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TOTAL IMMERSION

Sara Jane Rothwell has softened the hard landscaping of this sloping plot with rich planting that contrasts with the repeated use of Corten-steel features

WORDS KATE JACOBS PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS

The brief

The owners of this new-build house in north London – a Swedish couple with three teenage children – brought garden designer Sara Jane Rothwell on board during extensive internal renovations. For the garden, their brief was simple: to fill the space with plants. The owners wanted lots of flowering plants and references to their Swedish heritage, as well as a gazebo getaway for their teenagers.

The plot, a rectangle of around 40m by 16.5m, was not without its challenges. It was sloping and dominated by a rendered retaining wall that snaked, free-form, around the back and one side of the garden. Near the house it bulged out to surround a raised planting bed, which was dominated by scrubby shrubs and a large oak tree, *Quercus robur*. Next to the house, a huge terrace had been paved with dazzling white porcelain tiles, with grass covering the rest of the tiered space. “The white rendered walls were very much ‘in your face’, while the effect of all the tiling was blinding,” recalls Sara Jane.

The design

Sara Jane kept the retaining wall, painting it an unobtrusive dark grey that the new planting would quickly screen. At the point where the wall curves out into the centre of the garden, she boosted the sense of width by working laterally across the space, creating full-width gravel patios and planting borders. She replaced the porcelain tiles on the terrace with slate, and reduced its size by adding beds to bring planting closer to the house. A neat path of hardwood boards, laid flush with the slate paving, cuts through the terrace and splits it in two, further lessening its impact.

This path runs from the house to a short flight of Corten-steel steps, which leads up to two stepped patio areas topped with grey limestone chippings. The whole plot is subtly terraced to disguise the garden’s 2.5m slope. The Corten motif continues here with a simple bowl-shaped water feature and an eye-catching sculptural panel. “I think of this as a landing area,” says Sara Jane. “I like to include some breathing space in my designs.” Beyond the gravel sections, poured concrete stepping stones in the lawn lead to a Corten-steel shelter, nestled in a bank of woodland planting.

Turn the page for Sara Jane’s design ideas ▷

Left Steps in Corten steel lead up through a lush mix of planting below a *Cotoneaster* ‘Cornubia’. Low-growing *Geranium macrorrhizum*, *Geum rivale* ‘Leonard’s Variety’ and *Erigeron karvinskianus* soften the hardwood path that leads out from the house, while on the upper level, tall *Eremurus x isabellinus* ‘Cleopatra’ echo the colour of the facing Corten-steel panel.



The roof terraces

Sara Jane prepared the house's four roof terraces by checking and repairing their waterproofing and assessing their weight-bearing capabilities with a structural engineer, before decking them with hardwood. She designed large, trapezoid-shaped planters, in Corten steel, that break up the rectilinear floorplan of the terraces, and kept the number of smaller containers in check. "I kept it simple with just a few pots from Atelier Vierkant," she says. To connect the terraces with the main garden, Sara Jane has repeated plants including *Erigeron karvinskianus* and *Rosa Thomas à Becket* (= 'Auswinston'), as well as more drought-tolerant species, such as *Cistus x purpureus* and *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low'.

