

Caspar Gabb's gold-medal winning Green Room at last year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show



What false promise flowers bring, in comparison to the enduring pleasure of foliage. Yet many people overlook greenery in a garden and the depth of interest it can bring, concentrating instead on the short seasons of colour and scent that flowers present.

Green has many personalities, which can be used to build an exciting scheme that will hold attention.

However, if you are planting a garden that will rely on foliage rather than flowers, it is crucial to focus on the form, texture and colour of the plants.

The composition of any foliage-planting design presents many choices: all shades of green as well as sparkly silvers, wine reds, beetroot purples and russet browns. When designing a garden, I always rely on this foliage, not merely to extend the season of interest but to provide it with flow and essential structure. From topiary to tropical, minimalist to woodland, a green garden can come in all shapes and sizes.

Often referred to as the backbone of a garden, foliage is responsible for holding everything together.

Evergreens deserve a special mention for their year-round contribution. This can take many forms, ranging from hedges and architectural plants – those that provide a strong focal point – to ground cover and climbers.

If you have acres to play with, then you can have the luxury of devoting areas of your garden to the pure indulgence of a riot of colour that dies down after summer. Most of us, though, have much more modest plots, which demand 12 months of interest from one space. The colour green calms and soothes, which is why a predominantly foliage-based garden offers such a welcome relief, especially in urban settings.

When designing a green garden, my primary objective is to employ layers of foliage, which highlight contrasting leaves and textures. From a more distant view – say, through a window – it is the larger leaves that stand out. If you then position these plants against smaller, finer leaves nearby, the larger specimens will become further defined. Closer up, the smaller leaves will come into their own.

Include contrasts of upright, linear shapes with those that are rounded, prostrate and horizontal; large bold leaves with deep-cut or feathery fine ones; the pendulous with the spreading. Put glossy, shiny leaves with matt and glaucous (covered with a waxy bloom) specimens; soft and transparent with dense; spiny with hairy, smooth with rough.

Without careful consideration of each plant's relationship to its neighbour, the overall structure of a green-based garden can become blurred. However, don't use all these tricks at once and avoid falling into the trap of plumping for the most extreme textural contrasts: this will only look contrived. Simplicity is the key.

Greenery comes in many shades and hues, which will also affect the

Give the garden a backbone

Caspar Gabb won Best City Garden for his foliage-based entry at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show last year. Here he recommends his favourite greens