STEPPING STONES TO SUCCESS

Pre-registered SGLD member Peter Berg's award-winning design for a hillside garden in the Eiffel region of Germany is a masterclass in the use of rockwork and refined planting. **Philip Clayton** spoke to the designer, to find out how he fused the garden so perfectly with its house and the wider landscape

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARIANNE MAJERUS

So often, rock gardens are thought of as drab, dreary features from a past era, but in south-west Germany, on a north-west facing slope of a steep-sided valley near Piesport, there is a cutting-edge example of the type so brilliantly executed that it is winning applause from around the garden design world. In awarding it best International Garden earlier this year, the judges of the Society of Garden + Landscape Designers (SGLD) Awards described it as 'impressively grandiose', with a 'masterful use of materials' and 'perfectly balanced in its breathtaking setting'.

The garden unites its designer, pre-registered SGLD member Peter Berg's signature areas of expertise: dealing with a sharply sloping site (the garden drops some 36 feet (11 metres) despite covering just 5,381 sq ft/500sqm), and a masterful use of natural stone and understated planting. 'The sloping site part comes naturally; there are lots of slopes in Mosel,' jokes Peter, who was born in this part of Germany.

Seen from the front, house and garden are smart but low key, the upper part of the split-level home clad in wood, overlooking a driveway of stone setts and plantings of *Miscanthus*, *Amelanchier* and *Parrotia*, but just visible are tantalising glimpses of the valley beyond.

The steep slope the house is built into is terraced, with sawn basalt stairs descending to the lower storey between basalt boulders and stepped beds with retaining walls planted with trees such as *Cercis siliquastrum* and perennials including *Molinia* and tumbling *Symphoriotrichum ericoides* var. *prostratum* 'Snow Flurry'.

In some walls, the slate is laid horizontally, and vertically in others (a traditional technique in the area, says Peter), an effect that boosts texture and refinement. Sawn basalt blocks march across the slope through a wintergreen froth of *Polypodium* fern, contrasting with boulders and connecting a terrace with both an outdoor kitchen and a superb, cantilevered, steel viewing platform that offers panoramas of the River Mosel and its valley.

Basalt rocks provide a sense of transition with the surrounding landscape, particularly in the steepest areas, boulders and stepping stones punctuating plantings of *Cornus mas*, *Salvia* x *digenea* 'Adrian', *Geranium renardii*, *Sesleria autumnalis*, and various ferns. At the garden's perimeter, and retaining the level above, is a rock face planted with prickly *Rosa rugosa* and *Pyracantha*, both chosen to deter the inquisitive. Looking back and upwards, rockwork and planting unite to absorb the house into its landscape.

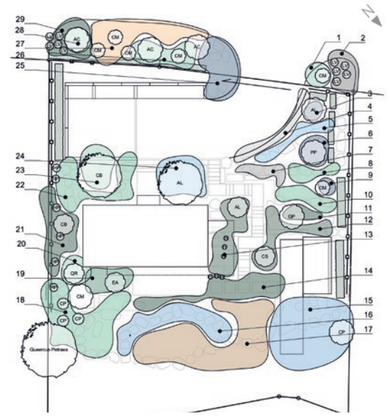
Meeting the brief

Integrating a garden this well with its house and surroundings was achieved in part by the fact that Peter was involved with the project before the house was built or an architect selected. 'The clients knew the garden was the most important part of the build; it's the third build I've completed for them,' he said.

As a result, he was able to prepare the site before construction of the house started, with the huge boulders being moved in first. Little of note was here before, mostly brambles, although a fine *Quercus petraea* (sessile oak) has been retained. Interestingly, Peter helped his clients organise a competition to find an architect and he was involved in the selection process as the look of the property was to be developed by both architect and garden designer for a sense of unity.

The house is a family home, used at weekends and holidays. The owners wanted to maximise superb views with a garden that included a covered seating area and outdoor kitchen, as well as screening from the street and neighbouring buildings. Peter describes his clients →

Inspired by an existing *Quercus petraea*, high-quality, slow-growing trees and shrubs were selected to give the garden a sense of permanence and ever-increasing value, as well as create privacy and act as natural boundaries with neighbouring properties. Perennials are mixed with ferns in shaded areas and with grasses in sunnier spots; all were chosen for their natural propagation properties, and to avoid the need for annual plantings based on greenhouse cultivation.



Planting plan legend

AC – *Acer campestre*
AL – *Amelanchier lamarckii*
CM – *Cornus mas*
CB – *Carpinus betulus*
CP – *Crataegus persimilis* 'Prunifolia'
CS – *Cercis siliquastrum*
EA – *Euonymus alatus*
HP – *Hydrangea petiolaris*
LV – *Ligustrum vulgare*
QP – *Quercus pubescens*
TB – *Taxus baccata*

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as having a 'strong connection with the landscape', so it was vital the garden should integrate with its rural setting, with terracing employing the same dry stone walls used in the region's vineyards. 'One architect chose cut stone for the lower house walls, to provide a uniform finish, but this does not match stone used locally. In this case, the garden designer came first,' he explains.

