

A photograph of a modern garden. In the foreground, there is a lush green lawn. A wooden deck with a dark grey finish is on the right. On the deck, there are two white wicker chairs and a matching table. The garden is filled with various plants, including tall grasses, purple flowers, and a white-barked tree. The background shows a modern building with large windows.

Ferdinand Leffler

# Live in Your Garden

Design Inspiration for Contemporary Gardens

Host





Ferdinand Leffler

**Live in Your  
Garden**

**Ferdinand Leffler**

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**Design Inspiration  
for Contemporary Gardens**

Brno 2018

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First published in Czech by Host – vydavatelství

Cover photo © Zuzana Stiborková

Photographs © Zuzana Stiborková, Mirek Kodeš,

Ferdinand Leffler, Studio Flusser, Natália Vataščinová,

basepoint, Jakub Stratil, David Veis

Illustrations © Markéta Šindlarová

Translation © Helena Worthington and Mark Worthington

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ISBN 978-80-7491-676-2

**“THE BIGGEST REASON YOU DON’T GET ANSWERS IS THAT  
YOU HAVEN’T ASKED THE QUESTIONS.”**

– Richard Bach





# Contents

Introduction: Every Garden Has Its Own Story . . . . . 11

## MY APPROACH TO GARDEN DESIGN

### Questions I Ask Myself . . . . . 15

The Limits and Specifics . . . . . 17  
of the Place . . . . . 17  
Functions, Features, and Experiences. . . . . 31  
Atmosphere and Design . . . . . 49  
Materials . . . . . 55  
Plants . . . . . 61

## INSPIRATION

### Garden Stories . . . . . 67

The Garden of Villa Franta . . . . . 69  
A Small Garden in Town . . . . . 79  
A Forest Garden for My Friend . . . . . 89  
A Garden in the Country. . . . . 101  
A Relaxed Garden. . . . . 111

## HOW TO PLAN A GARDEN STEP BY STEP

### The New Garden . . . . . 121

What Can Be Changed and What  
Isn't Worth Bothering About. . . . . 123

Hard Surface Areas and Land Demarcation. . . . . 135  
Connections to the Surrounding Areas. . . . . 151  
Practical Features and Dream Experiences. . . . . 155  
Deciding and Prioritizing . . . . . 237  
The Atmosphere of the Garden . . . . . 241  
Design and Detail . . . . . 247  
Materials . . . . . 253  
Building materials . . . . . 253  
Plants . . . . . 265

And finally... . . . . 278

## Technical Details & Practical Advice . . . . . 281

Sample Landscape Plan and Most Common  
Garden Features. . . . . 283  
Technical Details . . . . . 287

Subject Index . . . . . 300  
List of Photographs . . . . . 302





## Every Garden Has Its Own Story

You are not holding in your hand a textbook for prospective landscape architects. This is a book in which I'll try to give you some advice on how to approach your garden. It could be a garden that is quite old and overgrown that you've had for years, or it may be so new that there's barely been time for a dandelion to grow in it.

I'd like to show you that you can create a practical and pleasant environment virtually anywhere. It just needs a certain perspective and not to be afraid to ask some straight and sometimes even delicate questions.

Just to be clear from the beginning, I will also advise you when it's absolutely essential to get expert advice and not overestimate your own abilities. In my view, this is evidence of the maturity of your reflections on the architecture of your garden and house.

The gardens I create always put people above all else. First, I see the family that's going to live in the space, and only after that do I think about plant structure or particular layers of vegetation.

With my designs, you won't find anything that's just for show, created simply for passers-by to admire. The gardens I design in my studio with my colleagues are not intended to confirm a person's social status, but, primarily, to please their owner. A garden is a bit like a relationship—although it requires a certain amount of care and attention, it brings unique experiences, fulfilment, adventure, inspiration and joy into one's life.

*Ferdinand*



Now's the right moment to forget, yes, forget! If you want a garden in which you'll feel good, forget about all the pictures of gardens you've ever seen. Forget about trees, flowers, pergolas, designer furniture, stone pavements and barbecues. I'll teach you to think about the garden differently, with a broader overview and more detachment. It's nothing complicated and it will be fun. In essence, I just ask a few questions, and you answer them. After that, I believe you will have a clearer idea about where you want to go with the design of your garden.

