

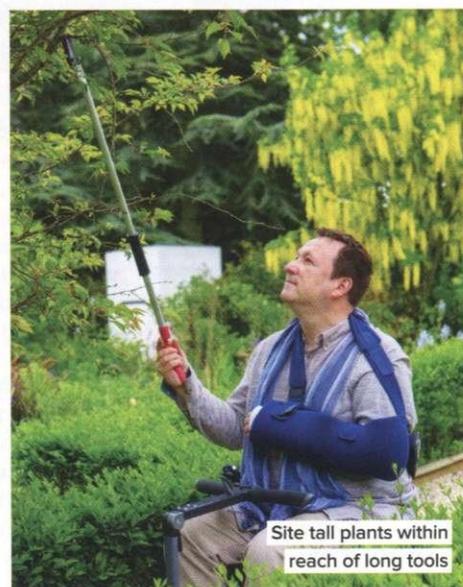
Mark's wheelchair-accessible garden

The accessible garden

Garden designer **Mark Lane** takes us on a tour of his outdoor space and explains how a few simple tricks mean it can be worked and enjoyed by all



Raised tables enable those with restricted movement



Site tall plants within reach of long tools



None of us is getting any younger, but that doesn't mean we should be banished to the sofa with a TV remote in our hands, only getting up to pop to the toilet or to make ourselves something to eat. Gardening and green spaces improve our wellbeing physically and mentally. Being in a wheelchair myself and very close to celebrating the 'big 5-0' has meant my practice of gardening and my garden-design work have been adapted to assist me and to make things easier. As soon as I get outside I feel the stresses of modern life lifting. There are times when I just stop and look at the planting combinations, the spaces created in and around the plants, and the wildlife that they attract, but being a very keen gardener I always find jobs to do.

When people start hearing or reading that adaptations need to be made for disabled gardeners or older generations, visions of concrete ramps, ugly railings, raised beds and tired or unusable spaces come to mind – well, they do for me. There are, of course, some very good adaptations and these should be applauded. But in some 'adapted gardens' I've seen, I think the designer or company involved should have really spent time in a wheelchair to see how difficult easy tasks can be.



are the obvious choice and can range in price from a couple of pounds per slab to several hundreds. However, paving a large area is sometimes impossible. Drainage is also a very important aspect to consider when paving areas. Water should drain away easily with no puddling. Also, the width of the path is extremely important. For wheelchair users, the best width for a domestic path is, in my opinion, 120cm. This allows space either side to control the chair.

For more ambulant people, a width of 120cm to 140cm is ideal. It means that people with, for example, chronic arthritis, who may need the support of someone's arm will find the path is wide enough for two people to walk side-by-side. Another

shapes. It does need 'topping up' every few years, but it's a good substitute for paving. Self-binding gravels are good because they provide a level surface, as long as the subbase is firm and correctly laid.

For any path the essential elements are a firm stable subbase and good edging. A different material can denote the edge but simple gravel boards are a cheaper option. I have left them proud where they meet flower borders so feet and the wheels on my wheelchair can feel the edge of the path. In my garden, we topped the gravel boards with fence capping to create a small lip, under which a continuous white LED strip light has been fixed. I am at a lower height than someone standing, and the

'Gravel paths are a problem for less able-bodied or visually impaired people. Self-binding gravels are good'

I'm very lucky and have just under an acre of garden, which is my playground for trying out new plants and planting combinations. When we moved here, though, the garden was stuck in the 1970s with island conifer beds and large areas of lawn. The first consideration was the grass. For someone in a wheelchair or less able-bodied, grass is like 'green ice'. You never know what it is like underfoot. I decided that the garden design for the front part of the garden, which is about a third of an acre, should have no grass at all. Removing it was a massive task but, no matter what size the garden, the lawn can invariably be pulled up. So what do you replace it with? Flat, level, firm paving slabs

important tip is to make turning circles large, with no over-hanging plants to get in the way. Also, the transition from the house to the path should be easy. We had to raise the level outside, keeping in mind the damp course of the house, and a small portable threshold ramp bridges to the door.