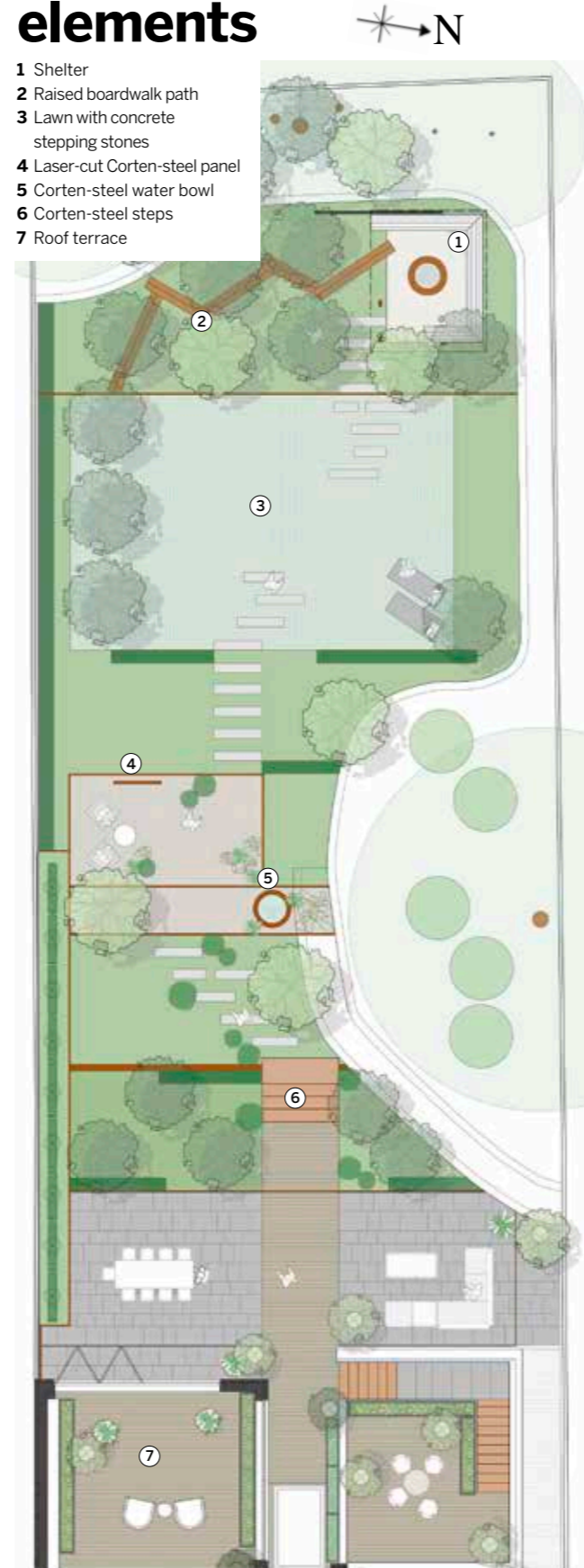


The green wall

To soften the effect of the imposing red-tiled house, the client was keen to explore the option of a living green wall. Using Corten steel, Sara Jane created a sub-frame and channels for the guttering, as well as edging to conceal the sides of the structure. She brought in Adam Shepherd of Tapestry Vertical Gardens. "I gave him the plant list for the garden, but otherwise he had a free rein and specified all his own plants," says Sara Jane. He has referenced the garden's purple theme with *Phormium* Black Velvet (= 'Seivel') and *Persicaria microcephala* 'Red Dragon'. Adam grows his plants in panels and installs them in sections after four to six months of growth. The green wall wraps around the most prominent corner of the house.

Essential elements

- 1 Shelter
- 2 Raised boardwalk path
- 3 Lawn with concrete stepping stones
- 4 Laser-cut Corten-steel panel
- 5 Corten-steel water bowl
- 6 Corten-steel steps
- 7 Roof terrace



The shelter

The clients asked for a secluded 'den' structure at the back of the garden, for their teenage children to retreat to. Since then they've also discovered that it's the perfect sunny spot for morning coffee. It can be accessed by a zig-zagging, raised boardwalk of railway sleepers, building on the atmosphere of secrecy and discovery. Sara Jane designed the shelter to open up on two sides, to better enjoy views across the garden and to provide ventilation for a gas firepit. Built in Corten steel-clad timber, the structure is topped with a sedum roof. "I slightly offset the vertical support posts, so that they don't break up the views," says Sara Jane. Towards the tops of the wall panels, the spacing between the Corten-steel slats increases, allowing glimpses of the shrubs and ferns planted beyond.



The immersive planting

A plant-focused garden was central to the clients' wish to be surrounded by flowers and greenery. As well as removing a few heavy, evergreen trees to bring dappled light into the woodland area, Sara Jane has planted around 25 new trees throughout the garden. These include *Betula pendula* 'Zwitsers Glorie' and *Pinus mugo*, nodding to the family's Swedish heritage, as well as colourful multi-stem acers and a row of pleached *Parrotia persica* to provide screening from neighbouring properties.

To the rear of the garden, a neighbour's *Prunus cerasifera* 'Nigra' overhangs the boundary and Sara Jane has brought this into the scheme by repeating it, along with other purple plants including *Cotinus coggygria* 'Royal Purple'. The herbaceous planting features a wide colour palette, which the clients were eager to embrace, with plants such as *Eremurus x isabellinus* 'Cleopatra' playing off the rust-coloured Corten with its salmon-orange tones.

The vivid colours are amplified by Sara Jane's preference for planting in large blocks. Plants including *Hakonechloa macra*, *Geranium Rozanne* (= 'Gerwat'), *Erigeron karvinskianus*, *Dianthus cruentus*, *Sisyrinchium striatum*, *Stipa gigantea*, *Phlox paniculata* 'Blue Paradise', *Achillea millefolium* 'Terracotta', *Bistorta amplexicaulis* 'Blackfield', *Astrantia* 'Roma', *Rosa Lady of Shalott* (= 'Ausnyson') and *Rosa Boscobel* (= 'Ausconsin') blur the lines of the hard landscaping. "A softening, cascading effect is important in terraced or sloping gardens. I want it to feel like the planting is tumbling from back to front."

The focal points

A sculptural panel of laser-cut Corten steel, with an abstract foliage pattern, leads the eye into the garden and marks the transition between the gravel area and the lawn beyond. It was custom made for Sara Jane by Natasha Webb Design. "It's a striking piece but, because it's partially transparent, it has a sense of lightness," says Sara Jane. "The eye is pulled towards it, then encouraged to travel onwards." Its position within the plan was largely intuitive on Sara Jane's part. "Together with the steps and the garden shelter – all in Corten steel – it creates a visual triangle within the space," she explains.

The Corten-steel steps

Beyond the seating area, marking the entrance to the garden proper, is a short flight of low, wide steps in Corten steel, which has been Sara Jane's go-to material of choice for many years. "Corten steel is the protagonist material in this garden, and I use it a lot, generally because it's such a versatile product. You can run it horizontally for 50 metres and not see a join, because it's hidden by the patina. It's easy to install, requiring only box steel posts set in concrete. It's economical, maintenance-free and develops its patina with age. And the colour looks wonderful against areas of planting."

The metal's slightly abrasive finish makes it ideal for these steps, which align with the front and back doors, creating a striking view through the house that culminates with a *Prunus cerasifera* 'Nigra', while a Corten-steel water bowl, from Urbis, is deliberately positioned slightly off-centre within this vista. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Sara Jane's work at londongardensdesigner.com