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Soft woodland planting, and a restful, rectangular pool clad in Corten steel help define a relaxing area for the family to gather.

In brief

What Elegant contemporary city garden.

Where London.

Size 550 square metres. A garden area of approximately 20m x 25m, and an additional corner triangle for hiding away composting and irrigation kit.

Soil London clay.

Climate Moderate climate only occasionally falling below freezing, and regular rainfall.

Points of interest Strong structure. Excellent handling of sloping site. Both subtle and dramatic use of Corten steel.

Perfectly formed

Designer Sara Jane Rothwell has taken a neglected and sloping, small city garden and turned it into a calming and comfortable space

WORDS NON MORRIS PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS

The hallmark of a Sara Jane Rothwell garden is a well-thought-through space, precisely built hard landscaping and clean lines softened by grasses and perennials. This family garden in London was a tired, unloved, sloping plot with bare fencing and patchy planting offering minimal privacy from the buildings overlooking it on all sides.

Now the garden looks smart and feels both private and spacious. Two broad platforms of lawn are separated by an elegant flight of turfed steps, a neat cedarwood and glass lodge sits discreetly in one corner, a comfortable terrace offers outdoor sofas around an easy-to-use firepit, and there is a soothing rectangular pond and an area of elegant woodland – while the edges are softened throughout with an effective mix of strong structural planting, grasses and long-lasting perennials.

A clipped yew hedge provides both a screen for one side of the garden and cleverly squares off the previous ragged shape of the plot, completely concealing a triangular working area now perfect for housing composting and irrigation kit.

To minimise the effect of the garden's steep slope Sara Jane levelled off part of the garden and created a 'sunken' path that runs alongside the hedge and is separated from the lawn by elegant blocks of box and three sets of simple wide steps.

The box platforms ingeniously surround an awkwardly positioned, double-trunked pine tree, looking as though they have always been there and turning the tree into a feature rather than a problem.

The lodge, which functions both as a gym and an art studio, is cleverly raised on to a decked platform to avoid damaging the root system of a nearby plane tree. It looks out on to a grove of silver birch that provides garden privacy without blocking light. "I went out of my way to source *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii* because its canopy is so much lighter than some other birches," says Sara Jane.

Although small, this woodland area gives the garden a wonderful feeling of calm. Beneath the trees Sara Jane has planted broad sweeps of box, alongside Japanese anemones, *Tellima grandiflora*, the lovely, pale *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola', and the fern *Dryopteris erythrosora*, chosen in part because its new foliage has the same rusty tones as the Corten steel used throughout the garden. In late spring the area lights up with the addition of *Tulipa* 'Maureen' – a gleaming, acorn-shaped, snow-white tulip.

The elegance of the grove is enhanced by a simple iroko wood platform – designed by Sara Jane – that seems to almost float above planting and creates a serene, woodland walkway that links the ►



▷ garden lodge to the soothing waters of a sleek, Corten steel-clad pool, positioned to line up exactly with the double doors of the house. A stepping stone at the pool's centre allows the family to walk directly from the lodge to a comfortable seating terrace where outdoor sofas surround a circular firepit.

Here on the terrace Sara Jane has used the warm tones of Corten steel to its most dramatic effect. A triptych of rust-coloured panels – one with a circle cut out to reveal a flourish of ruby red acer – provides an exciting focal point for the garden and cleverly hides away the gas cylinders for the firepit. “The great thing about the metal is that it is like an art installation,” says Sara Jane. “It just carries on ageing and changing. And it looks so great with green.”

On the opposite side of the lawn, next to the house, Sara Jane retained an existing terrace, but removed a glossy white balustrade, which she felt created a barrier.

“I wanted to make the house feel part of the garden and have an uninterrupted view,” she says. In place of the balustrade are broad steps of sawn Yorkstone and tiered raised beds. Here the planting is rich with velvety

reds and mauves. The clients’ only planting request was for roses, so in went the vibrant *Rosa* ‘Tuscany Superb’ and *R.* ‘Charles de Mills’, alongside jewel-coloured tulips, *Cirsium rivulare* ‘Atropurpureum’, *Penstemon* ‘Andenken an Friedrich Hahn’ and *P.* ‘Raven’, *Salvia nemorosa* ‘Caradonna’ and *Erysimum* ‘Bowles’s Mauve’. Sara Jane had “resisted the idea” of using *Erysimum* before, but is thrilled with the way it flowers from one end of the year to the other.

Sara Jane has created a comfortable, elegant, low-maintenance garden with fine structure, exquisite detailing and restrained bursts of gorgeous planting. The different elements of the garden have been cleverly unified by the repeated use of pale Yorkstone in the terracing and steps, and the subtle richness of Corten steel in cladding for the pool and the uprisers of the lawn steps. The garden as a whole is an inviting private space and a pleasure to use all year round. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

To see more examples of Sara Jane’s work visit londongardendesigner.com

“The great thing about Corten steel is that it is like an art installation – it just carries on ageing and changing”

Above Raised beds filled with *Erysimum* ‘Bowles’s Mauve’, jewel-coloured tulips and *Heuchera villosa* ‘Palace Purple’ provide a splash of rich colour.

Opposite top A deep red acer – one of the few plants retained from the original garden – bursts through the circle cut into the central panel of a weathered Corten steel triptych.

Opposite below Sara Jane designed the simple iroko platform to provide a woodland walkway from garden lodge to the new seating terrace.



Contemporary style tips

• Create different areas of interest

Creating several distinct spaces within a garden not only adds to the interest within the garden, but can also increase the feeling of spaciousness. “It’s important not to overcomplicate,” says Sara Jane. “Staggering the various elements and creating layers of texture and depth are often the key.”

• Create privacy with plants and trees

Sara Jane recommends using pleached trees, (her favourite is the ornamental pear, *Pyrus calleryana* ‘Chanticleer’) and high-panel trees, (such as hornbeam) to create a natural partition for separate garden areas. A pair or – if you have room – grove of silver birch can be a great choice. Silver birches grow closely together in the wild and can happily be planted closely together in a small garden.

• Create privacy with structures

Permanent structures or screens, such as the Corten steel panels used here, can create a real focal point for the garden – and some much-needed privacy in an overlooked city garden. For roof terraces Sara Jane often uses a pergola with a retractable canopy or, as in this garden, a generous parasol to provide shade and privacy. Despite its size, this parasol, from the US company Tucci (globalparasols.com), can be easily wound up, taking up relatively little space.

• Choose plants with a long season

Sarah Jane often uses box and yew to provide a good structural skeleton for a garden, and then softens these with ferns, grasses – including *Hakonechloa macra*, *Anemanthele lessoniana* (pheasant’s tail grass) and *Deschampsia cespitosa* – that will look good all year round, and flowering perennials, such as *Erigeron karvinskianus*. She adds seasonal colour, by including lots of spring bulbs.

• Keep things simple

It can be tempting to try and over compensate for a garden’s faults, but often the simplicity is again key. Here the garden had a steep slope, which Sara Jane levelled in parts to create distinct areas, but left a gentle slope in the lawn. “I could have used more terraces and retaining walls, she says “But it would have spoiled the lateral view.”