

Mobile Home



This was my current garden when I completed my portfolio... an ongoing project & yet one which reached its natural boundary within the orchard that surrounded it. In this case I started with nothing more than pasture surrounding the mobile home & a stack of pallets as makeshift steps up to the door. For once though, the site had a lot going for it, being south facing & sheltered from the north by a high hedge. Here I made great use of available resources, both local & free of charge & made the most of the vertical growing opportunities & water catchment.

I also experimented with different mulching techniques throughout the garden's creation.

The Design Process



When I first moved into the mobile home here in Dorset, it was the beginning of December & it was surrounded by nothing more than pasture. There was a stack of pallets by the door that acted as a fairly unsafe set of steps & that was all. After a year of instability & not feeling at home anywhere, it

was nice to once again have a space of my own & I spent the first couple of months just getting settled in & starting to make plans for the garden. The photo on the left illustrates clearly my starting point & was taken in the early spring when I had just made my first garden bed... & how lonely it looks there!

My first job was to clarify my wants & needs from the garden. I had a chance to start from scratch & so there were a couple of new things on the list, but as I had done this a few times before, I was already quite clear about most of the things that I wanted. These essentially boiled down to the following:

- * Food (salad leaves & flowers, vegetables, fruit).
- * Beauty, colour & scents.
- * A place to relax.
- * A place to watch wildlife (habitats).
- * A place to connect with the Earth.
- * Fresh air & exercise (gardening).
- * A place to experiment & be creative (gardening!)
- * A low maintenance garden, filled with plants.
- * A garden that inspires visitors to try permaculture.
- * A pond full of frogs & other pondlife!
- * A surplus of seeds & plants to share with others.
- * Diversity & an abundance of growth!

Observations

The first couple of months I was able to make initial observations about the site that enabled me to draw up this rough design. This incorporates the observations that I had made regarding the prevailing wind & the way it funnels in between the shed & the caravan & the movement of the sun & where it falls within the garden. I had also become aware of the natural flows through the space; where I walked, where vehicles would need to pass & what I looked out upon through my windows.

The site sloped gently from west to east & had an excellent southerly aspect with a high hedge to protect it from the north winds. The east side of the caravan got the morning sun & sheltered from the wind it was an early morning suntrap. The area by the door seemed to stay frost free & was home to a very healthy crop of nettles. The hedge contained a good diversity of species; holly, hawthorn, field maple, blackthorn, bramble, elder, hazel, even willow; which had grown from pegs used to lay the hedge a few years previously & now towered above the rest.

The blackthorn though was suckering vigorously & the bramble doing what it does best, so they were going to need regular trimming. The caravan had good guttering & provided an excellent opportunity for water catchment. A large tank in the yard was also already being used for this purpose, collecting the water off a barn roof & was a short walk of a few yards away. The soil in the field had a high clay content (great for fertility), but didn't drain easily. In heavy rain, the water often ran off down through the gateway, making it a muddy area in time, though the pasture was preventing the soil from washing off with it.

The area between the caravan & the shed seemed to be a naturally wet spot & so would be a good place for a pond. The caravan did not at that time blend in with its environment & this needed to be addressed. Sandra who owns the farm had already been using permaculture design on the farm generally (there are some excellent treebogs here for instance) & so I knew that she would be sympathetic to what I wanted to do.

Boundaries

The boundaries to the site were defined by the three main fixed elements & the need for vehicular access into the field through the gateway on the south side. The primary living element (the one that can accumulate energy) is the hedge. It provides food, shelter, habitats, privacy & biomass, but is a strong competing influence on the plants around it. Whilst it is 'fixed' in one sense, it has the potential to expand into the garden site & so will need to be kept pruned back. The other elements are non-living; the shed has the potential along it's south side to be a good heat-retaining growing space, as well as being a storage space for tools. The mobile home is the third element & effectively cuts the garden into two areas. It has good sun-reflecting surfaces along its south & east sides & provides a shady summer spot along it's west side, providing a lot more 'edge' in the garden. These elements along with need for access into the orchard for vehicles, effectively define the furthest boundaries of the garden.

Although the gateway into the orchard could be moved to allow an extension of the garden to the south, doing so would be a big job & the garden feels a good size as currently defined. Also the gateway is in the most appropriate place for vehicle access & moving it would make this a lot more difficult. Going downwards, the clay ground was not going to be easy to dig (though far easier than hardcore!), but then again, I wasn't planning on doing much digging this time anyway. As I have already noted, the ground didn't drain well on this site & was going to need 'improving'.

