



## Room to Grow

Sara Jane Rothwell turns a small city garden into a chic usable space with a refined colour palette and planting

WORDS **TAM SIN HOPE THOMSON**  
PHOTOGRAPHS **MARIANNE MAJERUS**

**W**hen Zoe and Andrew Fenn moved into their Victorian terraced house, near Highbury, a few years ago, the first job they had to tackle was a kitchen extension. Then they turned their attention to the outdoor space, a tiny garden with very few plants and a rotten wooden deck.

Both Zoe and Andrew are enthusiastic gardeners, but they were working full time and needed help to transform their garden into a space they could use and enjoy. Zoe is a keen vegetable grower and wanted a garden that had generous space for planting, and they both wanted somewhere to entertain, too. “Our brief wasn’t too prescriptive,” says Andrew. “We wanted to make the best possible use of a fairly small space and were happy to hand over creative licence. Planting wise, we wanted to retain areas for growing vegetables, and our preferred colour palette was green and white. No more decking was another part of our brief!”

The garden is north-east facing, just 10.5m long by 5m wide, with London clay. It had a small lawn, nowhere to sit down and little privacy. Sara Jane Rothwell (above) who runs London Garden Designer was recommended to Andrew by a colleague.

“The garden had an awful slippery deck that was

fairly lethal,” says Sara, “and then you tripped up a couple of steps into the garden. We wanted to create a more usable seating space without encroaching on the garden.”

Sara outlined her plans to the couple, suggesting that they link the style of materials used in the extension to create a continuation from house to garden. As well as pushing back the lower retaining wall, Sara incorporated a timber bench, which wraps around the patio and doubles as a step, saving space and solving the couple’s seating problem. “Visually it had to look nice, but it was also a practical decision,” adds Sara. The colour of the walls around the garden, a pale grey, and the fencing, painted a slate grey, were chosen to tie in with the shade of the kitchen doors. Sarah sourced reclaimed slate paving for the patios, which match the slates on the kitchen floor. This helped to transform the garden into an extension of the house, rather than a separate space.

The planting is as subtle and elegant as the colour scheme. “We used a soft planting scheme in monochrome – it’s mostly white herbaceous planting, with only a few shrubs and low planting,” says Sara. “The planting isn’t so tall that it blocks views – it’s a translucent view through to the back of the garden.” Key plants such as cow parsley relative *Cenolophium denudatum*, *Alchemilla mollis*, *Luzula nivea* and *Dryopteris erythrosora* are repeated throughout the garden – reliable performers that add understated impact. Grasses and perennials, such as geraniums, hellebores and Japanese

**Right** Generous space for entertaining, and for planting, despite the garden’s small size.  
**Below** The step from the patio to the garden doubles as seating.



FACT FILE

■ **Garden design** by Sara Jane Rothwell, London Garden Designer. Tel: 020 8348 9514; londongardendesigner.com

■ **Landscapers** Clinton Wootten Landscaping. Tel: 07887 847770.

■ **Corten steel** sourced by Clinton Wootten Landscaping from AJ Marshall. Tel: 01423 359111; ajmarshall.com

■ **Paving** Reclaimed slate from an old London pub through Salvo. Tel: 01227 500485; salvoweb.com

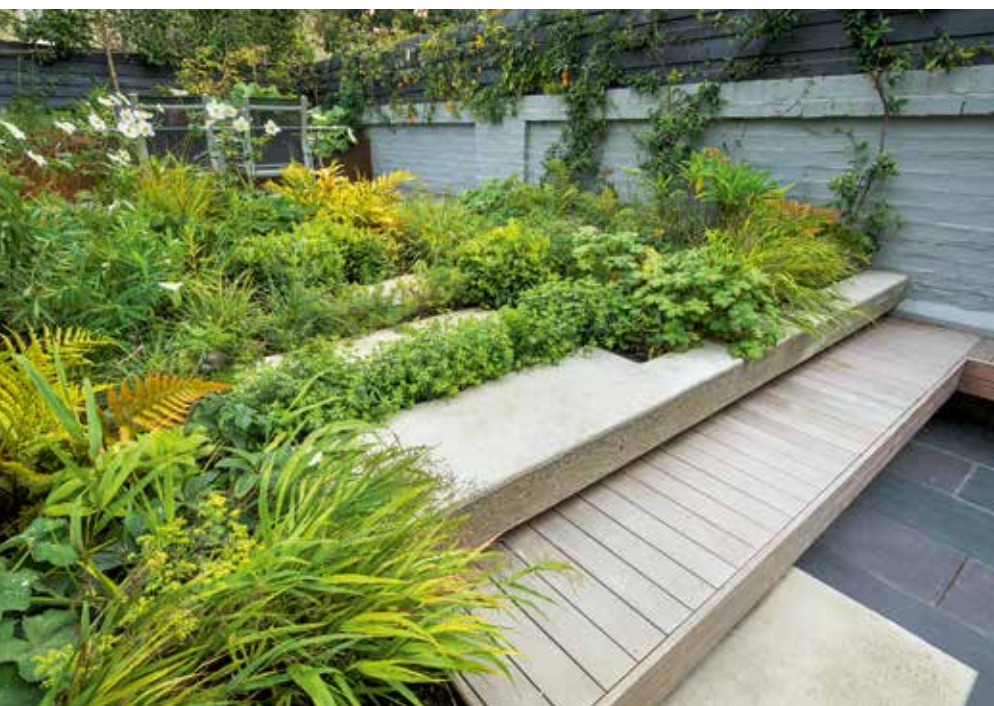
■ **Pleached trees** Deepdale Trees. Tel: 01767 262636; deepdale-trees.co.uk

