



A PRIVATE WALL GARDEN
IN THE OLD CITY OF
GENEVA WITH TOPIARY,
OLIVE TREES AND THE
FLOWERING RAMBLER
ROSE, ROSA SEAGULL.

Come Naturally

The 21st century garden is respectful and less invasive; its designers are careful to leave grassy spaces and keep human intervention to a minimum.

words and photography by Pascal Olivier

It’s obvious today that we can no longer approach garden design the way we did 20 or 30 years ago. Environmental, economic and climatic conditions have all been turned upside down. Our collective conscience has taken over and made us realise that our planet’s resources are limited. Like a garden, the Earth is a finite space. This is the new model into which we must work even further restrictions and explore new cultural practices, all while preserving our natural resources.

To understand how any plant fits into a garden, one must look at its geographic origins and understand the milieu in which it will evolve and grow. A garden must be in harmony with its surrounding countryside. ‘Plant ethics’, or better still, genius loci (the spirit of place), seem out of kilter whenever we see a green lawn in an arid environment, or mountain orchids that are foreign to the seashore. “The art of gardens consists in nothing more than in arranging the ground with the same diversity as nature presents to our intuition, but in arranging it differently and conforming to certain ideas,” wrote the philosopher Immanuel Kant.

But now man has changed his attitude toward nature. “Instead of conquering nature, we must feed her, love her and preserve her,” says French botanist Gilles Clément. A brief glance back in time shows us that late 19th-century landscaped gardens used rolling hills, running streams and natural stands of trees. This type of garden blossomed in 18th-century England, breaking with the tradition of formal, more regular French garden patterns. In the 20th century, many landscape architects began to imitate nature; we began seeing banks of alpine rock gardens planted in lowland parks, for example. This approach gave visitors the illusion of a more natural effect using carefully staged plant collections. Paradoxically, many garden lovers appreciate nature, but not the idea of a ‘wild garden.’

The 21st century vindicates the wild garden. What's natural has again become essential. Little by little we are abandoning the artificial and the out of context; we are seeing clipped lawns turned into flowered meadows, and thuya hedges replaced by more indigenous shrubs. Plant ecology now lies at the very heart of our thinking. Committed landscapists use plants to emphasise or create a form of biodiversity. They now seek to reproduce existing ecosystems, using species that evoke scrubland or moors, bogs or rain forests.

"We do not inherit the Earth from our fathers, we borrow it from our children,"
— Antoine De Saint-Exupéry

Today the garden has become a place of harmony, clearly in step with its local environment. Yet it can still appropriate elements of a more distant countryside. Gardens gain additional dimensions and become part of the global landscape when planted with local species, offering new visions, both real and imaginary.

The 21st century garden is respectful and less invasive; its designers are careful to leave grassy spaces and keep human intervention to a minimum. They mow less systematically, for example, and more with a view toward preserving each landscape's intrinsic biodiversity.

But above all, they are looking for ways to reduce our dependence on water and to preserve this priceless resource. They choose flora adapted to their surroundings in order to optimise watering, and mulch around young plants to limit evaporation. They salvage rainwater with water butts or green-planted roofs. Every day they watch and learn, tending toward ever-better solutions. This preliminary observation of a place, coupled with knowledge of plants, dictates any action by gardener-landscapists today. ◇

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LEFT: THE LUMINOUS GRASSES, 'KARL FOERSTER' WITH A DOUBLE ROW OF HORNBEAM TREES AND AN OLD FOUNTAIN. RIGHT: IN THIS GARDEN, HORNBEAM IS OFFSET BY A DENSE BOXWOOD HEDGE. © PASCAL OLIVIER.