Of the non-physical boundaries, the main one was financial, though as I mentioned before, this can be a good incentive to use all of the available resources creatively. The clear lack of appropriate resource use in 'affluent' countries, where people don't see the need to do so is a clear testimony to this. The other boundary related to me not knowing how long I would be staying & Sandra not wanting to have yet more garden to look after if I was to make one & then leave soon afterwards.

I made an agreement that if I was to leave then I would return the site to pasture again, but this was in effect a boundary as it made me really have to think about how big I wanted the garden to be.

Once I had surveyed the distances & angles between the fixed elements on the site, I was able to draw up the base map (above) upon which I could later draw my final design. I thought that I had given myself plenty of space to do this, but as it turned out, I only just managed to squeeze it on.

Resources

Living on a farm, there were a lot of free on-site resources available to me. There were also free & cheap resources available to me locally that I could also incorporate into my garden, turning pollutant outputs into valuable inputs.

- * Large stones - rockery & pond edging.
- * Wood chippings - mulch.
- * Goat manure - mulch.
- * Cardboard - mulch.
- * Food waste - compost.
- * Compost - mulch.
- * Wood offcuts - bed edging.
- * Used bottles - bed edging.
- * Large blue plastic barrels - water butts.
- * Pallets - compost bins & decking.

I also had plenty of seeds that I had brought with me, friends who were giving me surplus plants & my own ideas, energy & enthusiasm. Finally there was the sun & the rain (which were going to be there whether I harvested them or not!) & the windbreak provided by the hedge on the far side of the orchard.

Evaluation

These inputs would allow me to create beneficial outputs, that would in turn have their own valuable outputs:

- * New beds - for accepting inputs of plants & seeds.
- * Compost bins - for accepting inputs of food waste.
- * Compost - as an input into the beds & ultimately the plants.
- * Comfrey barrel - for accepting inputs of comfrey & water.
- * Comfrey liquid - as an input into the beds & ultimately the plants.
- * Plants - providing inputs of food, beauty, scent, biomass, habitats & seeds for myself & others.
- * Decking - providing growing space, peoplecare, aesthetic improvement & caravan stability & safety.

The soil was clearly going to need some added elements to improve drainage, such as compost, manure, sand & gravel. I figured that if I added these as a mulch, in time the rain & the actions of plant roots would take them down into the soil below. A layer or two of cardboard underneath would help suppress the existing grasses & other unwanted plants. Putting out plants & sowing seeds into pockets of compost within the mulch would give them enough of a head start until they managed to get their roots down beyond the cardboard as it rotted.

Building decking around the mobile home would provide a lot of yields. It would create a new growing area for my more vulnerable plants, such as salads & half-hardy perennials, including more vertical space. It would provide a space for people to sit & relax or eat outside (or both!) & effectively double the caravan's floor space in the summer months. It would also be somewhere for me to do morning exercises on dry days. It would stabilise the caravan in high winds & make the doorway (a couple of feet off the ground) much safer too. It would also round off the sharp angles of the caravan within the landscape. I had to decide how big I wanted it to be to fulfil its purpose.

Utilising the heavily shaded 'dead' space to the north of the caravan for the siting of the water butts & compost bins would also provide easy access to them from either side of the garden where their outputs will be needed. Siting the comfrey liquid feed barrel here too, between the water butts & the best site for growing the comfrey also makes most sense.

The damp area between the caravan & the shed would be an ideal spot for a pond, which would also reflect low winter sunlight up onto the shed, making it a particularly good growing spot. The diggings from the pond could make a spiral or a rockery to provide some wind shelter to the elements behind. The pond would also provide new habitats; both in & around it, to bring more wildlife into the garden & create greater diversity with an increase in potentially beneficial connections.

The metal surfaces of the shed & the caravan are both potentially good growing spots, because of their heat retentive properties (the bramble was clearly doing well there). This could be improved further by painting them dark green & this would also have the effect of blending them much more into their surroundings. Conversely, the plant growth on the outside of the caravan would have a cooling effect inside on hot days, by reducing the sunlight reaching the walls. It would also go some way to softening it's boxiness too.

Mulching the paths would help prevent the grass from invading the beds & make them less muddy in the winter months. The shed could be used for storing garden tools, right where they will be needed. Making beds in front of the hedges & placing strong plants there will help keep them from 'invading' the garden. Plants will need to be sited depending upon their needs & the different microclimates within the garden; this brings me on to looking at zones & sectors.

Zones & Sectors

Because of the small size of this garden, it can more or less be considered to be all in zone I, with the decking becoming part of zone 0. There is a gradient of use for the different paths through the garden though, the primary use being to & from the door through the gateway.