The crunch

Gravel paths are a real problem for the disabled, less able-bodied and people with visual impairment. Gravel-stabilisation products work well by holding the gravel in honeycomb-shaped interlocking panels, but after a while, the thin top layer of gravel migrates and you can see the honeycomb



PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK WINWOOD

hidden lights illuminate the pathways without blinding me. At night, the borders appear to be floating above the pathways.

I've also introduced a raised bed at the top of the incline, using new pressure-treated softwood sleepers. These have straight edges, which tie in with the contemporary feel of the garden. They are secured in place with long wooden posts that are cemented in, as they need to hold back a substantial amount of soil. For me, the raised beds are 70cm high, but they can be made as high or as low as you need them. (Please note, if they are above 1.2m it is worthwhile asking the opinion of a structural engineer.) The softwood sleepers may need to be replaced in years to come, but some companies offer 25-year guarantees on their products. By this time, I may well have decided to change the garden. That is the beauty and excitement of

I have also planted a low hedge of privet around some of the borders, which is the right height for me to trim from my wheelchair. Currently, I am able to hold an electric and battery-operated hedge trimmer (or shears, if I'm feeling adventurous) and cut only those parts that I can get to safely. I leave the rest and the larger hedges to either my partner or my landscapers. Hedges really are a good thing for a garden and the wildlife. They give structure to a garden throughout the year and winter months, especially if they are evergreen or semi-deciduous. They also provide feeding, foraging and nesting places for insects, birds and mammals. For me and my 'contemporary wild' garden, they accentuate the straight lines of the paths while holding back the wild planting within the borders.

'Cascading water features stimulate the senses. The trick is to get the height right so it doesn't sound like a horse relieving itself'

gardening. A garden never stands still; styles and ideas change; and new products tempt me to have a go at something new.

Raised beds are a good idea for people in wheelchairs because the 'garden' is brought up to a workable level. However, for people who cannot twist their bodies, raised 'tables' are a better option. They allow someone to sit under the structure (such as a normal dining table) and plant or sow from an easy position. There are limits on what can be grown because the soil will only be 15-20cm deep, but this is deep enough for alpine plants, small bulbs and corms, and cut-and-come-again lettuces, radishes and beetroot.

Tools for the tall plants

Another trick I have used in my garden is to grow plants of various heights with some taller plants, such as milk parsley (*Selinum wallichianum*), verbena (*Verbena hastata* 'Alba'), Canadian burnet (*Sanguisorba canadensis*), sneezeweed (*Helenium* 'The Bishop') and ornamental grasses, at the front of borders where I can get at them.

Whenever I'm in the garden I always carry with me long-handled tools and a 'reacher grabber/pick-up stick' (a long-handled tool with a claw at one end). I use the grabber to pull a plant towards me, then either my secateurs or shears to deadhead and prune. So, no matter what your physical ability, there are some easy techniques and tools that make gardening and your garden a pleasurable experience.

It also goes without saying that water in a garden is a must-have. We live on a busy road and the sound of running water helps disguise the noise, and our water feature looks great and helps wildlife, too. The trick to any cascading water feature is to get the height right so it doesn't sound like a horse relieving itself. Placing pebbles or stones at the base helps break up the fall of the water, and they also help insects and smaller mammals to drink from the water reservoir.

Clients always worry about water if they have children, so self-contained water features are a good alternative. There are some good ready-made horizontal metal grilles that can be placed over water, which can then be topped with a decorative stone. A feature of some kind can then be put on top and the water pumped through. Even ponds can have grilles put in place, with 3-5cm of water above. (Although not really designed to take the weight of an adult, they will help protect children, but they must be installed properly by a qualified person.) Water brings another element to the garden and heightens the experience. Cascades stimulate the senses, while gently trickling water relaxes the body and mind.

