

DESIGN & PLANNING:

From natural to nourishing: The new direction of domestic design



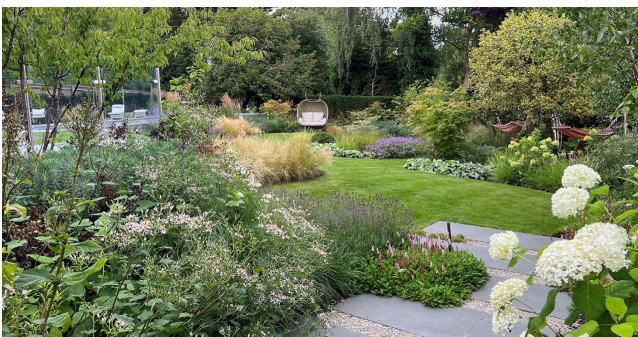
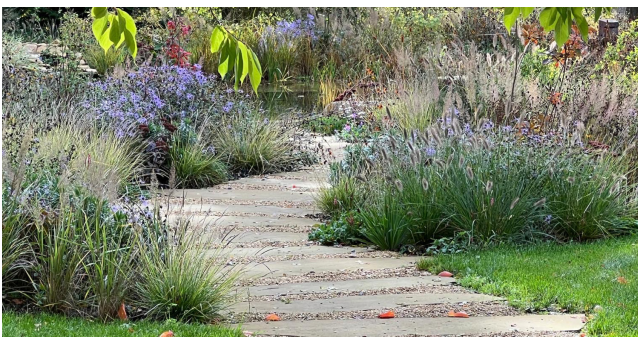
From edible arrays to carefully cultured wildness, client desires are changing. The Garden Company's Managing Director and Principal Designer, James Scott MBALI, FSGLD, explores the trends shaping the year ahead.

Across domestic projects of all sizes, one clear trend is shaping conversations with clients this year: people want gardens that feel natural, useful, and enduring. The days of imposing, statement design schemes are giving way to gardens that feel real and truly connected to nature – spaces that are immersive, seasonal and rooted in ecological principles. For designers and landscapers, this shift presents creative opportunities and practical challenges, as clients increasingly seek gardens they can engage with throughout the seasons and enjoy for years to come.

The backbone: a move towards naturalistic design

The strongest trend is the growing preference for naturalistic garden design. Clients may not always describe it as such, but they increasingly ask for gardens that feel softer and less 'manicured' – spaces that evolve with the seasons and blend harmoniously with their surroundings. During lockdown, people engaged deeply with their outdoor spaces, and we observed a clear divide: some clients sought naturalistic, immersive garden experiences, while others longed to recreate the boutique hotel grounds they could not visit. Today, that divide has shifted, with demand for the latter decreasing, and demand

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for nature-inspired design clearly increasing. Even clients requesting swimming pools are now more likely to ask for natural swimming pools, reflecting a broad shift towards natural, sustainable garden design.

Naturalistic gardens take their cues from wild and semi-wild landscapes, favouring organic layouts and planting schemes that prioritise structure, texture and longevity rather than short-term impact. Crucially, these gardens are not unplanned. Successful naturalistic planting relies on horticultural knowledge and clear design intention.

It's worth contemplating how the things we love in nature – ocean waves, mountain ranges, bluebell woods – all feature rhythm and repetition. This concept lies at the heart of naturalistic design, where a restrained plant palette plays a central role. By repeating a limited number of species – including structural shrubs, grasses, flowering perennials, and small trees – rhythm and cohesion are created, allowing gardens to feel abundant without becoming chaotic.

A key aspect of naturalistic design is the shift from hard to soft landscaping. Paths, terraces and structural features still exist of course, but they play a supporting role. Greenery dominates. Lawns, meadows, mixed borders and layered planting create immersion and movement, so the garden feels like an evolving landscape rather than a set of built rooms.

Naturalistic planting choices

Naturalistic gardens remain captivating throughout the year. The key to this lies in selecting plants that are well-suited to the specific soil, light, and exposure conditions and layering them effectively. Plant layering – ranging from bulbs and groundcovers to mid-height perennials and taller vertical elements – ensures seasonal succession, suppresses weeds and reduces maintenance. In these planting schemes, winter interest often comes from leaving old flower heads and grasses undisturbed. Clients are increasingly open to what might be considered 'untidy' garden spaces, recognising this as an opportunity to nurture the garden, provide winter wildlife habitats and create a more sustainable environment.

Wildflowers and wildflower lawns

Interest in wildflowers, especially wildflower lawns, is steadily growing. Clients are increasingly drawn to their softer appearance, their biodiversity benefits and the reduced need for mowing. In fact, there is a broad shift away from traditional emerald-green lawns that are highly fertilised and maintained to be weed-free.

Turf-based wildflower systems have been key to this trend, offering reliability, quicker establishment and predictable results compared with traditional seeding. Defined edges, mown paths or adjacent structured planting ensure these areas feel intentional rather than unmanaged, which is essential in domestic gardens.

Pollinator-friendly planting

There is a growing environmental awareness among clients, who are more open to gardens that support bees, butterflies and birds. Naturalistic gardens, with their emphasis on nectar-rich perennials, grasses and plants offering year-round structure and food, are ideal. Designers should increasingly consider flowering sequences, seed heads and overwintering value when selecting plants.

Edible plants

Edible planting continues to be popular, but with a more refined approach. There is becoming a preference for kitchen gardens that blend into the overall design, rather than traditional layouts tucked away in hidden corners. Herbs and soft fruits are increasingly incorporated into mixed planting schemes, while fruit trees – offering spring blossoms and vibrant autumn colour – are experiencing a resurgence in popularity.

Ambient lighting

Lighting trends are shifting to ambient, low-level schemes that extend usability while enhancing mood. Subtle lighting that highlights planting, movement and structure works particularly well with naturalistic design, while minimising light pollution and protecting local wildlife. Early collaboration between designers, landscapers and lighting suppliers ensures fittings are discreet, durable and integrated over time as the planting matures.



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Designing for enduring value

Perhaps the most positive trend is a growing recognition that gardens are living, evolving spaces. We are finding that clients are increasingly open to designs that develop over time, reward patience and deliver lasting value. For the industry, this is good news. As clients value biodiversity, environmental responsibility and thoughtful design, our professional expertise becomes increasingly important.

At The Garden Company, this philosophy underpins our mission: to improve people's lives through transformational garden design, build and gardening. Naturalistic design has been a passion of ours for a long time, and we are delighted to see clients becoming increasingly informed and appreciative of its many benefits.

A balance for the future

Domestic gardens are evolving to be more closely aligned with how people relax and engage with nature. At the heart of this shift is naturalistic design, supported by sustainable planting choices and nature-inspired features, creating spaces that are both beautiful and enduring. However, cost remains a crucial factor in design decisions and many sustainable choices (such as using local stone instead of imported alternatives) can come with a higher price tag, albeit at a lower carbon cost. As clients become more attuned to the value of eco-friendly, enduring gardens, professionals must strike a delicate balance between environmental responsibility and financial practicality. Those who can effectively navigate this balance will not only meet client expectations, but also lead the way in shaping sustainable outdoor spaces for the future.

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