Visiting the compost bin & water butts (emptying compost bucket, collecting water) happens less often & trips to the shed (tools) less often still. If the zone was going to be split, the back garden would get less through traffic than the front one. Adding a pond around the back would increase traffic there, but it would still very likely be less than the front garden. The hedge acts as a wildlife corridor around the garden & is essentially zone V.

Then, looking back at the sketch I made of my initial observations, I was able to define the different sectors within the garden.

Sun: The sun hits the eastern side of the caravan first in the morning, it then slowly makes it's way around into the back garden. The western side of the caravan & the front garden hedge stay in shade until the early afternoon. Later in the afternoon, the east side of the caravan falls into shade & gradually the rest of the front garden follows it. The back garden stays in sun until quite late, even in summer. In the winter, the situation is less pronounced, with the sun rising & setting further south.

Wind: The two halves of the garden are affected very differently by the wind. The front garden is well protected by the caravan from the south-westerly prevailing winds & this would become more pronounced with the building of the decking. However, that same wind is deflected by the caravan & funnelled down between it & the shed towards the site for the compost bins. The front of the decking area would get wind exposure, but without it being focussed so much. The decking & planting across the front of it could cut down wind blowing under the caravan & reduce winter heat loss.

Rain: The rain essentially comes from the south-west, along with the prevailing wind. This creates a relative rain shadow along the east side of the caravan. The protruding hedge growth also creates a drip line that keeps the base of the eastern hedge relatively dry. The corner to the north of the caravan door is also a particularly dry spot.

Frost: The same dry corner of the front garden also seems to stay frost-free. The decking structure would also potentially provide more frost protection to plants in pots upon it.

View: The primary views from inside the caravan are clearly looking out over the orchard through the picture window facing south & from the small front window to the west, which would overlook the site of the pond. Views from my workroom & bedroom would look out over the back garden. From outside, the east part of the decking will provide a place to sit & view the front garden, not easily seen from inside the caravan. The south part will again give views out over the orchard & over the pond, which needs to be sited to make the best of this.

Priorities

Short term:

1. Use trips out to collect free resources (energy harvesting).
2. Mulch first beds near door, ready for planting (start locally).
3. Decide on decking size & cost up materials.
4. Set up roof water catchment (energy harvesting).
5. Make compost bins (energy harvesting).
6. Get my design down on paper.
7. Plant out comfrey roots (energy harvesting).
8. Order decking materials & start building it.

Medium term:

- * Finish the decking structure.
- * Make rest of front garden beds (expand perimeter).
- * Grow on seeds & plant out.
- * Collect surplus plants from friends.
- * Paint caravan.

Longer term:

- * Create beds in the back garden & plant out (expand perimeter).
- * Dig the pond & make the rockery or spiral & plant up.
- * Paint the shed & put trellis up for growing climbers (expand perimeter).
- * Convert the shed for tool storage.
- * Share my surplus with my friends!

Costings & Timescale

Finally I looked at my costings for the design & the kind of timescale I was looking at to implement it all.

Free materials: woodchip (some), manure, gravel, sand, straw, plants, large stones (all on-site). Also woodchip & offcuts, bottles, cardboard, more plants (off-site, needing collection - tie in with other journeys to save travel costs).

Cheap materials: Blue plastic water butts (£5 each), plus fittings (total approx £20 for 3 butts). Pallets (£1 each), need approx 40 (total £40).

Expensive materials: Timber & fixings for decking structure (£280 best quote) - Sandra will pay. Plastic pond liner (approx £30).

Plants (not scroungable!): Water lily (£15), Akebia (£10), Kiwi x 2 (£20), Passiflora (£10). Probably totals between £50 & £100.

Total costs: £400 to £500 (my costs £100 to £200)

The timescale for the completion of the project I thought to be probably two seasons, which is effectively what has happened, but with more or less a year off in the middle! I looked at the front garden & decking as the first phase during year one & then the back garden, pond & rockery as phase two in the second year. My one concern at the time was being swamped with work at Hooke Court, although that of course didn't materialise. Instead, I obviously found lots of other things to keep me busy during the second year (see my Activities review)!

All in all though, I think it was a good estimate for the time I was actually working on the garden structure.

The Final Design



Having evaluated the many elements of the design, I was able to decide upon where different elements were to go & to finally draw it all up. I will take the different elements in turn & using magnified sections of the full design drawing, explain my reasons for each decision.