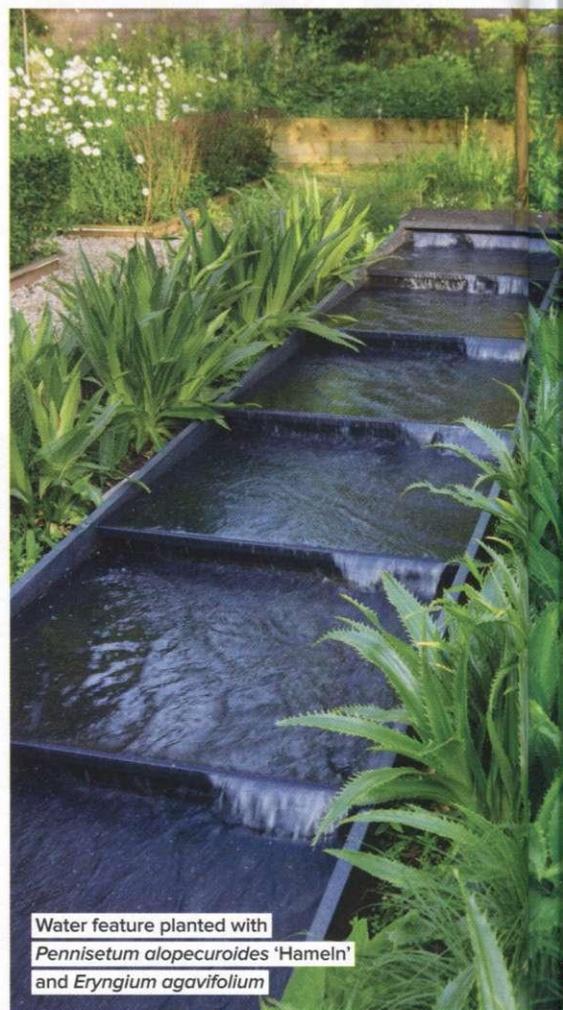
For disabled, less-able and, in fact, any gardeners, seating is important and there needs to be lots of it. I have my own permanent seat, but there are times when I like to transfer to a wooden bench just to see the garden from a different position and rub my hands over the grooves in the



Water blade planted with *Sisyrinchium striatum* and *Ageratum* 'Tall Blue Planet'



Test seating is suitable for your needs



Water feature planted with *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln' and *Eryngium agavifolium*



Raised pots can be reached from a wheelchair



Mark's low hedges are the right height to trim from a wheelchair

'You need to think outside the box but there is a solution for most things. Disability should not stop you from gardening'



Raised path edges can be felt



Thalictrum
'Black Stockings'



Cirsium rivulare
'Atropurpureum'

wood. The raised sleeper beds are just the right height for my partner and friends to sit on, and in the front garden alone I have two wooden benches and two sets of tables and chairs. When buying a patio set, always try it out in the shop beforehand, especially if you are in a wheelchair, as table heights vary considerably. Also, check the arms on the chairs, if they have any, and make sure they are firm, stable and comfortable to lean on when sitting and standing. If you find arms on chairs difficult, ensure the chair is heavy enough to take your weight when using the back and seat to lower yourself down. Sit in them for a couple of minutes and wriggle around a bit. If they move too easily and you rely on using the chair to sit, look elsewhere. The choice of tables and chairs is a personal thing, but shop around, try them out and check that they have good guarantees.

A place in the shade

Alongside seating, shade of some kind is essential, either in the form of a tree, a building or purpose-made structure such as a gazebo and a pergola. Clients always ask me what the difference is, so I describe a gazebo as a free-standing roofed structure, normally made from wood, with open sides on to the garden, opening up views across your lawn and borders. (A garden room or sun room is the same, but the sides are usually closed off with some windows and a door.) A pergola is a shaded walkway made from wood or metal, which is generally used to train climbing plants up and over the structure. In my garden, I use the shade of a silver birch, which gives us dappled shade throughout the day, as well as a purpose-made green oak pergola. I've planted evergreen ferns along the shadiest side of the pergola, and have started growing espaliered fruit (peach, apricot and pear) on the sunny side.

Sitting on top of the pergola are some photovoltaic cells, which are in sun all day, so we can generate our own electricity – extravagant, I must admit, but I like to be as green and as organic as possible.

So, whatever size your garden and whatever level of physical and mental ability you may have, get out there and enjoy your garden, allotment, roof terrace, balcony or hanging baskets – even your local park.

Sometimes you need to think outside the box, but I strongly believe there is a solution for most things. Disability should not stop you from gardening. Research across the UK has shown that green spaces have a sustained positive effect on us and our well-being. Without gardening and garden design I certainly would be a different person today.