We often think about gardens from the end point. First, we choose the accessories and then we fall in love with the atmosphere we want to create. We first ask ourselves, "Should it be modern and elegant, or wild and natural like a garden in the country?" And then, we try to fit into our garden everything that we've seen somewhere in photographs that's impressed us. Don't worry, these things will eventually come into play, but not until later. First, we need to understand the space that we have at our disposal. We need to understand what it offers us, and also, contrastingly, what it will not allow, for example, due to its location or shape.

Then comes the time when we have to properly set out what we require and what we would like to have. This requires a courageous and honest probe into our soul. We have to figure out not only what practical elements we need in the garden, but also what is lacking in our everyday lives, since our garden may be able to give it to us.

Once we know all the things that need to be in the garden, we can gradually try to find the best possible places for each of them. Last of all come the specific design, the materials, and the shapes.

I invite you to join me on an adventurous journey to your new garden.







# Questions I Ask Myself

When I first meet clients and look around their land, I ask a lot of questions. I ask not only the people who live there, but I also ask myself, or rather I ask questions of the particular place and everything in it. For me, answering all the questions is key to creating a garden with a unique atmosphere. Here are the questions I put to myself and my clients when we first meet.





# The Limits and Specifics of the Place

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In a quiet moment, take a piece of paper and a pencil and try to answer all of the following questions.

If you don't know the answer to some of them just yet, don't worry, skip over them and come back to them later. It might seem at first glance that there are just too many, but you'll see that in order to create a really good garden, done in the right way, it's necessary to answer them.

Before we begin to dream about the atmosphere and the fulfilment of your aspirations for the garden, it's advisable to answer a few very practical questions, as it will save us from being distracted by them when we come to the actual creative part of the planning.

## HOW HIGH IS THE LAND ABOVE SEA LEVEL?

The elevation of the land isn't going to have an influence on deciding whether or where to situate a woodshed or a pergola. However, it does indicate how long the snow will stay on the ground during winter and how much rainfall you will get. It is especially important when selecting plants.

See *Hard Surface Areas and Land Demarcation*, p. 135

## WHAT IS THE STRENGTH AND DIRECTION OF THE WIND?

Observe the strength and direction of the wind. The direction will tell you the parts around the house where there will be a lot of water when it rains, and, conversely, which parts will be sheltered from the rain. Unpleasant winds can be partially mitigated by suitable planting or by erecting a screen or windbreak wall in the garden.

## ARE THERE ANY UTILITY MAINS OR RESTRICTED ZONES RUNNING THROUGH THE GARDEN?

Restricted and safety zones can have a decisive influence on the location of all features in a garden—both constructions and plants. Therefore, it is necessary to find out as much information as possible on the relevant regulations in advance. Pay attention to water pipelines, sewerage pipes, electricity and gas mains, communication cables, and others. It's also good to find out whether the area is subject to any specific regulations (e.g. a conservation area). Also, look at the natural surroundings (forests, protected areas, water resources, etc.).





↑ In the end, what works best in the space of the garden is simple geometry, which may seem mundane from a height. Believe me, the dynamics will be taken care of by the plants in the beds.

If you are at the stage prior to the planning of the garden, pay particular attention to the existing electricity and water mains that run through the land.

#### HOW PERMEABLE IS THE SOIL?

If the land is not extremely waterlogged, water isn't going to be a limiting factor in creating the garden. However, very wet and saturated soil must be drained (for more on this, see p. 288). But this is only possible when you have somewhere for the water to go. If your garden is in a hollow, a high level of groundwater is simply a reality that has to be taken into account, especially when choosing plants. In the most susceptible parts, we don't put any paths or larger seating areas. If there's no other option, a seating area may be put on a raised construction such as a little wooden pier or something similar.

#### WHAT KIND OF SOIL DOES THE LAND HAVE?

The soil quality of the land is a crucial issue. Normally, we wouldn't want to pay for cultivation, as this investment is not very visible in a garden. But take a good look right from the start. Take a look at gardens that have been established without any attention to the soil, often soulless developers' projects, where trees and bushes literally languish.

Above all, try to protect the topsoil, which is usually twenty to thirty centimetres of the top layer of soil. Put it to one side and don't mix it with the rest of the subsoil. This topsoil needs to be stored well to preserve all its properties.

