



# *Information Sheets*

## **Create a Courtyard Garden**

A court or courtyard garden is defined as being an enclosed area that has walls or buildings on three or four sides. Courtyards can be small, only a few square yards, such as a space between a house and garage, or it may be the space between the house and the side fence. Courtyards can also be large like the centre area that is surrounded by classrooms, large city buildings or a common area where houses are close together and have limited garden space, such as apartments or townhouse buildings. Courtyards are usually open to the sky, but can have some covering such as pergolas or trellises. Whatever your space is, big or small, the feeling and look that you are trying to achieve is the same. Small courtyards are perfect to make into decorative features; they do not have lawn areas and usually consist of a type of paving material and mulched garden areas. A small water feature can be very attractive as well and extremely decorative if outdoor lighting is used to accent the water. When viewed from inside the house it is something that can be enjoyed not only year round but also both morning and night.

Large courtyards may have lawn as well as pathways, seating areas, ponds and garden beds. If used by more than one family, the courtyard may need several private areas.

Here are some pros and cons for courtyard gardens:

- courtyards provide protection from extreme climate changes, particularly wind.
- protection from strong winds may lead to poor ventilation-this can cause a problem for some plants that are subject to fungal diseases.
- large patio areas and pathways make the area more usable as an extended living area off the house.
- large areas of paved surfaces can cause heat build-up in the garden. This can be both good and bad. In cooler climate areas it will extend the time that the courtyard can be used, in warmer climates it may become too hot to sit in and also hard to keep the plants watered.
- the surrounding walls, buildings or fences can reflect light and make the area brighter as well as provide protection from loud noises and bad views.

- These same things can reflect heat and glare that may be too intense for some plants. If they are surrounded on one or more sides by tall buildings, trees or houses that may block light out for part or all of the day.
- courtyards can be very private.
- *can't say anything bad about that feature!*

### *Watering and Drainage?*

Water can be a problem if part or the entire courtyard is covered. In smaller courtyards hand watering by hose or even a watering can will not cause a problem. However for larger areas the installation of a watering system may be the answer. By incorporating water features into the garden you will help create a humid environment that the plants will benefit from. This can be done by simply adding a birdbath, fountain or small pond.

Drainage can be a big problem in a courtyard garden, with a great deal of the area in paved material, as well as being enclosed by surrounding structures there is no natural slope and therefore poor drainage. Provision for good drainage then becomes a priority.

### *Design Ideas*

Starting from the ground up, the choice you make with the type of paving material will have a major effect on the overall appearance of the courtyard. Square concrete slabs or glazed pavers will create a formal look, while brick, stone or crushed rock will give a softer, more informal look. You can choose tiles that will match the interior flooring in the house so the courtyard blends in. You can leave spaces in-between the pavers to create planting areas.

To give a small space the feeling of being larger, a garden scene can be painted onto the wall or fence.

You can get the effect of a larger space by merging the garden into the house. The glass entryway into the house can be surrounded with shrubs on the outside and by tropicals on the inside.

By installing outdoor lighting in the courtyard you will be able to use the area at night. Also, highlighting a particular plant or piece of garden art can add interest as well.

By having stepped or irregular shaped walls and beds you can reduce the boxed feeling that can be associated with courtyards that are surrounded by straight fences and walls.

Make sure to keep your design simple, avoid the temptation to use too many different types of plant material, colours and textures as this can make the area appear smaller.

Do not use bold colours like red, yellow, or orange as these make the space feel smaller. Choose colours such as blues, whites, greens and purples to make the space seem larger.

### *Planting Ideas*

When choosing your plant material, the selection should be done with a few things in mind. When the courtyard is small the growing space will be limited, so therefore the plant materials ultimate height should be looked at to make sure the plant will not get too big for the space. Choose plants that will withstand heat and glare that can be intense in the summer.

- Shade trees can be used to provide summer shade and winter light.
- Do not over plant as things will fill in once they become established.
- For areas that receive very little light, choose shade-loving plants like fuchsia, ferns, skimmia, and hosta.
- Containers planted up with trees, shrubs and annual colour are a good idea as they can be moved around changing the look of the courtyard, as well as moving them into the most sunny spot in the yard.
- Hanging baskets can add interest to the garden by adding colour to areas that most need it as well as offering something to see at different eye levels.
- Espaliered plants and vines require very little growing space but can give you the full lush look of a large plant. They can hide ugly walls or fences and reduce the glare and heat build-up that can happen in the middle of summer. An espaliered fruit tree can be both attractive as well as provide fruit. Vines can be grown up the walls on trellises or over pergolas to give partial cover and shade if needed.
- By using dwarf trees and shrubs you can create the image of a larger garden. There are many dwarf conifers that would be suitable for courtyard gardens.
- If you have a long narrow courtyard or entry way, it is best to grow ground cover and low growing shrubs that will spill over the walk to soften the long straight lines of the pathway. By adding a statue or other garden art at the end of the courtyard you can create a focal point, which will reduce the visual effect of distance.

### *Mediterranean Gardens*

If you think of a Mediterranean garden you may come up with images of clear blue skies, sun baked courtyards with vine-covered pergolas. Well, now all you have to do is put this into place by having the key ingredients of light, warmth, simplicity and relaxation. The main hard landscape materials are stone, concrete and ceramics, as these earthy materials give you a warm felling. Lumber is only used usually for the construction of pergolas and sturdy outdoor tables. Metals are rarely used and generally restricted to decorative cast iron lacework.

The most widely used colours will need to have a sun bleached look – white or earthy shades such as terra cotta and sandstone. By adding a splash of brilliant blue for contrast, this will remind the viewer of the blur Mediterranean Sea. These gardens usually do not have lawn as there is a shortage of water in the heat of the summer. Instead the ground surfaces are paved or covered in gravel, which will give a look that has a drier, arid feel. The walled and courtyard gardens create a warm, sheltered and intimate space for relaxing

and entertaining in. To have some overhead shade is necessary and this is usually provided by a pergola or verandah. To have outdoor furniture is essential for relaxing – for a rustic look use long timber tables and benches or metal furniture for a more formal look. Water features are usually simple and used for their cooling effects. Garden ornaments are either traditional or rustic; olive jars and traditional statues add drama to the garden. Plants are secondary to the hard landscaping and should be hardy, drought tolerant types with many in the silver-gray tones, which are typical for drier climates. Rosemary, lavender, olive and roses make good choices. Having several container plants, including window boxes really makes a difference to the look of the garden. Topiary and other pruning techniques can add formal elements to the Mediterranean garden.