



Sara Jane **Rothwell MSGD**

Rothwell worked in film and theatre for 11 years before retraining in horticulture and garden design. The outdoor spaces she designs are characterised by her passion for plants and inventive use of hard landscape materials.

www.londongarden designer.com

ara Jane Rothwell MSGD spent the first 10 years of her working life building elaborate sets for theatre and films, before enrolling on the one-year garden design course at Capel Manor College in 2002. "I've never regretted the career change, but I was perhaps surprised at how directly useful that early film experience has proved to be," she says. "It means I automatically take a multi-dimensional approach to my gardens, based on vistas and focal points - and technical drawing has never bothered me."

So when Rothwell was called to consult on a new project on a corner site in north London in 2015, she was not fazed to find herself looking at a very large hole in the ground. "The client was having a basement extension constructed, and really all you could see was mud."

The garden wrapped round the house on three sides and sloped significantly from front boundary to back. It was this change in level that the client was exploiting by cutting a basement extension across the back of the house. "This meant that the patio opening off the main living space, although apparently at ground level, was effectively a roof terrace. The challenge of the design was to incorporate this into a sensible design solution for the rest of the sloping site." And as if that were not challenge enough, there were several mature trees with preservation orders that restricted Rothwell's scope for regrading levels still further.

Open to ideas

Fortunately the clients were not as difficult to manage as their garden. "We quickly established a good rapport, and

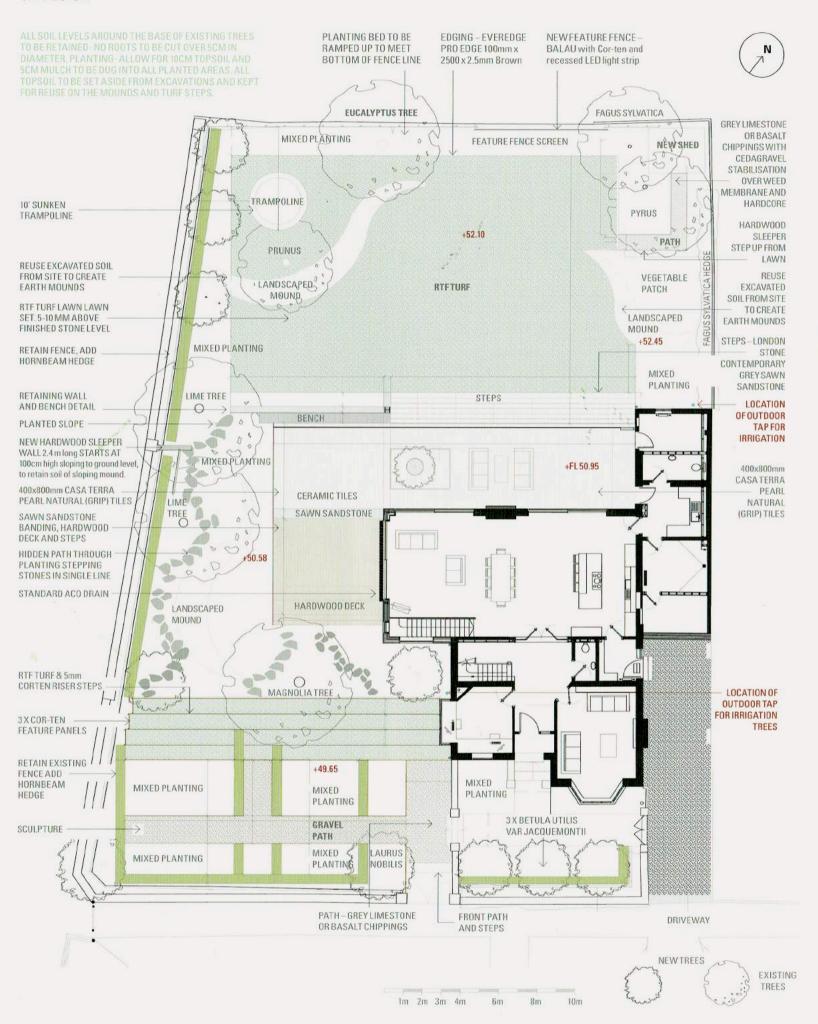
"WIDE TURF STEPS EDGED IN CORTEN STEEL TURN THE FRONT GARDEN SLOPE INTO A SCULPTURAL LANDFORM WITH A CONTEMPORARY AESTHETIC THAT COMPLEMENTS THE WHITE WALLS"