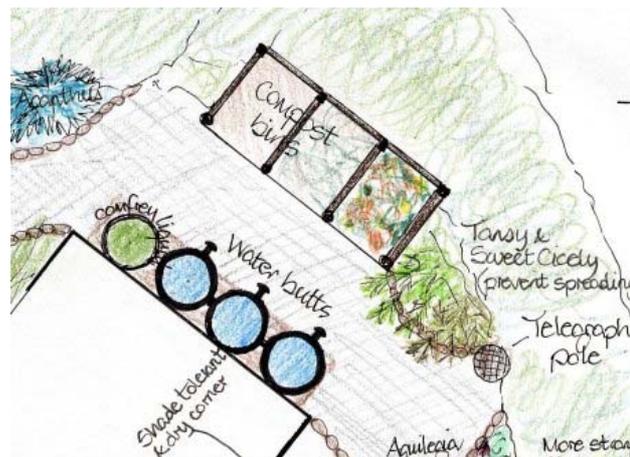


The area immediately around the caravan door & the approach pathway is my most visited zone. It is a very sheltered spot & catches the sun until well into the afternoon, so the beds here have the potential to be very productive. The decking gives extra height & much reduces slug & snail damage to more vulnerable plants. The pergola provides vertical growing space, sheltered from the wind. This extends my zone 0 during the warmer months, which is when I will be most needing to tend plants in pots on the decking.

A trellis on the caravan provides a very warm growing wall for half-hardy climbers & the leaf cover gives some heat protection to the caravan. The water butt on the decking provides my drinking water when it is fresh enough. A couple of trees in pots give more height & provide me with opportunities to try out new guilds.

Scented plants & colourful flowers around the doorway & next to the bench are placed where I can most enjoy them. The compost bucket sits on the ground just below the decking, where it can be easily filled from the caravan door & just as easily picked up from below to carry around to the compost bins. The beds in front of the decking are filled with soft fruit bushes (currants & gooseberries), with aromatic herbs, alliums, self-sowing vegetables like rocket, parsnips & kale & good ground cover plants like strawberries & *Montia sibirica*.

The blue plastic water butts fit nicely behind the end of the caravan where they are out of sight, yet easily accessible from either side of the garden. Linking them together & feeding water from both gutters into them gives a good potential for rooftop water collection. They are raised high enough to get a watering can underneath & the lids bolted on for safety, in case children are around. The compost bins are set back into the hedge giving enough space to get a wheelbarrow through the gap. Their fronts lift out to allow full access to dig out the compost when it is needed. A fourth butt to brew comfrey liquid in sits between the water supply & the comfrey bed.



Tansy & Sweet Cicely (good herbs to hang in the caravan doorway & repel summer flies) are planted in a bed bounded by a hedge & a well-used path, preventing them from getting too invasive. The telegraph pole is left with access for when it needs to be serviced.



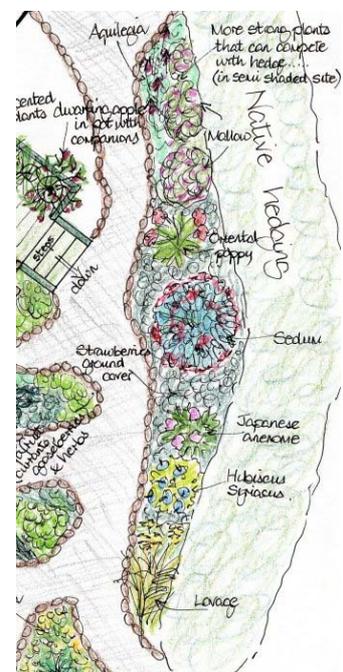
Around the back of the garden against the shady caravan wall I have planted a plentiful supply of comfrey to provide both fertilising mulching material & the basis for a liquid feed. It is also a good medicinal & tea herb, attracts the bees & provides flowers & small leaves for salads. It will grow well in a difficult spot & will be

confined by the boundaries defined by the caravan & the path.

The centre bed contains suckering raspberries that will also hopefully be restrained by the surrounding pathways. These are underplanted with aromatic herbs (chives, marjoram etc) & clover (nitrogen fixer) & strawberries as ground cover.

A fig has been planted in the centre, which will in time establish itself, so this bed will provide another good supply of soft fruit. The walk to the shed for tools passes by this bed, which at the right time of year may prove to be a bit of a distraction from doing any work in the garden!

