tensioned galvanized wire strung between the posts. This provides a long lasting and durable fence. Because of the large size and woodland nature of the garden already providing natural screening, privacy was not considered a major issue, so the open style of the fencing was not a problem. In addition, new green oak was purchased from a local supplier for the construction of the terraced retaining walls and the arbour.



Obviously the beautiful mature beech trees seen in the 'before' photo would remain as a central feature, but careful consideration was needed to decide how to work round them. Firstly, as mature trees they were tall and caused a great deal of shade, which affects and limits what can be planted nearby. Secondly, it is very difficult to grow most plants under beech trees, so this affected how the immediate surrounding areas were planned and designed. However,





as can be seen from the 'after' photo on the right, the more formally designed and planted areas segue naturally and harmoniously into the less developed woodland area around and under the beech trees.

The finished garden as shown in the after photo above has a contemporary feel, with a clever mix of formal plantings integrated with natural woodland areas.

A large garden such as this must rely to some extent on physically powerful structural design and architectural plants, and here the beech trees give a strong focal point. Combined with interesting surfaces such as the bark mulch, a wide variety of different plants, and features such as the terraced beds and arbour the overall impression of the garden is one of Nature in harmony with human design.

GREEN CREDENTIALS

The garden was designed to be environmentally friendly, drought tolerant and low maintenance. The photo at the bottom of this page shows two key green features. Firstly you can see the fenced area providing space for two compost bins – this is the best way to compost with one bin undergoing the composting process with the bottom layer just about ready for use while the other bin is built up with fresh vegetable peelings, grass clippings and so forth. The bins finally were installed once the planting and all the other gardening work was completed.



Secondly, you can see the thick bark mulch covering all of the surface area of the beds around the plants. Not only does this minimise moisture loss and make the best use of rainfall, but the mulch has been also applied quite thickly to discourage any but the most persistent weeds. With very few weeds having a chance to grow through, the amount of time spent weeding is much reduced. In this way, the natural state of the garden is undisturbed much of the time – encouraging wildlife to visit – and the soil structure is not broken down by repeatedly walking over it.



CHOICE OF PLANTS

Plants were chosen for their suitability for the soil type and other of the garden's conditions such as sunlight, shade, exposure and so forth. Plants were also selected for their individual aesthetic qualities and for their ability to combine harmoniously into the garden as a whole. The natural, woodland style of the garden has been enhanced by a choice of plants that blend well together. Whilst some more formal, highly stylised or cottage gardens can take lots of different colours and flowers, the more natural feel of this garden is highlighted by keeping to mainly different shades of green with some white flowers and grasses.

One of the few exceptions is the pretty and dramatic red flowers that you can see have been carefully and generously interspersed amongst the other plants. This plant is the lovely penstemon garnet, or *Penstemon Andenken an Friedrich Hahn*. *Penstemon garnet* is a bushy semi-evergreen perennial that can grow up to 90cm in height, so the bright flowers





are easily visible both above and through the other plants. Its narrow, dark green leaves help show off the bell-shaped, deep wine-red flowers, accented with white on the throat of the petals. Generally disease free, penstemon garnet tolerates almost all soil types and aspects so it fits in well to the garden's natural, low maintenance, drought tolerant remit.

The penstemons are particularly complemented by the Mexican feather grass, or Texas needle grass (*stipa tenuissima*). The close up detail photo (above) of the grass covered with dew shows the pretty, almost luminous shades of green and white colours of the grass, and perhaps this variegation gave rise to its other common name of ponytails. This deciduous grass has narrow, arching, feathery flowers of pale brown and pale green in summer. Ponytails is a hardy, easy to care for plant ideally suited to this garden.