



Franchesca Watson contemplates the importance of cohesive planting in creating an evergreen backbone

A Gardener's Canvas

THE TIME OF YEAR has come when my thoughts turn to planning the reorganisation of all things garden related in readiness for the next summer. For me, this is the most important and creative move to be made garden-wise for the entire year and a process without which I will be unhappy with my garden all summer long. From autumn through to midwinter, I mull over my garden's previous successes and failures, and my aspirations and inspirations for the coming summer – it's what gets me through the unspeakably dreary (for me anyway) Cape wet-and-sloppy time.

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VIRIDESCENT VIRTUE By the evergreen backbone, I generally mean the larger plantings of the garden that provide the edges, divisions/screens or graphics. I don't necessarily allude to trees, instead I refer to the patterning of the garden. Even in a naturalistic garden, this is seldom random. These components of the garden are generally the darker, denser and less ethereal parts – you could almost think of them as the skeleton onto or around which the other plants are superimposed. Evergreen plantings should form part of the design of the garden and not just be randomly strewn around. They can be shaped or clipped, or they can be less formal, either way these plants should perform the vital function of holding all the other elements together.

MY FAVOURITE EVERGREENS

Soft plumbago hedges, *Curtisia dentata* used as a shrub, olive hedges, *Syzygium pondoense*, large white azaleas, *Magnolia* 'Little Gem', *Pittosporum tobira*, the whole indigenous *Rhus* family (except *Rhus pendulina*), *Rhaphiolepis delacourii*, *Phyllica buxifolia*, all the indigenous Buddlejias (except the untidy *Buddleja salvifolia*), *Myrsine africana* and *Taxus baccata*, which does well in semishade.

STRUCTURE IS KEY

What I am reminded of (and am grateful for mine) every year is that the evergreen backbone of a garden is absolutely crucial. Everything else becomes easy and falls into place when this is strong, clear and well considered. If the backbone is good, one can almost do without all other plantings as the garden will still hang together. It is perhaps the strongest reason for calling in the best professional design help you can find.

LABORATORY OF THE MIND I think about the garden in its entirety and plan for all sorts of issues, from practical ones such as hose storage and edgings, and what I didn't get right in terms of feeding and pest control, to my wish list of new plantings. My garden is my laboratory where I try out fresh combinations, new plants and design ideas. It's also the expression of my idea of what's beautiful now. This year I am installing a roof garden with AstroTurf but that's another story. ■