The beds that I have created in front of the two hedges both need strong plants in them that can look after themselves up against such strong competition. The two stretches of hedge though contain slightly different species & this may be due to their different aspects. The hedge in the back garden has a lot more bramble & elder, which provide fruit for the birds & myself & so to a degree I have to be careful about when I prune them back. Plants that like a bit more sun would do better in this bed than in the other one & this is also a slightly windier & wetter spot too. I have gone for good self-sowing plants (i.e. Evening primrose, Aquilegia, Fennel) & vigorous species such as Mallow & Buddleia, which will hopefully hold their own in the face of bindweed & bramble in particular. The Buddleia I have planted in the corner behind the shed door, where it can also be contained, yet provides a sheltered spot for butterflies to feed on it during the summer.



The hedge in the front garden is a much shadier spot & it has a rain shadow at its base. Blackthorn & Holly is much more dominant here, the former suckering vigorously in the immediate area. It certainly seems to be a much more difficult place for other plants to grow. Again I have planted big strong plants that I have known to do really well in other places, in the hope that they will hold their own here too. Mallow & Sedum provide edible leaves (& flowers from the former). Hibiscus syriacus will also provide salad flowers & Lovage seeds & leaves for salad (small amounts) & drying as a flavouring. The strawberries again provide edible ground cover. The other plants are just beautiful & of course vigorous too.

The shed needs to be painted to improve its heat absorbing capacity & blend it better into the environment. It also has a trellis attached to it to support climbing plants & to prevent them from touching the surface of the metal & getting scorched. I have planted Jerusalem artichokes at the western end of the bed, to provide a windbreak, biomass & a self-storing winter food.



I will underplant different climbers to experiment with guilds again. The plum at the eastern end is fan-trained against the shed for a better crop & loganberries trained along the wall in between. Low sun-loving plants fill the front of the bed. The pond is sited so that it is viewed from both the decking & out of the

caravan side window. The soil dug from the hole is used to make a rockery, along with the large stones from near the house. Like the spiral bed, this will provide areas with different microclimates; hot & dry at the top, sunny to the south, slightly moister & shadier to the north.

The pond provides extra habitats, both in & around it for greater diversity within the garden. I intend to plant mostly native species & aim to attract plenty of wildlife to the pond. It would be great to see tadpoles developing in there in particular. The south end is deep to accommodate a Water Lily & provide enough depth for frogs to hibernate there too. At the north end is the shallows, where tadpoles can sunbathe & wild animals can climb out if they fall in. It is also sited to be easily watched from the two viewpoints, in case birds for instance come down to wash & drink. Tall species at the south end provide midday summer shade & a bog garden at the north end provides another new habitat for Irises, Houttonia etc. Reedmace is planted in a bucket outside the pond liner to keep it from invading the whole pond.

The south end of the decking is where the real sun-loving plants (& people!) hang out. It is the place from which virtually the whole garden can be viewed & where beautiful views over the orchard can be enjoyed too. There is room enough for a table & chairs (for drinks or meals) & also space for me to do my morning exercises. The pots around the decking will be used to grow mostly salads during the summer & in the winter they will be moved back closer to the caravan.



Again, scented & colourful flowers surround the table for maximum sensual stimulation! The plants around the outside of the decking will also be mostly low level sun-loving plants, surrounding soft fruit bushes again, though some climbers could make use of the handrail posts above them. Among others, I intend to grow tomatoes, cucumbers & squashes here, as this area receives maximum rain as well as full sunshine. These plants should they not die back too much in the winter, will also cut down the amount of wind blowing under the caravan during the colder months.

While the positioning of some plants is quite clear from my own & other peoples' growing experiences, others are open for experiment & what might start in one place may well find itself somewhere else.

Plants are easily movable elements within the design, unlike the groundwork, so there is not so much emphasis on getting these absolutely in the right place from the very beginning. More room is thus open for experimentation & that is when useful new discoveries get made..... & may there be many of those!

Implementation

I started my design implementation outside my caravan door, according to the principle 'start locally & work out from well managed areas'. The new beds I created were made on meadow grass which contained a lot of dock, nettle & buttercup in particular. In order to give the new plants a chance, I first mulched the ground with cardboard waste from local shops (which in time decomposes), then on top of that I placed a mixture of homemade compost, soil (mainly clay), plus some sand, gravel & manure to give it some structure. The manure was a very local resource being heaped only a few yards away.

The bed edging was made from fencing post offcuts, which along with the bark chippings from the same source were free of charge, although I did have to collect them. The straw for the paths came from spillings off the floor of the barn & most of the first plantings were surpluses from friends' gardens.

