

# The Modern Aesthetic

Landscape designer Franchesca Watson offers advice on creating and maintaining a modern garden design



I recently updated a small garden around a perfect gem of a Bauhaus-style house. Although the house was built in 1983, it encapsulates the spirit of the Modernist movement perfectly – simplicity, rectangular planes, light-flooded spaces, glass and attention to perfect details. These same elements, combined in very similar ways, are found in contemporary architecture today and they demand a very distinct garden to set the building at ease.

This particular garden involved a fair amount of thought and planning as the planting needed to remain within the design constraints required by such exacting architectural ideas. The first principle is obviously to keep it simple, which requires thinking out a suitable plant palette – in the case of this most recent project almost completely for shade – and then paring it right down to just a handful of plants. In the process of elimination you need to keep your requirements firmly focused, for example: one plant to give height, one creeper to cover the walls, one groundcover, one medium-sized shrub and one smaller shrub.

Then you have to think about the shapes, textures and leaf colours of each of these elements and how they work best together. It's actually more demanding to work in this restrained way because each plant has to stand alone and work. There is no room for plants that have a particularly iffy moment

during one season or those that need support physically or aesthetically in any way.

The garden had a lovely quirk in that the enclosing pergola had certain horizontal elements painted in a primary red that I felt needed to be echoed in the garden, so the shrubs that were chosen flower in this red to carry the theme through the seasons.

## It's worth creating a unique element that gives the garden a little jolt of surprise

Every garden has something special about it that can be emphasised and if it has a blank canvas, it's worth creating a unique element that gives the garden a little jolt of surprise.

Another garden I was involved with had an outdoor shower worked into the envelope of the building with tall enclosing circular walls. The shower platform became a simple circle of concrete ringed with ferns and the fittings were simple sized-up brass. All this would have been spoiled with a plastic drain cover, which brings me to the next point ...

Attention to detail in modern gardens is essential – uneven surfaces and botched corners is not going to cut it. All the elements must work with the building materials, such as a steel edge rather than brick, or a perfect rectangular paver rather than a rustic stepping stone. All the practical components like pathways and screens become integral parts of the design and should add to the overall composition as well as serve a purpose. Take particular care with irrigation

standpipes – with a clean, modern look to the plantings, a sprinkler standing proud can be distracting – it's worth investing in high-pops for the visible sprinklers.

As far as adorning the garden goes, contemporary furniture and containers are essential. Less is more and the few, perfect objects you have should be in mint condition – no faded cushions, no collections of mismatched pots and no birdbaths inherited from granny.

■ Franchesca Watson ☎ 082 808 1287;  
 📧 [www.franchescawatson.com](http://www.franchescawatson.com)