

How to plan the perfect patio

There is no such thing as too much paving — create space for alfresco dining, says Stephen Anderton



There is plenty of room to circulate around this dining table and chair set
ALAMY

Don't move. Just lie there in the sun, on the patio, on the lounge, the bees a-buzzing, the finches a-fluttering and look around you. I would hazard a guess that your patio is too small for your purposes. What do you think?

While you are lying there, let's consider what to do about it. How much bigger should you make it to suit your needs? Would it be better to take up the whole thing and start again? Wouldn't it be more fun to extend it round the corner of the house to get sun (or shade) at a different time of day?

I have never met anyone who

said that, practically speaking, they had too much paving. Paving is almost always mean. There's a rule of thumb that a patio should extend from a house for two thirds the height of the building. Then it stops looking like a thin streak of paving, or a fat path under the windows, and more like a comfortable rug before a hearth. By the time the paraphernalia of ordinary life has been plonked on it, it really doesn't seem too large.

Think what all that stuff is, as you lounge there, pondering the proportions of your patio. You might want sufficient depth

front-to-back for a dining table and chairs and also in sunny weather for the base of an umbrella, which always has to sit in some particularly precise and annoying place to cast shade over the table. It will, of course, need a generous gangway for adults, children and dogs to get past. You will want space for a decent-sized pot of clematis against the house wall, except that it won't stand quite against the wall because of the outside tap, which you need room to get at because that's where the hosepipe lives.

Maybe there will be another pot containing a fountain of bamboo on the edge of the patio where it meets the grass. There'll need to be space for people not to fall over that toy tractor. And enough wriggle room to avoid that colony of fennel that seeded itself in paving cracks. It's only when you start to list all of these elements that you begin to realise how much space is needed.

It is also hard to make the paving slabs you use too large. They are more difficult to lay of course, which is why people go for smaller ones, contractors included. Yet big ones, even of the size you see in a street, have an effortless magic and a visual modernity that is hard to beat. They calm the look of a space, whereas a pattern of many smaller units fizz it up. Be prepared to look in builders' yards as well as garden centres if you can't see anything large enough.

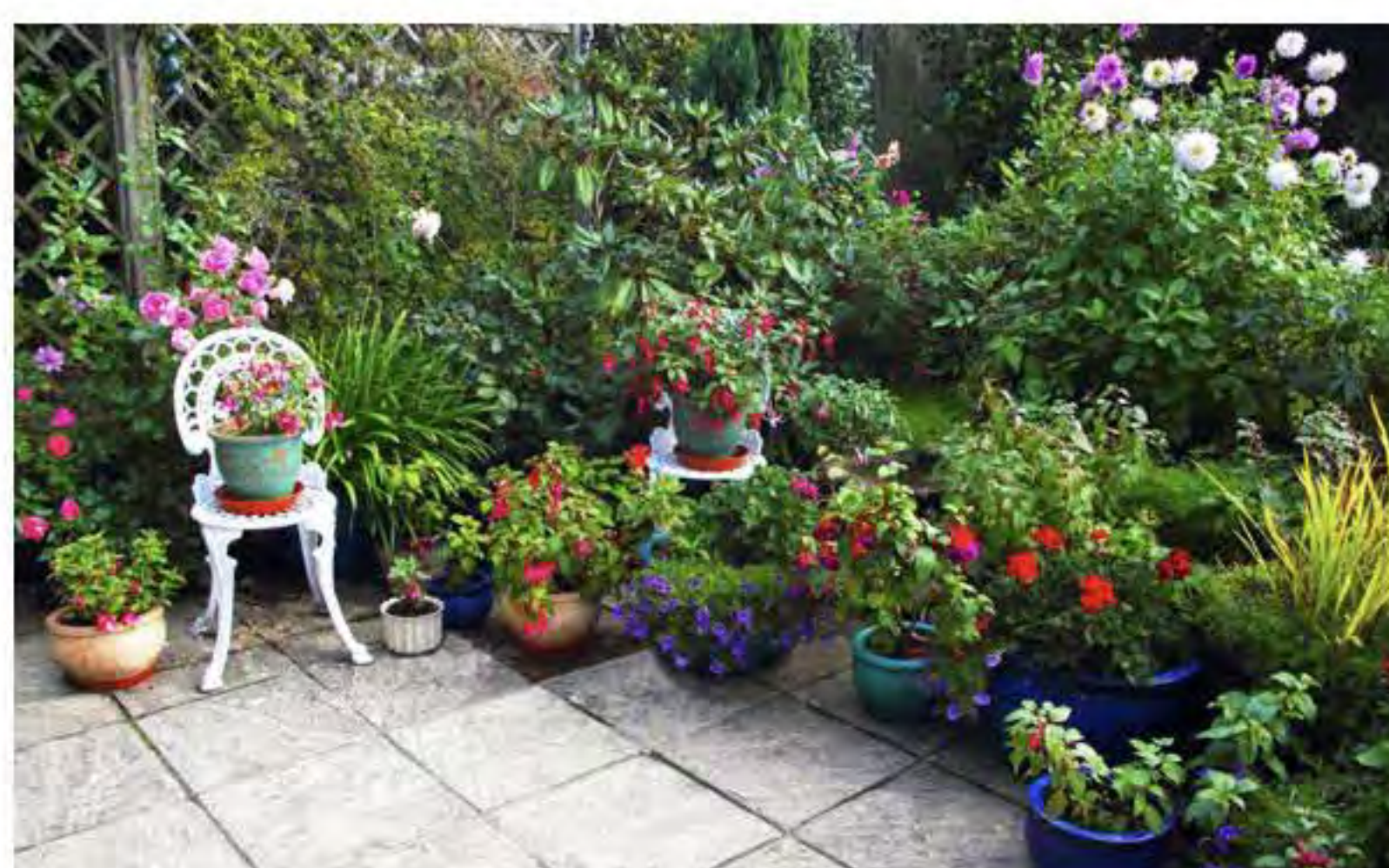
The same strength and





A tiny decked area has pretty planting around it in this small garden, but not much room for seating
ALAMY

simplicity applies to choosing paving colour. There are all kinds — including various shades of sandstones and limestones from India and granites from China. Resist. Unless your garden is inescapably smart or rustic there is nothing wrong with decent-quality concrete slabs. Stick to one colour that relates to the house or tones with it. You need a companion colour rather than loud contrast. This is a garden after all, not Copacabana Beach. Whatever



A trellis provides a screen on one side of this flower-filled patio
GETTY IMAGES

tone you choose, lichen soon gently takes over anyway.
If I had to put a figure on a comfortable patio depth I'd say

aim for not less than four metres (and if you only have a tiny plot and that means a paved garden, so be it). So work out where four metres would get to. Do your tables and chairs and gangway sums. Then you can think about some luscious planting. If you want some post-lockdown inspiration, the National Garden Scheme is up and running again, so you can go a-visiting and at the same time support charities. Pre-booked slots only through [ngs.org.uk](https://www.ngs.org.uk) ■