they gave me an open brief. They did insist on a larger lawn than I would have chosen, with a trampoline sunk into one corner, and asked for a few flowers for picking at the front of the house, safely away from their children's footballs. But generally they were interested to see what ideas I came up with."

Rothwell's solution was a bold design making a virtue of necessity. Wide turf steps edged in Corten steel turn the front garden slope into a sculptural landform with a contemporary aesthetic that complements the white walls and plate-glass windows of the house. The clients' study looks along these steps to the side boundary, where Rothwell has installed three Corten panels, which do double-duty as a focal point from the house, and a screen from the curious gaze of passers-by in the street outside.

"We also planted a mature Acer palmatum outside the office window to the front of the house, when the client realised that people walking past their gate could stare straight in from the street." Although it was added from necessity, the acer has been an aesthetic success. "The





WHO'S WHO

Contractor

Clinton Wootten info@woottenlandscaping.com

Metal fabrication

AJ Marshall www.ajmarshall.com

Plants

Orchard Dene
www.orcharddene.co.uk
The Palm Centre
www.palmcentre.co.uk
Deepdale Trees
www.deepdale-trees.co.uk
Readyhedge
www.readyhedgeltd.com

Paving

Contemporary grey sawn sandstone by London Stone www.londonstone.co.uk

Woodwork

Ipe timber from Southgate Timber www.southgatetimber.co.uk



colour of its leaves perfectly echoes the colour of the Corten step risers, and uplighters throw the most amazing shadows onto the white walls at night."

There is more Corten on the rear boundary, worked into a sculptural panel designed by Rothwell and brilliantly executed by contractor Clinton Wootten. "It was a complicated job because it combined steel, wood and LED rope lights to enhance certain sections, but Clinton did a fantastic job. He also came up with a great way of building the turf steps to minimise the amount of concrete we had to use," she explains.

"He started by retaining the steps with 4x2 timbers, which he pegged and concreted into the ground. Then he glued on the Corten using CT1 adhesive, and welded on L-shaped brackets at 1m intervals, which were also attached to the timber. The Corten finished 5cm above the timber, and it was a very effective technique."

Informal planting

Excavated topsoil was used to form a series of sinuous mounds that run up the side of the garden and also screen the sunken trampoline on the top lawn. "The only mound we reinforced with landscaping membrane was the one by the trampoline, which we knew the children would scramble over all the time." The other berms were informally shaped and planted with ornamental grasses, predominantly *Anemanthele*.

In fact, ornamental grasses are used extensively around the garden. "The clients wanted relatively low-maintenance "THE CLIENTS WANTED RELATIVELY LOW-MAINTENANCE PLANTING, SO WE KE IT SIMPLE WITH LOTS OF GRASSES AND SWATHES OF PERSICARIA, PENSTEMONS, HARDY GERANIUMS AND ROSEMARY"

planting, so we kept it simple with lots of grasses and swathes of persicaria, penstemons, hardy geraniums and rosemary. We went a bit more flowery at the front," Rothwell explains, "with roses worked into the long borders that run the width of the site. The clients tend to enter the garden from the driveway on the front-right corner of the garden, so they regularly take a section of this long walk on their way to the front door. We'd intended to put a striking piece of sculpture to act as a focal point at the end of this 30m-long double border, but unfortunately they didn't have funds for a significant piece — however the overall effect is still very pleasing."

The change of level at the rear of the house was rationalised with broad, shallow steps and a cantilevered dining bench against a section of retaining wall, where the clients take as many al fresco meals as the weather will allow. "I got the impression the garden was always a bit of a problem before," says Rothwell. "It has been really satisfying to see just how much they use and enjoy it now." O