The main project of the first year was to erect the decking, in order to provide a better growing environment for younger & more delicate plants, enable the better use of vertical space & of course provide a bit of Peoplecare too! It was constructed using new timber for the framework, but recycling pallets for the decking surface. I had discovered a lot of pallets, all the same size, going for £1 each at the local builders yard & they looked ideal for the job. They were such a size that I could make the decking two pallets across & a whole number along the side & across the front, so I designed the framework to fit the pallets. The slats were quite a long way apart, but I could see that if I dismantled a second set of pallets, I could use those slats to fill in the gaps of the whole pallets I was using, overlapping the other joins.

When it started going down I could see that it was going to work very well & so on through the summer, the decking progressed.

The other important job was to create some water catchment as it was clear that the mobile home roof was a good size & helpfully already had good built-in guttering.



The space behind the caravan was both dark from being north-facing & out of the way where the blue barrels wouldn't look unsightly either. I put them up on blocks & pallets, so that I could get my watering cans under the taps & joined them together using cheap plastic fittings intended for use in dairies. Two old downpipes were ideal for diverting the water from the guttering into the barrels & I bolted the lids down for safety, in case children were ever around. A fourth blue barrel with a better lid has been installed here as my comfrey liquid feed container. It's clearly the obvious place for it to go, as it is right next to both the comfrey bed & the water catchment barrels.

My compost bins were also made from completely recycled materials. I used old fence posts for the front corners & old pallets for the back & sides (making three bins in one). The fronts are made from pallet slats dropped down in between a couple of pieces of recycled battening, allowing me to get right in & dig out the contents when I need to. I cut back into the hedge a little here to fit them in & still have room to get past with a wheel barrow (essential for distributing the finished compost back around the garden). The hedge is very thick at this point & has some large shrubs & trees in it, so there is still a lot of growth behind the bins.

By the end of the summer, I had finished the decking & was making a lot of use of it for growing. It had totally transformed the space, just about doubling the living area in the summer months & being pretty much slug proof & (as I was later to discover) frost free too! An added bonus has been that it really has made the mobile home more stable in high winds.

In the first year some work was done on developing behind the mobile home too, but limited to the beds in the picture on the left. Again I used fence post off-cuts to edge the beds & a mixture of mulching materials, topping off with wood chippings. At this time, the hedge was very low here behind the caravan, but I have allowed it to grow up to give much more privacy. Comfrey was planted as a useful green manure crop in the shadiest spot against the mobile home, where it has since thrived. I planted other vigorous plants in front of the hedge, where they would have to do well to hold their own, but that was OK as I was just experimenting at that point.

The area in front of the shed was at the time swathed in bramble. It was clearly making the most of a sunny south-facing wall, but how easy was it going to be for me to turn it into a bramble-free bed? By the autumn, the bramble had been cut back & was being mulched in order to try & eradicate it from that area.

By the following spring I was already feeling a real sense of progress. The decking was finished (& the steps were much safer!), the water catchment & composts bins had been sorted out. Plus, I had extended the original beds I had made at the front with a couple more, adding to the other new ones I had made at the back. As you can also see, the simple act of painting the mobile home green has helped it to blend much better into its environment. Straw spillings (shown here) were tried as a path base, but rotted too quickly. The latest experiment with wood chippings from treework done on the farm is turning out much better.

Having painted the mobile home green I decided that the decking needed the same treatment. I wasn't sure how much treatment the pallets would have been given as they are essentially temporary things & so I bought some 'eco-friendly' wood preserver & gave the decking a couple of coats of it.

By the end of the spring I had yet more plants to fill out some of the gaps & the garden was really starting to take shape. It was great to see the perennials I had planted returning stronger than the year before & I was also bringing on more seedlings in the greenhouse.

I was utilising a lot of the space on the decking, using pots to grow more vulnerable plants & I had installed a bench to catch the morning sun & a table & chairs to enjoy many of my meals outside, often with visitors. The local birds were perching on the decking handrails regularly & pheasants occasionally wandered through the garden. It was nice to have the vertical space too now & I put up some hanging baskets, experimenting with various water retaining techniques. Later in the summer I planted two honeysuckle plants in the ground, one at the base of each pergola upright. I looked forward to having the structure covered in plants!

I was still using straw spillings for the paths, as it was the only local free resource that I had available to me for the job. It seemed OK during the summer, but it had got quite mushy over the previous winter though & I was wanting to try something else as soon as I could.

Behind the caravan, the hedge was thickening out, which was good for the extra privacy, but it was also invading the bed that I had made next to it. The Buddleia I had planted the previous year started to fill it's corner & I put in six raspberry canes, which were surplus to requirements in the Manor garden where I was working. They had suckered & I figured that if they did the same in my garden then I would have a nice clump of canes in years to come. The comfrey was also starting to establish itself & I took my first crop of leaves to wrap around the potato tubers I was planting in the house garden.

