

FLOOR LEVEL

The very early gardeners seem to have designed their flower beds on the same lines as a carpet. They worked out the intricate patterns of squares and triangles or, better still, elaborate curly designs full of scrolls and arabesque. The spaces were filled in with different coloured flowers of about the same height and which could be trusted to bloom at the same time. If everything went well, the flower pot would some day look like a dense, rich carpet of jewelled colours. The expertise here lay in choosing the right species of flowers and in so controlling their growth that the outlines of the pattern remained clear and firm, which meant that the flowers grew close and thick enough to form solid shapes of colour. Sometimes one had to indulge in a little cheating, when masonry helped to sharpen the outlines.

Like a carpet, this kind of garden was meant to be looked at from above. A magnificent example of this kind of garden is the one at Amber near Jaipur. Even if it is no longer alive, you can still look down at the carefully worked, complicated layout from the top of Amber Fort. In its heyday, this garden must have looked like a vast Persian carpet spread out for the delight of the Maharaja who saw it far below his balcony.

Few of us now have the chance to view a garden from several hundred

feet, unless it be from an apartment window in a high-rise building. And then the garden below is likely to be so small that, even if it were beautifully planted, it would be incapable of making a strong impact. We can no longer think on a grand scale; it is now the small gardens which should attempt to imitate the qualities of a good hand-woven rug whose background is green, ofcourse.

The smallest, most modest garden might be a rectangular patch of lawn between the gate and the house. It is too small to have a tree, even a small one. Shrubs might mean visual clutter. You want something which will not deplete the floor area of the garden, while, at the same time, will make it beautiful and interesting. Plain grass is always beautiful but is not always interesting. What, then, can we do to make our grass patch both beautiful and interesting?

Let's think of our bit of grass as a piece of blank art paper and draw on it a pattern tht will be both pleasing as well as functional. In other words, we do not want abstract scribbles; we want a meaningful pattern. We have two kinds of materials – the live and the inert – e.g. stone, masonry, etc. To begin with practical considerations, what sort of things would be useful? Would it be a good idea, for instance, to have nice stone or brick paths

which would lead us from the front door to the garage/gate/back yard? Do we need a paved space where we could pull out chairs? Do we need some paving under the water tap? Do we, perhaps, want a little tank under that tap at ground level so that the water itself becomes a part of the design on our blank paper?

We now carefully draw these things, taking trouble to get the curves and proportions right. The best way is not to do it on paper, but directly on to the grass, using either thick rope or a hosepipe to work out the outlines. You can lay these on the ground and adjust them until you are convinced that you have got the ideal lines.

You might now feel that your garden is complete, for, just plain grass with well designed paving can look so beautiful that there might seem to be no need for any more “garden”. As we know, its success will hinge on the scale and proportion. It will also hinge on the texture of the material used and in the correct mix of materials, whether stone, brick, pebbles or gravel. We must avoid the danger of being carried away and juxtaposing too many textures in a small space. Although we know that our little space does not need any extra decoration, we might still itch to put in some plants – flowers, if possible - just to please ourselves. We must start a hunt for plants

which are (a) good-looking ofcourse, and (b) will not grow taller than twelve inches. A study tour of the nurseries will suggest many varieties of low, creeping, crawling, spreading things which will look well against either grass or any other material.

While the search for suitable plants will involve personal exploration and experiment, there is a hard core of old realiables which are useful for making a start. The two verbenas, white and mauve have every virtue – hardy, very pretty, and an attractive manner of spreading. The mauve lantana looks like a bigger and stronger version of the mauve verbena; it is perennial and may be more suitable for certain locations. Portulaca is very low and very brilliant, but needs to be replanted often; impatiens will be at least a foot high, but it always manages to seed itself.

It is a pity that the climate of Bangalore does not encourage the many kinds of tiny flowers which grow among rock crevices in the hills, but there are some begonias (I cannot recall the specific names) with beautiful, bronze, velvety leaves, which do well in the shade. There is another crawly plant, (again, name unknown) with small, yellow flowers and proportionately big leaves, which has made itself at home on many of our pavements. But that is no reason for treating it with scorn. It would certainly be useful if we find that our soil or location does not suit some of the more desirable plants.