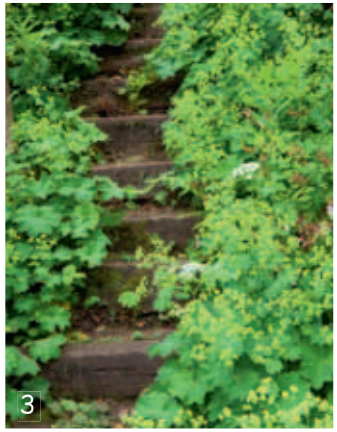
1. Turf steps

A wonderful set of turf steps cut into a grass bank at Milton Abbey in Dorset has dry-stone risers that have been allowed to get so worn down that it all looks as though it's been trodden into mother earth for centuries. The flanking evergreen planting adds just the right degree of grandeur.

ELLA TWITCHEN



364 MAGI / MARIANNE MAJERUS, SWILLIAM COLLINSON

2. Terracing levels

Here steps lead up to the garden from the house. Originally, the lawn extended much closer to the house, dominating the scene. We dug it out and pushed back the level to make a series of terraces, culminating in this broad flight of steps.

3. Planted steps

This narrow, winding staircase has been colonised and softened by lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*). Steps like these are suitable for a gentle, slow climb, where you can take your time and enjoy the plants.

4. Vertical gardening

This is a beautiful example of how a steep slope can be gardened using a series of terraced beds with dry-stone retaining walls. Herbaceous planting softens the sides of the long flight of steps and makes it seem less daunting.

5. Concealed steps

From a formal terrace of clipped *Elaeagnus* and *Iris* 'Jane Phillips', a simple set of steps leads down to a croquet lawn through a border of herbaceous planting. The effect is deliberately understated, with the steps lost among the soft planting.

Arne Maynard is a leading garden designer based in London and Monmouthshire

Level changes

From the steepest of slopes to the gentlest of inclines, level changes of all kinds add character to the garden and can be used for effects both subtle and dramatic

WORDS ARNE MAYNARD

6. Banks and curves

At this Devon garden we created level-changes using a gently sloping cobbled path that winds around a wildflower grass bank. The effect is soft and relaxed and what lies ahead is hidden by the height of the bank and the curve of the path.

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7. Framing an entrance

At Guanock a path from the house was made to cut through an existing wall. The drop down was slight, and to give it more ceremony, the step was placed on the other side of the wall and made wider than the opening.

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8. Through the woods

This old set of stone steps seems to have become an organic part of the woodland bank it climbs up. The treads are simply blocks of stone. There's nothing formal about it and no cement has been used. You could just as easily use timber.

8

9. Drove-ways

The earthworks at Allt-y-bela are inspired by the drove-ways of the nearby countryside. The fields used to slope steeply down to the house, which felt as though it was down a hole. Now these gentle ramps allow the garden to ripple out into the landscape.

9

6 BRITT WILLOUGHBY DYER, 7 &9 WILLIAM COLLINSON, 8 NTPL/DEREK CHOUCHER

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10 CLIVE NICHOLS

10. Faded grandeur

The way to create an atmosphere of age and romantic neglect is by allowing plants to self-seed and colonise in the crevices of stone steps. With its lichen-encrusted balustrading and steps down to the river Avon, the wonderful landing stage at Heale Gardens in Wiltshire is the real thing.

Services & suppliers

For building beautiful retaining walls, contact The Dry Stone Walling Association. This charity has a Register of Professional Wallers so you can find a practising member as close to you as possible. Tel 015395 67953, www.dswa.org.uk

A local quarry will often be the best match to your soil colour – but look also at areas of particularly fine stone such as Yorkshire and County Durham, which have traditionally supplied stone for finer detailing on buildings across the country. A quarry such as Dunhouse is able to supply stone cut to your measurements and style. Dunhouse Natural Stone, Cleatlam, Darlington, County Durham DL2 3QU. Tel 01833 660208, www.dunhouse.co.uk

Level changes can be difficult to deal with. Earlier in my career I tried to avoid them. When I bought Guanock, my garden in the Fens, where the landscape is incredibly flat, at first I thought, "How marvellous – I don't have to do anything." But I soon realised that over the distance of a lawn or a border, there was often a variation of a couple of feet, and I came to appreciate the value of these level changes and how they could be used as punctuation points and to signal transitions from one kind of space to another.

Stepping up gives you a view and a change of perspective; stepping down allows you to create a sense of intimacy and enclosure in the lower area. The physical act of stepping up or down intensifies this experience.

Steps are the obvious form of level change, but sometimes a more gradual transition is needed, like the gently sloping drove-ways I've carved into my new garden at Allt-y-bela in Monmouthshire (see picture 9). The question is always how to contain the earth, and a differential of, say, 1m or 1.5m will require either structural retaining walls or sloping banks. A long run of wall can look intrusive, whereas a combination of wall and bank gives a more natural effect. We often plant hedges in front of retaining walls to hide them; this means the wall can be a functional concrete-cast or rendered breeze-block construction. It also means the level-change is not as dramatic.

You can tuck a stairway behind a hedge so it's concealed, and if the hedge is allowed to grow higher than the wall, you will be less aware of the level change from the other side.

Softening retaining walls with planting is important to prevent a barrier effect. Drystone walls are lovely, gathering ferns and mosses in the crevices, but are not suitable for level changes of more than about 1.2m. Taller structural walls can be clothed in roses.

Banks are the gentler method of retaining soil, and, depending on the context, may be mown grass or wildflower meadow grass.

Steps should belong to the location; their design should take account of the distance they are travelling. On a steep flight, it's nice to incorporate a landing, allowing a pause and a chance to look around. Brick or stone are the materials of choice for formal areas, and there is an almost infinite number of ways to dress them up or down. In informal and woodland gardens, nothing more is needed than logs or branches fixed into the slope. □

NEXT TIME Design ideas for herbaceous schemes.