

GEOMETRY LESSONS

Designer Sara Jane Rothwell has used clean lines and clever planning to create a family-friendly garden

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THIS PAGE The new garden wall and the grid of stepping stones help to link the striking new terrace with the more natural areas of the garden beyond.



Ask Kai Smith what used to be the worst thing about the garden of the north London house in which she lives with her husband Colin and she says, without hesitation, "The wall – everywhere we looked out from the house, we saw this ugly wall. After we had a glass extension built, we were even more aware of it."

The wall ran along one side of the garden and dominated the whole space outside the back of the house. It was a hotch-potch of aged brick, old breeze block and ancient fence. "In the summer, we could just about get away with it, as a layer of greenery grew over it and we could ignore it," says Kai. "But in the winter, every time we looked out, we had this awful view." In general, the garden worked reasonably well for the Smith family's needs, so when they met garden designer Sara Jane Rothwell, their main request was to "make that wall pretty".

The wonderful new concrete and glass extension had eaten into the steep slope behind the house but, Kai explains, the cost of taking the garden down to match the level of the extension would have been prohibitive. There will always be a wall of some sort in view and access to the garden has to be via a flight of steps, but this is a compromise Kai is happy to accept. "It would be great to just walk out onto the sitting area, but it is only a few steps up," she says. So that the steps themselves are more of a design feature, Sara Jane has added a ceramic tile by Kathy Dalwood to the retaining wall, which makes a clear focal point as you climb the steps.

On the terrace, slick slate and sharply cut Yorkstone have been used to create a new seating area. To help distinguish this space from the rest of the garden and to enhance the comfortable, enclosed feeling, Sara Jane has made a feature of the retaining wall at the back of the terrace with beds of greenery. She has deliberately chosen low-maintenance plants such as euphorbias, heucheras and alliums because, as Kai and Colin admit, "we're not gardeners".

Beyond the seating area, the garden has three defined areas. The first is a lawn, the second a woodland walk and in the third, at the far end, is a summer house. This is the ideal place for Colin's daughter Nelly and her friends to "make as much noise as they like", says Kai. The spaces are linked by a grid of stepping stones, taking you from the terrace with its modern feel into the more rustic area of the woodland. "We love the way they lead you to the entrance of the woodland," says Kai, who sees this area of trees to be enjoyed as a passage when you walk to the summer house, rather than a space in which to stop for a while.

Sara Jane's solution for the problem of the eyesore wall was to build a new one and render it in a colour to match the concrete of the extension and the low wall across the terrace. Now, both walls act as an elegant backdrop and as the perfect foil for the planting. The wall is still there, but it is a key part of a beautiful garden. "It was a big outlay, but it has been worth every penny," says Kai. "We get so much enjoyment out of the garden and use it at every opportunity." ■

TOP LEFT A woodland walkway leads through to the summer house at the end of the garden, which the Smith children use as a hideout.
BOTTOM LEFT A line of pots planted with the low-growing evergreen *Convolvulus cneorum* (silverbush) forms a barrier at the top of the steps leading from the house. A tile by Kathy Dalwood, 020 7372 2677, kathydalwood.com, creates a focal point on the wall.



THIS PICTURE Along the terrace, *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, *Stipa arundinacea* (syn. *Anemanthele lessoniana*) and *Phyllostachys nigra* provide low-maintenance foliage.

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ILLUSTRATION
SCOTT JESSOP

GARDEN GUIDE

GARDEN ORIENTATION

Southwest.

SOIL London clay.

SPECIAL FEATURES Modern terrace; woodland pathway.

GARDEN DESIGNER

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