By the end of the year, some of the bed edging wood off-cuts were starting to rot & I used up all my surplus pieces, filling gaps that were appearing. I needed to find something more durable to use for this purpose & so I turned to using empty bottles. I wanted to extend the garden around the front of the decking & to fill in the space between the mobile home & the shed at the back, so I started making new beds. Again there was plenty of cardboard & manure available & this time the bed edges were made using these recycled bottles (& no I didn't drink my way through them first!). I had noticed that people often left boxes of bottles by the local bottle bank when it was full, so I started collecting them. I timed my recycling trips for the morning before the bottle bank was collected & I soon had enough to make all the beds that I wanted.

The bottles are remarkably strong & have been tested in this way for safety before being used at busy tourist attractions like the Centre for Alternative Technology & the HDRA Organic Gardens. As it was a damp January, I was able to just push the bottles into the soft ground. I also decided to let nature deal with the labels rather than spend a lot of time getting them off first. I then got started on digging the pond out.

I had bought the most logical size of liner for economy reasons (4m x 3m), knowing roughly how big I wanted the pond to be & then worked out the exact dimensions that I could manage for the pond. I dug down in terraces, having decided on a pleasing shape that increased edge without reducing surface area too much & dug down to two & a half feet at the deep end. Because it was a damp & mild January, the ground was quite easy to dig (one of the reasons I decided to start) & so the digging & lining was done in a day. I used an old hessian backed carpet that I had pulled out of a skip to line the hole, before carefully placing the plastic liner & filling it with water from my water butts (via a hose).

The mound of earth (mostly clay actually) from digging out the pond was heaped up & spare large stones from a dismantled wall used to create a rockery. The same stone was also used to edge the pond, hiding the edge of the liner. Then I planted out around the pond & sprinkled flower seeds that I had been given all over the rockery..... & waited.

As the spring progressed, the beds & the pond gradually began to fill up with the new plants & various creatures appeared in & around the pond. One end of the pond has a gravel beach to allow birds to come & drink or bathe & small animals to get out again if they fall in. It has also proved to be a favourite sunbathing place for all the tadpoles hatched from some frogspawn, rescued from a ditch early in the Spring. Already it is a popular place for birds bathing & much wildlife has set up home, including a large blue dragonfly, which likes to rest upon the irises.

Wire trellises were attached to both the shed (which was also by now painted green) & the east side of the mobile home for climbers. I planted Jerusalem artichokes at one end for a perennial crop & to provide a bit of a windbreak & I underplanted with Sweet peas & Morning glory to climb up them.

In the middle I planted a Loganberry which I trained up the trellis & at the other end of the bed I planted Nasturtium, Sweet peas, Borage & Fennel, as I knew between them they would soon fill the gaps & help suppress the bramble even more.

In the spring I also inherited a lot more pots (with plants in). My parents work for the Cats Protection League in Worthing & an elderly lady had died & left her entire estate to the charity. My parents had to clear out the house & there were so many pots in the garden, that I was able to collect all I could put in my van in exchange for a donation to the charity. Many of her beautiful plants now live in my garden, where many more people will get to appreciate them now.

Maintenance

The maintenance of the garden mostly centres around keeping the pots on the decking watered. I probably could set up a watering system with pipes, but I have no water supply to the caravan & the routine of watering takes me around to keep me in touch with what's going on. There is a certain amount of bindweed & grass in the front garden beds & it may be worth me re-mulching them this winter to cut this back.

The other area where grass still grows strongly is on the path edges, particularly in the back garden, but I keep pulling it & putting more woodchip down & in time it reduces. I have to clear the pond of duckweed every couple of weeks, but this makes a good nutritious mulch on the garden beds, so nothing is lost there. The decking can get a little slippery in the winter & so I have to keep an eye on that & scrub it occasionally.

All in all though, there is very little work involved in maintaining this garden, especially when compared with a traditional one (& I should know because I still earn some of my living working in one!).

There is very little else to do except to go out & pick my salads... & then spend my spare time arranging them into beautiful patterns.

Design Review

What went well

As with the cottage garden, where I was also able to implement the design, I would have to say that it has generally all gone well. The vast difference between when I arrived & the garden now, in just it's third season is testimony enough to that. I will however highlight a few elements that came together particularly well.

Decking: Working chronologically, I would have to start with the decking. Although it became quite a long project, it totally transformed the space around the outside of the mobile home & effectively doubled it's living area during the summer months. This has been particularly valuable when the interior has got unpleasantly hot towards the end of really sunny days & the east-facing area goes into the shade. It went up with only a few technical problems, reused all those pallets & became a virtually slug-free area to grow my salads. It's also a great place to catch the morning sun & the evening shade (on the east side) & to enjoy meals outdoors, looking at the beautiful view.

