

CREATE YOUR OWN WOODLAND GARDEN

In her new series, Stephanie Donaldson analyses the key features that make a particular type of garden. Here, she provides a guide to creating a successful woodland garden.

Whether your wooded area is a corner shaded by a single tree or covers several acres, the principles are the same, with three layers of basic planting used to achieve a beautiful, natural effect: the canopy, the understory and ground cover.

The understory

This is the medium-sized growth and includes bushes and climbers.

In natural woodland this area is often colonized by brambles and honeysuckle. In cultivated woodland, evergreen and flowering shrubs suitable for dappled shade (such as camellias and hydrangeas) can be grown alongside climbers trained to scramble up the tree trunks.

Rejuvenate existing straggly shrubs by cutting them back hard, mulching and soaking thoroughly.

When planting new shrubs, dig large holes, add compost and bonemeal, and water well and regularly during the first summer.

If establishing a small woodland patch beneath a single tree there may not be space for shrubs, but include a climber or two, planted at least a metre away from the trunk.

The canopy

This is the tree, or trees, that create the conditions beneath which the other plants will grow.

A woodland garden is at its peak in spring before the leaves have fully opened, when moisture and light can reach the ground, making growing conditions ideal. Before long, though, the canopy will close, sending many of the plants beneath into summer dormancy.

A woodland garden can be created under existing trees, but it may be necessary to reduce the number and raise, or thin, the crowns (remove low-growing or crowded branches) to allow additional rain and light to penetrate. Planting a woodland garden from scratch is simpler as all three layers can be planted at once. Where space is limited, planting two or three multi-stemmed trees or coppicing an existing tree (cutting down the trunk close to ground level to encourage re-growth) will create the impression of a grove rather than a solitary trunk or two.

Ground cover

This is where bulbs, shade-loving perennials, biennials and ferns grow.

Preparation is important – weeds will need to be removed and copious quantities of compost or leaf mould added to impoverished soils before any planting can take place.

Get the soil conditions and light right and plants will self-seed and spread until the entire area is a carpet of flowers in the spring, especially if you grow native wildflowers such as bluebells, wood anemones, primroses and foxgloves.

Paths

When a woodland garden is large enough to wander through, it needs a path to prevent ground-cover plants from being trampled underfoot.

Keep the design fairly simple with bark or woody shavings, edged with logs to define the route. If the path winds beneath trees it is best to avoid stone, brick or sleepers as they can become dangerously slippery, while gravel or stones look rather messy once the leaves begin to fall.

Whether your woodland garden is large or small, it is best to plant the earliest spring flowers close to the path so that you can admire them close up without having to get your feet wet and muddy.

Boundaries/gateways

Use natural materials wherever possible. Dry-stone walls, stacked logs, laid hedges and woven hazel are all appropriately rustic for use in constructing boundaries, while a small woodland corner or border can be defined and contained with woven-willow edging. Attractively weathered wooden gates are sometimes available from reclamation yards, or order a new one made from cleft oak – it won't take long to develop a patina of age.

If your woodland garden is in a built-up area, use your boundaries to create a sense of enclosure; if it borders open countryside, incorporate some views.

Rustic retreats

Whether it's a glorified shed or a luxurious hideaway, a woodland retreat works best when it blends subtly with its surroundings. Use natural materials and protect the timber with environmentally friendly wood stains rather than paints. A brightly coloured building like a small shed might look quite beautiful in summer among all the greenery, but will become inappropriately brash in winter. A turf roof can greatly enhance (and also insulate) a building, but it does need a fair amount of sun to thrive. To get the most use and enjoyment from your woodland retreat, position it where it will get the late-afternoon sun.

Furniture

Natural is the best choice. Whether a simple plank bench or something more elaborate, timber seats and tables will look very much at home beneath a tree or in a clearing. If there is managed woodland in your area, you may be able to source a locally made piece of furniture. Painted furniture will inevitably need more maintenance in damp and shady conditions, so, unless your woodland is no more than a shady corner of your garden, it is best avoided. Think carefully about positioning, too, siting tables and chairs where you can make the most of the afternoon sunshine, for example, or enjoy the scent of a favorite plant.

Wildlife

An important aspect of creating a woodland garden is that it is a wonderful wildlife habitat. It provides shelter, nesting places and food for many of the beneficial insects and birds that are welcome in our gardens. Encourage them to take up residence by including trees and bushes that bear berries, putting up nesting boxes and birdfeeders and stacking logs for hibernating insects and small mammals. Allow weeds to grow that you wouldn't countenance elsewhere in the garden – nettles for the butterflies, ivy as a source of food for birds and insects and, if room, a bramble patch.

Modern woodland

Rustic doesn't suit everyone but the basic principles of woodland gardening are the same in a more sophisticated setting and transform a shady town garden from a problem into an asset. Carefully trained or cloud-pruned trees can form the canopy and topiary box the understory, with a restrained palette of greens or shades of a single colour for ground cover planting. Modern interpretations of traditional materials are available for boundaries, paths and furniture.