

Gardens for People with Disabilities

Astute observations and an informed approach go further than official guidelines when designing private or public places for disabled users.

What is a disability?

According to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA1995 revised 2004) 'a person has a disability... if he (sic) has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on his (sic) ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.' The Act requires provision of services 'to the disabled person' in any 'place which members of the public are permitted to enter' – which includes, of course, parks and gardens.

While the act is about private provision, the guidelines apply equally to any private garden designed for people who are wheelchair users, have restricted mobility, sensory impairments and/or learning disabilities; in other words, people who need something extra from the designer.

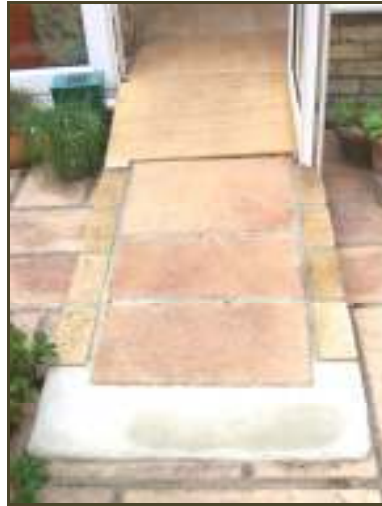
Getting the Brief

Among the list of questions designers ask clients – such as 'do you want a water feature? A barbecue? Flower beds? – the question 'what do you want to do in your garden?' is the most informative. If the client has a disability, the question is absolutely essential. We must not be shy about asking questions about the disabilities. How far can you walk? How far can you bend? Has everything to be done from a wheelchair? What do you see? What can you hear? Watch the client as you go round the site and observe how she/he walks, how she/he sits, the shape of her/his body. If offered a cup of tea, don't offer to help or you will lose the opportunity to observe. How does she/he lift the kettle, set the tea cups or mugs, carry things. Often people with arthritis have coped for so long they can no longer describe how they move. So you need to watch. Find out how easy it is to water the garden; if hose pipes are awkward and watering cans too heavy, a system of laid down hose pipes and a timed irrigation system will help.

Designing for difference

The DDA regulations give guidance for ramp gradients and other building requirements. However they are not the fount of all knowledge; it is important to use your own observations. While a ramp may be perfectly graded according to the guidelines, it may not be so for the client. In one project, an elderly resident did not use the existing garden because she was afraid that the ramp would make her lose control of her chair and she would crash into a low wall situated at the end of the run on a T-junction. The ramp was made to guidelines but the visual impact of the wall made her afraid. The wall was removed and a longer ramp in a different direction with a softer gradient curving into the garden was installed within the new design. Ramps should be made to suit the client: how fast they wish to go down a slope, how far the

slope should extend. Remember that a ramp may have to have an extra temporary wooden piece to raise or lower to make the adjustment to a sill where a door closes on the outside.



A small ramp with temporary adjustment piece

Paths and Seating

In my experience a 1.2 metre wide pathway is rarely adequate in a public situation. Just imagine pushing a wheelchair along, stopping and still having to talk to a person's back because you can't get past the chair comfortably to talk to her/his face. Talking constantly to air is a pain, you cannot see the facial expression or body movement. If you have restricted or no sight, or a hearing impairment, a muffled or hidden voice is no good at all. Likewise, space is needed for a stop with an assistance dog and a friend or two (the word 'carer' is only for officialdom). Paths should allow for a stop to admire flowers, to hold a conversation, to allow a blind person to touch plants, and to let other people pass. You do not want to cause a traffic jam.



The Italian Garden at Red House, with wide paths and raised beds of different heights for different abilities

People can be very understanding, but they can also act as if you are not there. At one Hampton Court Flower show I was on my mobility scooter, passing another one, and a man with crutches was nearby. We all overheard a comment in an exasperated voice 'can't get about; not just one but two of them and a chap on crutches'. Did he think all people with disabilities are

deaf? It was good, though, to see so many people enjoying that show - except... the pathways were wide enough but in order to get to exhibits you had to drive off them and there was rarely a ramp to do so – or rather to get back on. I frequently had to stop to ease the scooter back onto the pathway. (I must ask the RHS to have more slanted bits to let us on and off.)

In private gardens, I try to design 1.5 metre pathways as a minimum and make sure there is sufficient space for turning with a minimum of to-ing and fro-ing. Nine-point turns can be tiring. Also watch for space for the elbows, no scraping on walls or crushing of plants; and certainly no faces scratched by rose thorns.



The paths in this small garden are 1.5 metres wide

Seating: always design spaces next to permanent seats so that the person in a wheelchair can park next to friends.



A public park in Chelmsford: there is space next to the seat for a wheelchair

For people with restricted mobility, make sure seats are of sufficient height and space to allow all limbs to be parked in comfort. Seats should allow for the haul up again. Some regular bench arms can be too high for people with frozen shoulders. It is often easier to press on the seat to push yourself up, so have seats with arms and seats without.