Mulching: Not all the mulching I have done has been totally successful, but some of it has managed to create instant beds, without having any 'weeds' growing back up through later on. The use of a cardboard underlayer seems to make all the difference, because where I didn't use it, the situation is now less satisfactory (see below). Using a lot of manure as a top layer clearly keeps in a lot of the moisture in the soil & allows the plants to do well even when it has been hot & dry for a long period, while at the same time gradually dissolving feeding everything when we do get rain.

Pond: The pond has also been a great success. I was able to dig it during January, when there was nothing else to do in the garden anyway & it quickly gave shape to a flat featureless area of grass. I had sufficient old carpet from a skip to line the bottom of the hole with & protect the plastic liner & there were just enough rocks of the right sort of size nearby to edge it & create the rockery too. Even the pond plants & seeds I used on the rockery were mostly donated (I bought the water lily), so again it was a very cheap project to complete.

Everything has grown so well this year & the pond quickly filled up with pond life & looked well established even quite early on. It brings in another important habitat along with accompanying species to create greater potential for beneficial relationships within the garden.

Multiplying plants: I planted comfrey along the shady west wall of the caravan soon after I arrived & it has thrived, giving me plenty of leaves for making liquid fertiliser with & using as a surface mulch. The other plants certainly seem to benefit a lot from it's application (I also wrap my potato tubers in a leaf when I plant them out). I planted out six raspberry canes from the Manor house I was working at, where they had been suckering. I put them behind the caravan in the new bed I had created there & in their second year they are putting up canes to fill the whole bed. This will clearly be a very productive soft fruit bed next year & the use of the paths should prevent them spreading beyond where they are required. I have also had great success from simply leaving some plants like rocket & ragged jack kale to self sow themselves, avoiding the need for any input from me whatsoever. Simply sticking a selection of blackcurrant cuttings from good varieties in the ground has yielded some very productive bushes.

What was challenging

There isn't much really that goes in this section.

Pallets: I remember that fitting pallets into the decking structure didn't go quite as smoothly as I had hoped. Having built the decking to fit around the pallets, I discovered that not all the pallets that I had were quite the same size (clearly the 'human factor' in their construction). This meant that I had to do a bit more work trimming some down to fit than I had anticipated. Dismantling the other pallets for planks to infill the ones that I was putting in, was also a bit difficult as they had a tendency to split if I wasn't very careful.

Water catchment: Having set up three interconnected water butts at the back of the caravan & ascertained that they filled up well whenever it rained, I then built the decking. At first there didn't seem to be any effect, but it seems that the repeated use of the decking area at the southern end of the caravan has pushed the tow hitch assembly down a bit, where it rests upon it.

This seems to have had the effect of making most of the roof catchment to now run to the front of the caravan where there is only space for a single water butt. This often overflows in heavy rain now, while the three butts to the rear of the caravan hardly fill at all. The back of the caravan probably needs to be lowered a bit now to compensate.

What I would do differently

I would certainly have planned the **decking** more thoroughly before making new beds (a priorities error), as I had initially assumed that it would only be a single pallet wide. As it happened, once the decking was done, some of the plants in the beds that I had made were several feet under the decking & so a certain amount of transplanting was required. Some **mulching** didn't go quite so well, I would certainly use cardboard in all cases in future. Those where I didn't are still a mass of couch grass & bindweed, all entangled with the well established plants that now also reside there.

Some **plantings** I definitely made in the wrong place, particularly those that I put under the hedge on both sides of the caravan. Clearly the hedge draws a lot of the nutrients up from the soil around it, making it difficult for the other plants to compete. The eastern hedge is a shady spot that is also in a mini rain-shadow. As I find plants that do well in these beds I plant more of them, but a lot of plants I have had to relocate to other parts of the garden. I would now only plant big strong plants near the hedge, that I know will be able to hold their own there.

I planted a **pear tree** & an **apple tree** in pots on the decking. I wanted to have some vertical growth there early on & came across some cheap trees that needed rescuing from Woolworths. After doing well the first year, the pear died the following spring. On closer inspection I realised that leaving the saucer under the pot had caused the roots to rot. The apple developed a bad case of canker low down on the stem & despite work on it, doesn't look happy.

Conversely, two trees given to me by a friend (a plum & a cherry), that I planted directly into the ground, have done really well. I won't be growing trees in pots again, they are much easier to care for grown in the ground.