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5 key landscaping trends



The lie of the land

Thinking about revamping your garden? Landscape designer **Carrie Latimer** gives her views on where local landscaping is heading.

Photographs **Julian Goldswain**

What excites me greatly about current landscaping trends is the radically changing ideas on the concept of "indoor/out". At the moment, landscape design is far more about simple, intelligent methods of design and production than about new materials, hybrid plants and novel techniques. Tapping into broader socio-economic trends (and those that the landscape industry will experience) will increase demand for quality and a tempered approach to design.

Luxe will still be exact, but will be personalised and diverse, and with our focus narrowed to our local environment, gardens will reflect their own growing desire to blend in rather than stick out. Am I rating you to play it safe? Absolutely not. As a landscape designer, I can confidently say that the industry is hotting up. And there is no putting away with being all-out and so-knickers-in-the-climate. It's about good fundamentals, about finding that element of surprise and about creating a garden that reflects the very best of its owners.

Shag-turf chic

While ornamental grasses have been the rage for some time, the more common turf grasses are receiving increasing recognition for their natural beauty. Left unmown, turf grasses can be used to define spaces within the landscape in an attractive and cost-effective way. On a couple of occasions in the past year, I have been faced with the task of designing a domestic garden so large that to intensively landscape the entire property would have been both a maintenance and budgetary nightmare. Seeding large areas with grasses such as perennial rye, All Seasons Evergreen or *Paspalum notatum*, which can all be left unmown for many months, is easy on both the pocket and eye – not to mention the mower blades! Though you can achieve a slick effect by contrasting unmown turf with more manicured lawns, I have great fun experimenting with seasonal bulbs, such as snowdrops and oxalis, which can push through a turf carpet to give a charming display of flowers as the seasons roll over. Perhaps because of their connection to the grassveld, the Johannesburg-based designers I have met are far ahead on this trend, applying the principles to gracious old stands and tight urban spaces alike.

Photo: © Justin Hill



The age of responsibility



Any scepticism that going green is a fad is long out the window. Responsible design is now a lasting trend that, through necessity alone, will radically shape the world of landscaping to come. While there are many facets to this topic, the most pressing is probably water conservation. For her wisdom, experience and style, I place great value in the views of designer Franchesca Watson on complex matters such as these. As she points out, "Water constraints affect our choice in plants, and while it is important to understand how this will affect the aesthetic of your garden, choosing water-wise plants is not enough to turn the situation around. We need to think more deeply about the issue, about giving water a chance to seep back into the water table and not simply find its way to the storm-water system." Franchesca encourages people to find a comfortable balance between responsible and beautiful design. For example, she suggests inhibiting water run-off by choosing permeable driveway surfaces, such as grass blocks or middle mannetjies, which, when designed skilfully, can add greatly to the beauty of a garden.

Untamed modern

Say a sweet goodbye to the idea that for a landscape to sit comfortably with contemporary architecture it must mimic it by using hard lines, static sculptural forms and terribly controlled planting. The most sophisticated architects I've encountered prefer to set their minimal creations in a landscape that celebrates the informal beauty of the natural world. Creating a successful 'wild' garden requires a delicate understanding not only of the plant species native to the region, but of how the planting will develop over time. As ecologist Marijke Honig points out when talking about her fynbos gardens, "The more diverse an ecosystem is, the more resilient it will be, so one can include a lot of plant diversity in a fynbos garden. To make it look authentic, avoid large drifts of single species and rather plant in a mixed 'Persian carpet' style, which mimics natural plant populations. Fynbos plants are sensitive, so you can expect a few plants to die; but in this natural style of planting, it doesn't matter: there will be others to fill their place." I would strongly recommend seeking an expert from your region, who can design a planting scheme inspired by your local surrounds to create a natural, ultra-contemporary context for your home.



The urban refuge



As a Capetonian designer, I hadn't quite appreciated the growing interest in courtyard gardens, until a recent trip to Johannesburg brought me to some of the most exciting downtown dwellings I had seen in a long time. Enclosed by buildings and open to the sky, courtyard gardens have formed an integral part of residential architecture for almost as long as humans have built homes. Yet for landscape architect Sonja Swanepoel, of African Environmental Design, they offer a solution to some very contemporary needs. 'In cities across the world where security is an issue, people prefer the refuge of enclosed courtyard spaces,' she says. 'In Mexico City, for example, architects are building houses with very few exterior openings, and focusing great attention on internal courtyards. These gardens also moderate the extreme effects of the hot summers by cooling the air which enters a building.' The courtyards Sonja designs are uncomplicated, offering a usable, compact outdoor space suitable for urban living. While Sonja's metropolitan gardens appear simple, creating beauty in a small space requires attention to detail, and a fundamental understanding of the needs of the building's inhabitants.



A new modesty

If Karl Lagerfeld can say it, then so can we, and with a great sigh of relief – bling is dead. Every discipline of design is contending with a backlash to the lavish materialism of the past two decades. For landscape design, like so many others, it's back to solid, straightforward, gimmick-free design. One designer whose work has always impressed me as remarkably ego free is Capetonian Mary Maurel. Coming from a background in architecture, Mary says, 'I was never interested in trophy architecture – excess and ornamentation for the sake of it. Today, as a garden designer, I see my role in a project as site responsive – to create a symbiotic relationship between the architecture and the landscape. The framework is key, and the planting should reinforce it. Often, in this way, you can create something extraordinary out of the seemingly ordinary.' Mary's gardens are deceptively simple and restrained, her understanding of proportion, form and plant materials, clear. Her knowledge results in landscapes that are comfortable and quietly eye-catching. A garden does add significantly to the cash value of a property; perhaps that's why, despite the stringent economic climate, people are still willing to invest in their gardens. Attitudes, however, are certainly changing. People are showing far more reserve in their spending, and much greater interest in design that adds to quality of life rather than status. ☺

ABOUT THE WRITER

Carrie Latimer has been a practising landscape designer in Cape Town for the past four years. Coming from a fine-arts background, Carrie fell in love with the world of garden design while living in rural South East England. With her family being based largely in Hong Kong, and with her passion for travel, Carrie's been exposed to a diverse range of gardens, resulting in a portfolio that ranges from classic British-style gardens to ultra-contemporary landscapes on the Atlantic seaboard. You can contact her on +27 (0)79 871 5572.

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