With a private client, measure the sitting height that is best for the particular person. Many seats or perches may be required for people with arthritis who need to sit a lot while gardening to ease back or legs. My garden has lots of these. The paths round the pool are 1.5 metres.

Small gardens should be paved if possible for ease of movement (see section on surfaces below). Large gardens need ramps and paths to get people near to the plants, to the sunny and shady spots. Grass is fine for scooters and chairs as long as it is reasonably level and well-cut.

Planting

In private gardens, if the person is a gardener, planting areas need to be designed, for the abilities of the person. Ask the client to show you how far she/he can bend and design to that height for beds. Also, how far she/he can bend and stretch over the arms of a wheelchair comfortable. People who cannot bend will need height to work at and walled beds which can be leaned on and against. My mobility scooter is just the right height for me to trim the box hedge, or, rather, the hedge is trimmed to the right height for me! My planting beds are to a height of twelve inches (300mm) as I can bend that far. Vegetable boxes are much higher as there is often more work to be done in them. The greenhouse has a bar stool.



Raised vegetable boxes

The plants themselves should be chosen for ease. Beds and borders need to be of a width that can be managed, so shrubs can take place at the back if they can be trimmed by the client or by someone else. Perennials and bulbs are fine as long as the client can reach them to weed and divide.



*Plants at the front in reachable distance are those which will need attention; the Astelias and tree peony can be left; the tree fern leaves can be cut with long-handled shear.
Note the height of the bed.*

Roses are perfect as long as they do not obstruct pathways, as the scent is a great benefit. Annuals are fine as long as they can be easily pulled out, the ground raked and more seeds sown. Water features that are easy to clean are fine, and fish ponds are beneficial as long as the client has a friend or can employ someone to clear them once in a while. Feeding the fish and watching them are very therapeutic! Weeding – that is a pain. Long handled hoes are great, bending to pull out the odd weed even if you are chair-bound is possible. However, the more ground that can be paved, the better. Lawns are fine if there is someone to mow them – a combination of a Flymo and a powered wheelchair can be lethal!

Hard Surfaces

Surfaces are important. They shouldn't be totally smooth and slippery (especially when wet) but not so 'riven' that the wheelchair gives a bumpy ride. Resin-bonded gravel is expensive but is a good-looking surface which works. Ensure that people can get out of their houses safely and comfortably. How does she/he lift her/his legs over a sill? Does she/he turn sideways to do this? What surface will her/his feet connect with? People with inflexible ankles may need wider steps rather than ramps. Slopes can often hurt. Risers may need to be other than the standard 6 inches (150mm). Again, talk to the client about what she/he needs and what she/he wants. The latter is so important if the client cares about the look of the garden. If they want lots of pots and can squeeze round, then design it that way. You can get away with some decorative paving if the client can stand the odd bump or two. Don't be overperscriptive – it's her/his garden. Make sure the client understands and agrees with everything, especially with any compromises.

Client involvement

When working with groups, and their organisers, say, in residential homes or centres for those with disabilities, it is very important that the people for whom the garden is intended are involved in the designing process. I spent a day working in the greenhouses at Red House in Essex with adults with learning disabilities, talking to and observing them. The workers at Red House wanted

a garden with lots of hard landscaping (for mobility, wheelbarrows as well as chairs, and to smother sycamore seedlings) and to be a garden which the members could maintain themselves; an Italianate garden was agreed. The group was involved in looking at pictures of Italian gardens and making decisions; one was that they did not want fancy box hedging as this was too much cutting work for them. The end result had wide paths, planting at different heights, plants with texture and scent for smelling and feeling. The members also made tiles and planted the gardens. With another project, the clients made the design and patterns from which the final design was made. I always try to work with another artist to get clients involved in making a feature for the gardens.

Similarly, when designing for a group of elderly residents – who were very forthright in their demands and expectations – I spent several coffee mornings with them, walking round the existing garden to find out what they objected to and why they were not using it. The garden had too many shrubs which had grown to block the view from some windows and was slightly oppressive. The ramp (see above) was not satisfactory, and the sitting space was too small for them to sit in groups. The tiny raised pond was too high to see the fish inside and was in any case too small for those poor fish. One of the seats had too much bird muck from the tree above. They wanted roses. The final design gave much more space and more than one sitting spaces, with a safe water feature: a ball on pebbles..(The fish were sent to another garden).



The layout at this residential home is spacious and overlooked by the accommodation: the plants will grow in time!

It is vital to get to know the client/s in order to be trusted to design their garden, to make it truly 'theirs'. The clients must know you have listened; the plan must show this. Observation and empathy as the designer and full ownership by the client/s. This is the concept for your design. How it looks is up to you.

Sources of further information:

DDA 1995: www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1995ukpgs_19950050_en_1

DDA Amendment 2005:

www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2005ukpgs.20050013_en_1

DDA Guidelines: www.access2goco.uk/sources/sourcesddaguide.html

Historic Environment Local Management (HELM)

www.helm.org.uk/sever/sho/nav.772

Thrive: charity for positive change in the lives of disabled people through gardening: www.thrive.org.uk

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