



Creating a Sense of Place

Garden designers speak of capturing the “sense of place” when they plan a garden. What, exactly, do they mean? It’s the emotional response you have to certain spaces when the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I think it’s a sense of history and yet timelessness, a certain serenity and feeling of belonging created by a perfect juxtaposition of proportion, planting, and purpose. We might look at a hundred-year-old farmhouse and not think much of it, but one with an equally old maple tree in the front yard almost compels us to imagine the skinny sapling planted when the house was built, and the decades of change both have witnessed. The “place” can be as grand as the Taj Majal or as intimate as an urban courtyard. It doesn’t have to cost a fortune: the porch of a dilapidated farmhouse, overflowing with colorful flowers growing in recycled tin cans, could have a powerful sense of place, while the most expensively landscaped corporate campus almost certainly will not. That indefinable something actually triggers a physical response, too: blood pressure moderates, endorphins flow, and immune systems improve.

So, how do you bring a sense of place into your own garden? The starting point is always the physical attributes of your site. Is it urban or rural, open or sheltered, dry or damp, steeply sloped or bulldozed flat? Can you include the “borrowed landscape” of a distant view, or must you construct a private enclosure that turns its back on noisy neighbors or an ugly industrial plant? What plants are already there, and which new ones will thrive? Whatever the quirks, celebrate them.

You’re more likely to succeed if you work with what’s already there rather than try to force an idea borrowed from somewhere else. I love the strictly symmetrical gardens of medieval Europe and wanted to create something similar in my own courtyard. Accordingly, I built a row of classical columns to define the north side, and imagined tightly groomed beds in straight rows. But the garage pushes the entrance to one corner, and the retaining wall bends unevenly along the south side, so a path to the front door was always going to divide the courtyard into irregular halves. Then, too, my budget limited me to the rough stone already there, rather than imported cut stone or antique brick. Following the cues on site got me a slightly meandering stone path, perfect for a cottage garden. And so the formal beds I had planned were discarded in favor of relaxed abundance, which suits my little house better than the original design ever could have.

Also consider how you will use the space. Function is a key factor when creating a sense of belonging, and it doesn't take much: a simple table and chairs fill an empty corner of the yard with promises of family dinners under the stars; a bench invites you to sit and take note of the branches of a flowering tree or the sound of nearby running water. Fill your space with elements that speak of home: a swing under the largest tree; a sturdy cedar fence around a vegetable garden; a place of honor for your mother's roses. Make sure every path has a destination and every gate has a purpose. If they don't, you'll feel uneasy, even if you don't know why.

As much as possible, follow nature's guidance. An artificial waterfall rising abruptly in the middle of flat lawn is jarring, but the same waterfall on higher ground in a corner seems to have always been there. Follow nature's example by planting in clumps and drifts, not singly or in rows. Even in quite formal gardens, the effect will be more harmonious, and human intervention downplayed. Nobody ever created a sense of place with a row of arbor vitae and mulch!

Obviously, it helps if your property has some age to it. Older houses were more likely to be built of local materials, in a style dictated by the climate and the occupants' way of life, and successive generations will have left their mark in outbuildings, stone walls, old flowerbeds, and mature trees. All of these features give you a head start on history. But a newly built tract house, identical to every other house on the street, can still be planned and planted to create a world all its own within even the smallest lot. As you design, try to reflect your personality; complement the scale and age of your house; choose plants suited to your growing conditions; and incorporate natural materials as much as possible. You'll be well on your way to creating a sense of place.