

TEXT ANNIE GATTI | PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS

On the up

A steeply sloping site in north London proved a testing brief for garden designer Sara Jane Rothwell, but she rose to the challenge, creating a plot of many levels for the owners and their young family to enjoy



OPPOSITE The zigzag trajectory of the steps slows down the eye while providing a meandering pathway to the top of the 7-metre slope. Corten-steel risers link the bottom terrace, where the material is used to edge the beds, with the upper garden. **THIS PAGE** Floating steps in poured concrete create an opportunity for shadow gaps, which can be seen from the house, and for recessed lighting that provides safe journeys up the garden at night

A borrowed landscape is a dream starting point for any designer of an urban garden, as Sara Jane Rothwell realised on her initial visit to the north London family home of first-time garden owners Frida Grundberg and Peter Dahlen.

The sloping site – 38 metres long by 18 metres at its widest – rises 7 metres to the rear decking area and, beyond this, to a backdrop of mature trees and shrubs. Sara Jane knew she wanted to blend the boundaries of the plot to embrace this view, but first had to deal with the ski-slope layout covered with shrubs and trees, which offered no usable space apart from a slim ground-floor terrace. ‘We wanted a garden where the children could play, we could entertain and my husband could do his daily exercises,’ says Frida. ‘And we wanted to be able to see the sky.’

Sara Jane’s solution was to create a series of terraces, with a poured-concrete wall at the bottom of the garden and Corten-steel edging elsewhere – materials chosen for their seamless effect. Steps zigzag up the slope, first to a timber platform that catches the morning sun, then to a gravel terrace and on up to a wide, level lawn, big enough for games of football. From here, the final set of steps leads to a large deck with a studio, screened by trees, where Peter has his gym, and a pirate-ship adventure area for the children. ‘We sit here in the evening sunlight, looking over the gardens,’ says Frida. ‘We even celebrated New Year’s Eve up here watching the fireworks across the London skyline.’

Once the overgrown shrubs and a shade-casting lime tree had been taken out, and the mature rhododendrons at the front of the garden pruned to create more architectural forms, the hard landscaping could begin. This entailed major excavation at ground level to accommodate a generous terrace of permeable resin-bound paving, framed by a wrap-around iroko bench. The same timber was used for the decks and new fencing, giving cohesion to the design, with Corten-steel elements linking the different levels. Replacement weatherboard fencing at the back is painted black to make it recede from view, helping to blur the boundary.

For the planting, Sara Jane chose key plants including the dwarf pine *Pinus mugo* subsp. *mugo*, two varieties of birch and four kinds of grasses to reflect Frida and Peter’s Swedish roots. Although the flowerbeds create a cascading effect of vegetation on either side of the steps, it was important that views to the top deck were not obscured. So most of the species selected form neat mounds – massed in groups of 15-20 for impact and to reduce maintenance.

The exception is the bed adjoining the terrace, where there is a greater variety, in smaller groupings, including daintier species such as astrantias and *Erigeron karvinskianus*. Repetition is key to linking the different levels, with *Geranium* ‘Rozanne’, *Alchemilla mollis* and *Hakonechloa macra* providing low mounds and *Pinus mugo*, *Anemanthele lessoniana* and *Persicaria amplexicaulis* ‘Firedance’ creating taller undulations.

An early summer colour scheme of white, pink, purple and blue complements the mauves and pinks of the existing rhododendrons. Pinpoints of orange from *Geum* ‘Totally Tangerine’ anticipate the warm tones that replace the pastel palette, with umber and red hues from *Helium* ‘Waltraut’, *Persicaria* and *Crocsmia* ‘Lucifer’. At the top of the garden, the shade cast by a mature acacia and a sycamore creates an opportunity for woodland planting that includes ferns, wood spurge and camassias.

For Frida and Peter, Sara Jane has achieved the right balance of usable space and beautiful planting. ‘In summer, we like to sit on the gravel terrace halfway up, as the sun rises,’ says Frida. ‘It’s just so quiet, you wouldn’t believe you are in London’ □

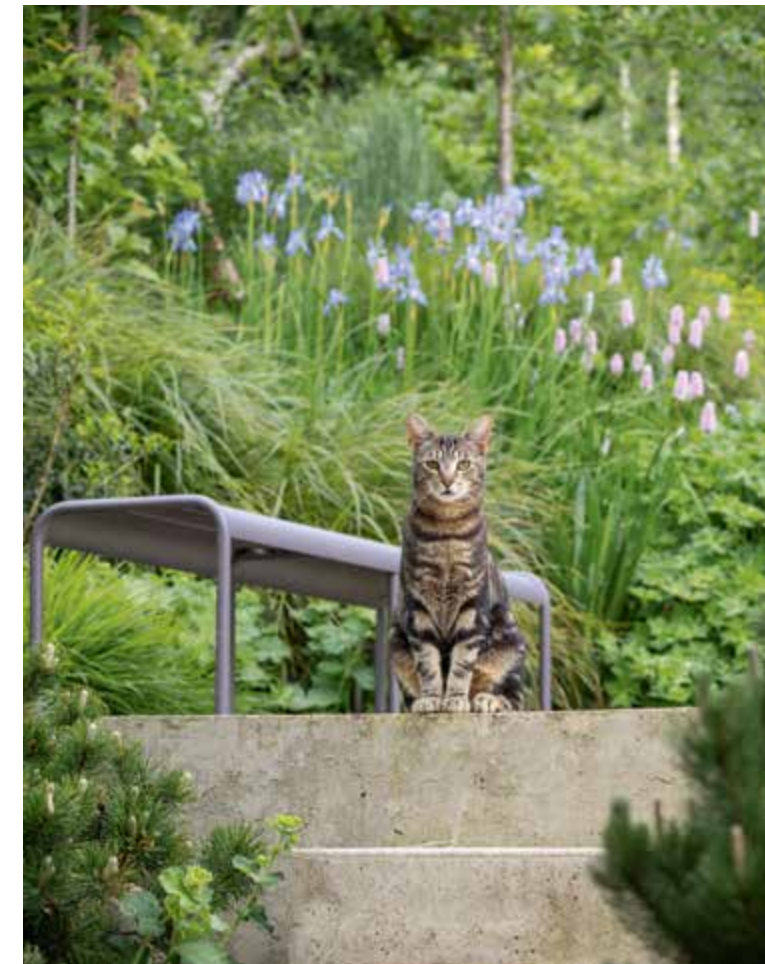
Sara Jane Rothwell: londongardendesigner.com



ABOVE A cantilevered bench in iroko wraps around the ground-level terrace, offering additional seating. BELOW The purple blooms of a rhododendron and *Salvia nemorosa* ‘Caradonna’ are offset by lime euphorbia and fresh greens



ABOVE Halfway up, mounds of chartreuse *Euphorbia x martini* blend with the emerging foliage of *Anemanthele lessoniana*. BELOW Irises and pink *Persicaria bistorta* ‘Superba’ soften the edges of wide steps filled with limestone chippings



ABOVE A simple metal bench by Fermob provides a place to sit on the first deck for the family and their cat Snickers. BELOW The mostly low, mounding forms of the plants allow views right up to the back boundary from the kitchen