See Technical Details: Topsoil and Storing It, p. 288

If you notice that nothing is growing on the land, I recommend you have a soil test done at the nearest pedology institute, because the soil is either "dead", i.e. without any nutrients, or it may be contaminated. In either case, a solution must be found before building a garden on it.

See Technical Details: Soil Cultivation, p. 297







← Dry stone walls don't have to be purely functional; they can also work very well in the garden as a casual decoration of the space or an occasional place for sitting.

↓ When designing the direction of the path in the space, keep in mind not only the transition from point A to point B, but also pay attention to the views that will open up to you along the way.



#### HOW IS THE HOUSE POSITIONED IN THE SPACE?

Most people consider the garden to be only the main outdoor living area of the land (most often behind the house). But the house naturally divides the land into several areas. The small and narrow parts in front and next to the house are extremely important and have more to offer than a mere transitional function. When compared with the central part of the garden, these spaces have a different ratio of sunshine and shade, and in the summer heat they can work well with a bench as little rooms. As they're not in plain sight, they can also be used, for example, as places for a clothes-dryer or a woodshed with a chopping block and an axe.

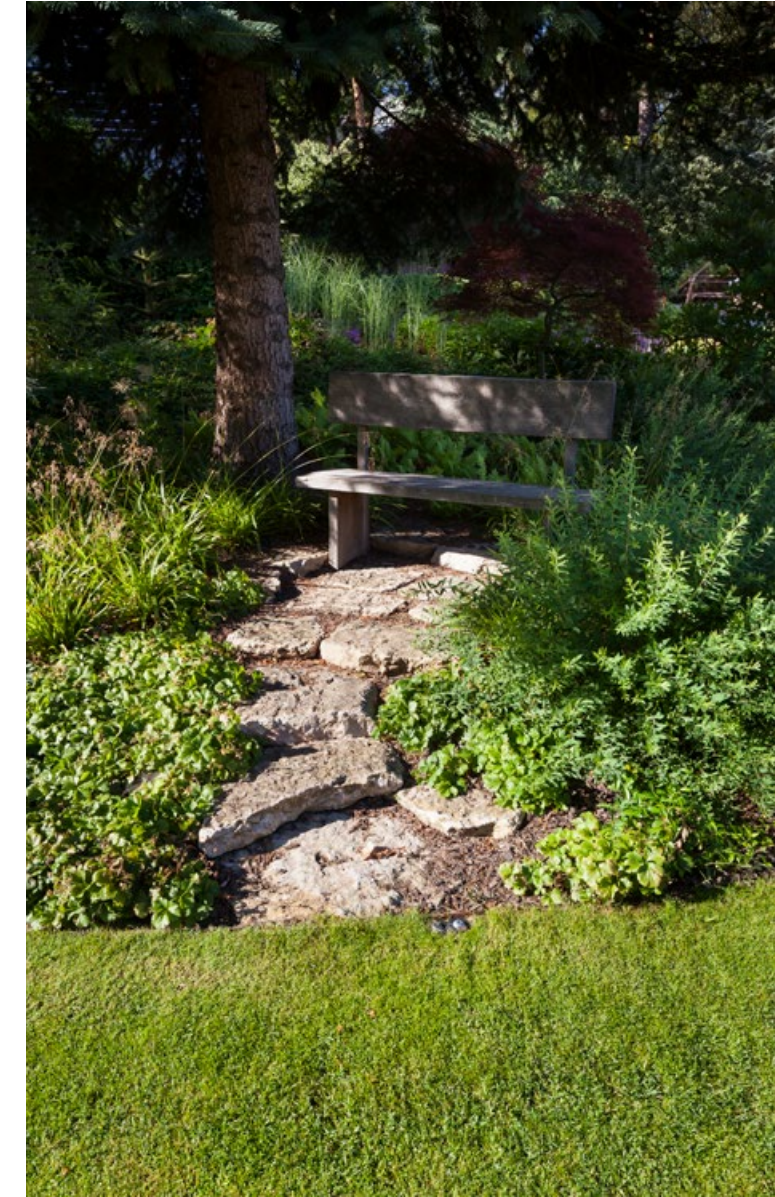
#### HOW IS THE HOUSE POSITIONED IN TERMS OF HEIGHT?

