Book Review

Garden Masterclass

John Brookes

2002 Dorling Kindersley, London, United Kingdom
352pp, hardcover
ISBN 0–7513–14331, price £25

As a master gardener with over 40 years of experience in garden design and teaching, John Brookes explains the way he thinks about design. He takes the reader through the process of making a garden — from gathering inspiration from nature to finding the elements that dictate one’s personal garden style. There is a logical progression from start to finish. The focus of the book is on the principles of design — what one should be thinking about in planning and constructing a garden — rather than on horticulture.

To begin with the author describes the setting of the landscape, reminding one that the land has a history and unique geology. An awareness of natural landscapes, patterns in agricultural and urban settings, as well as the vernacular style of buildings, helps one to define how we use garden space.

Chapter two looks at shape. This, says Brookes, is the one element that comes before everything else when planning a garden from scratch. He gives an account of shapes that define garden design — from the geometric shapes of formal gardens to the organic shapes used in wild gardens. On a more practical note, there are details of how to make a site plan using his grid method.

The next three chapters deal with direction, levels and enclosure. Planting avenues and constructing pathways create direction while additional visual interest can be created by changing levels on a flat site, either in the form of terraces, steps, retaining walls or through earth-shaping. Technical briefs for the construction of these elements are also included. Enclosure provides privacy and protection, which Brookes believes is increasingly important in smaller gardens. Special mention is given to framing views and choosing screens and different types of fences.

The garden entrance is the theme of chapter six, in which the author introduces some of the problems associated with access for both pedestrians and cars. There are tips on how to best utilise the space while at the same time create the right kind of impression and mood.

Chapters seven and eight explore the variety of hard (paving, pebbles and gravels) and soft surfaces (earth, grass, sand and water) available to gardeners and different kinds of garden structures. Bearing in mind that buildings should relate to the scale of the place, guidelines are given for planning conservatories and garden sheds.

What follows next is a comprehensive chapter on planting. Readers are introduced to different planting styles, like green, cottage, prairie and meadow gardens; how to use colour; where to start when it comes to planting trees and shrubs and how to choose material appropriate to the site.

Creating natural water forms with marginal plantings; the illusion of running water and formal water shapes such as water channels and swimming pools are dealt with in chapter 10 on water.

To conclude, chapter 11 shows one how to personalise the landscape using pots and containers, garden furniture and lighting.

Each chapter is richly illustrated with colour photographs and line illustrations to demonstrate design principles, making Garden Masterclass a superb visual reference work. At first glance it is this that will appeal most to readers as they are presented with ideas and inspiration from gardens around the world and in every setting imaginable. But this is not the only purpose of the book. Through his conversations with the reader, John Brookes shares a very personal journey of discovery as he explores gardens and garden traditions throughout the world, commenting on the influences of these styles on the way we think about gardens today.

Armed with this background and the tools of a master designer, garden enthusiasts will be more confident about tackling the landscape and transforming it into the garden of their dreams. The benefit of the book, of course, is comparable to attending a garden design course by one of the gardening world’s most respected gardeners. That being the intention of Garden Masterclass, the book should appeal to amateur gardeners and professionals alike.

Catherine Fennell
Research Centre for Plant Growth and Development, School of Botany and Zoology, University of Natal Pietermaritzburg, South Africa