Planting includes many native or near-natives to provide interest year-round, and it needed to be low maintenance. In all, the project took three years to complete, from 2016 to 2019.

Orchestrating stones and planting

Peter concentrates on natural elements; stone, water, earth, and plants, and all are present here, water in the borrowed landscape of the River Mosel. 'A garden should be like an orchestra,' he says. 'Violins are less interesting than if heard with other instruments but it's important everyone plays the same tune, from gravel to big rocks, moss to specimen trees, the whole orchestra.'

About 25 years ago, Peter became interested in Japanese gardens and the use of rockwork, and he and his practice, GartenLandschaft, have now evolved a distinct style, combining stones with plants; Peter even runs workshops on dry stone walling at his own garden in Sinzig.

He regularly uses boulders weighing anything between two and 20 tonnes, personally selecting them from the quarries. 'Rocks add structure but also act as stepping stones, which makes planting easy to maintain – you walk on the rocks, not the plants, and also need fewer plants,' he says.

Some elements of his work may be familiar to students of German garden design. One source of inspiration is Hermann (Count) Pückler, a 19th-century landscape gardener, and another is plantsman Karl Foerster. 'I once made a garden in Belgium where the owner's father was a landscape architect,' Peter recalls. 'He visited the site but, sadly, died soon afterwards. His daughter later found a book written by Foerster, *Der Steingarten der sieben Jahreszeiten* (*Rock Gardens Through the Year*), which she passed to me – [Foerster] recognises plants are more beautiful when used in combination with stone, and advises people study Asian gardens.'

In his planting, Peter chooses flowers that reflect 'colours of the sky': white, blue and grey. Yellow flowers are avoided, especially in spring as Peter finds 'they stop you seeing the greater picture'. He also selects slow-growing

WHO'S WHO

Contractor, GartenLandschaft Berg & Co. GmbH, gartenlandschaft.com/en

Plants, Baum & Bonheur, baumbonheur.com/en-gb#

Hard landscaping, (slate) Weber-Schiefer, weber-schiefer.de; (basalt) Natursteinwerk Peter Engels, engels-naturstein.de

plants, which goes against what others often choose, and picks out specimens with clients at nurseries. He believes slow-growing plants improve with time, while quick-growers become untidy. 'We'd never plant *Forsythia* as it becomes ugly after ten years; by contrast, *Hamamelis* gets more valuable with age. Slow growers also tend to have better autumn colour,' he explains.

The viewing platform

The remarkable steel and glass viewing platform is perhaps this garden's most exciting feature, and it is not the first one that Peter has designed. 'We previously built a similar viewing platform for the same clients, in a different garden, but in this case, we wanted to bring the spectacular surroundings closer to the viewer.' Peter feels the clean design and use of contemporary materials creates a balance between architecture, garden and landscape.

Reflecting an ethos

All the designer's ideas outlined above can be seen in this garden at Piesport: rough, apparently randomly placed rocks juxtapose with perfectly cut and spaced blocks, softened by restrained plantings, fern fronds or pale, uncomplicated flowers of plants such as white *Anemone* x *hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert' standing out against slate and basalt. In autumn, foliage colour abounds.

Peter is pleased with the results. 'Working with natural stone from the region was satisfying; the successfully diverse use of slate and cubically sawn basalt blocks ranges from robust and massive, to delicate and complex. This contrasting work, I feel, makes the project individual. Traditional craftsmanship is also revived in the form of vertically layered dry stone walls.'

Searching out the right clients is vital if designers are to create authentic design such as this, Peter says. 'I go to clients who appreciate my style – I travel across Germany and neighbouring countries; it means fewer compromises and stronger, more confident work.'

He also feels garden designers need to be involved with building and maintaining gardens. 'During construction, I am busy laying stones and creating the topography and terraces. I think this is key. The most important place for my work is in my own garden, where I try out new ideas. Nature must always be our role model; it shows us how everything works,' he says.

In the sublime Piesport rock garden, this ethos certainly works brilliantly, as the impressed SGLD judges and many others have seen. ●

PETER BERG, PRE-REGISTERED SGLD MEMBER,
grew up in the Ahr Valley in the Eiffel region of Germany. After studying for a diploma in civil engineering, he worked in construction until 1986, when he realised landscape gardening was his passion. In 2000 he set up GartenLandschaft, a garden design and construction company, with business partner Susanne Foerster, and in 2010, published his first book, *Modern Garden Architecture*; his latest book, *BergStyle: garden design inspired by Pückler*, was published in September 2024.
gartenlandschaft.com/en