Personally, I am very fond of gardens on hillside slopes. They offer the kind of ruggedness and nooks and crannies that take time to create in gardens on level terrain.

If the garden is on flat land, do not attempt to divide up the space with "little mounds", i.e., landscape mounds or berms, which, in the end, always looks artificial. A better solution is to use a low wall, steps you can sit on, or a dry stone wall. The height dynamics of the garden can also be created using greenery; larger groups of various trees and shrubs work well. If the land is quite steep, I would only recommend levelling it in the residential areas of the garden. Leave the rest of the space naturally undulating. Terracing all of the land is unnecessarily expensive and in the context of the surrounding areas looks unnatural.

#### HOW DOES LIGHT AND SHADOW MOVE IN THE GARDEN?

You shouldn't underestimate the value of this question either. The way sun and shadow moves around the garden throughout the day and the whole year is fundamental information for choosing plants and places for particular outdoor living areas of the garden. Try to notice the light and shade that is also created in your garden by the trees and houses of surrounding properties. Make these observations at least four times a year, in every season if you have the time, as you want to be able to make the most of your garden the whole year round.



↑ Shady gardens offer a unique charm and mystery.









↑ Think about the everyday views from the house onto the changing garden. If the design works, they will be sights you'll never tire of.

#### **HOW DO YOU GET TO THE GARDEN FROM THE HOUSE?**

A comfortable way of getting to the garden from the house should be a matter of course. The exits from a house to the surrounding land are often predetermined. However, if your house doesn't offer a pleasant way of accessing the garden, take a step back and consider some new alternatives. Sometimes, an independent architect may bring some unexpected ideas on how to live in the house, which can make significant positive changes to your habits. In the years I've been designing gardens, I have persuaded a number of my clients of the benefits of knocking through a new window or a door leading to the garden.

#### **WHAT ARE THE ACCESS ROUTES FROM THE STREET TO THE HOUSE?**

By moving the position of the gate in the fence, it's possible to change the direction and shape of the path to the entrance door of the house. As in the previous paragraph, considering new alternatives might prove fruitful. Try to close your eyes for a moment and imagine that you have the opportunity of creating a totally new entrance and you can completely obliterate the existing arrangement. If a proposed solution is more practical and pleasing, go for it. After all, you'll be walking along that path every day!

#### **ARE THERE ANY VIEWS FROM THE LAND WORTH CALLING ATTENTION TO?**

If there's a beautiful view of a distant horizon or a church tower from the garden or any of the windows, then give prominence to such a vista; don't cover it up with a building or dense greenery.

It's also good not to lose sight of more commonplace views such as the nice house next door or the spreading cherry tree across the street.







## We are all sensitive to the noise of the neighbourhood in different ways.

Even though your street may not be a very busy one, a little bit more privacy can help you feel more at home in your garden. Sometimes, it's enough to put up a simple screen with cables and have grapevines growing up it. Spend some time thinking and perhaps you'll come up with some unexpected ideas on how to occupy the diverse spaces around your house. It doesn't matter if you only sit there a few times a year. It's just nice to know that you have them.

### WHAT DO WE WANT TO OPEN UP TO?

Openness versus the need for privacy is an essential aspect of designing a garden and careful consideration of this will point you towards the ideal goal of feeling really comfortable in your garden.

Perhaps you're bothered by the neighbours being able to see you drinking your morning coffee on the terrace. Or perhaps you want to be alone when you're sunbathing in the afternoon. Depending on the answers, it is possible to intensify the screening, or to reorganize the garden into separate little green rooms. I know this can be a sensitive issue, especially if you have friendly relations with your neighbours. So, if you don't want to lose contact with the garden next door, but privacy in the garden is really important for you, build a full fence, leaving space for a little "neighbour communication window".

### WHERE IS THE BEST VIEW OF THE HOUSE AND OF THE GARDEN?

Most people buy a house for its views out onto the garden, but it's good to realize that there's also a beautiful view of the house from the garden. Find the place where the nicest view of your house and of your garden is and plan a little seating area there. The view from it will make you happy every day, as will observing the garden changing through the seasons.



↑ When a fence won't do, don't be afraid to build a solid wall inside the garden. Together with a selected combination of plants, it can also be a nice design feature.