■ **Garden furniture** Barlow Tyrie. Tel: 01376 557600; teak.com

■ **Plants** The Palm Centre. Tel: 020 8255 6191; palmcentre.co.uk. Cotswold Garden Flowers. Tel: 01386 422829; cgf.net

■ **Wall paint** Ash Grey from Marston & Langinger. Tel: 01362 684125; marstonandlangingerpaint.com

■ **Fence paint** Cuprinol Garden Shades in Urban Grey. Tel: 0333 222 7171; cuprinol.co.uk



anemones, provide a long season of interest but keep the scheme low-maintenance.

Sara has also made the most of the vertical space. “The 3D-element in a garden is as important as the 2D, to add perspective,” she says. The back wall now adds privacy and an attractive planting feature. “The view wasn’t particularly nice, so we went for pleached pears, which have white flowers and autumn colour.” On the other boundaries, a passionflower scrambles up one of the fences, its orange fruit vibrant against a grey backdrop.

Sara also advised removing the lawn. “It was a typical London garden, where someone had tried to cram in a lawn. I persuaded Zoe and Andrew that the lawn wasn’t that useful and it would be much nicer to have a generous planting bed.” Taking out the lawn provided more space for planting and entertaining. “It allows for separation between the seating areas,” says Sara. “Getting rid of the lawn and replacing it with planting was the first big decision and it looks great,” says Andrew.



“It splits up the garden and makes it feel longer.”

The main challenge in carrying out these plans was in the excavation. With no side access, all the soil and rubble had to be brought through the house. To avoid extra excavation, the landscape team worked with the sloping layout and built in levels – a solution that also maximised space, allowing for the larger lower-seating area and the additional patio at the top of the garden, as well as raised beds to satisfy Zoe’s passion for growing vegetables.

“We’re very pleased,” says Andrew. “We love the use of Corten for the walls of the raised bed and really like the planting. So far, the garden has developed and changed beautifully through the seasons.” Five months

after starting the project, in late 2016, Zoe and Andrew’s garden was unrecognisable – a tranquil green space for a busy couple.

**Clockwise from far left** Strips of planting break up hard landscaping and separate areas; white Japanese anemones; passionflower fruit against the grey fence.

## Design Details

### Steps

In this small garden, steps were needed to link the two levels but to maximise space, Sara created a floating hardwood timber seat that doubles as a step. The timber bench is made from FSC-certified Ipe wood, a hardwood similar to teak, set at 40cm. This height is ideal for a bench, but to make it work practically within a series of steps, it was set in between a poured concrete retaining wall (to stabilise the upper garden) and a floating poured concrete step.

### Ornamental planting bed

To make the best use of the 3m between the lower patio and upper patio, Sara advised removing the lawn and replacing it with a planting bed that would provide impact in the garden but still allow a view through to the rest of the garden. Low-growing plants, such as *Euphorbia cyparissias*, *Alchemilla mollis* and *Galium odoratum* have been set in between concrete stepping stones that lead to the next patio, helping create a balance between landscaping and greenery.

### Raised beds

The wall of the raised bed at the far end of the garden is made from Corten steel, chosen for the fact that it is completely weatherproof and for its colour – the steel develops a rusty patina. The plan for the raised bed is for it to be a mix of ornamentals, vegetables and herbs. At the moment a large rhubarb and herbs such as fennel and oregano, sit among plants such as *Sedum spectabile* ‘Stardust’.



### Pleached trees

The pleached trees on the back wall of the garden perform well on a practical and an ornamental level. The garden was previously overlooked and the 2.5m high trees provide an attractive solution, giving the couple privacy, while the green screen acts as a calming backdrop to the raised bed and seating area. The ornamental pear trees, *Pyrus* ‘Chanticleer’, add interest in spring with attractive white flowers as well as in autumn when the leaves turn striking shades of yellow and red.

### Paving

The paving is reclaimed slate and provides a continuation between the kitchen extension, the lower patio and the upper patio. Sara found an exact match to the slate in the kitchen, sourcing it from the same London pub the couple salvaged their supply from. On the lower patio the paving is laid vertically, and then on the upper area the paving has been rotated to sit horizontally, which provides a contrast between the two areas.

### Entertaining area

Zoe and Andrew wanted a garden that included space to entertain. Sara created a generous seating area, around 16 square metres, with space for a barbecue. As well as having the same paving, the two patios are linked by the use of hardwood timber.

### Vertical planting

To make the most of the small space, including climbers and trees was important. *Trachelospermum jasminoides* and a passionflower provide a swathe of greenery, vibrant orange fruit and summer flowers across the east-facing fence. To add height, there are two trees – chosen for their suitability for a small space – *Cornus kousa* and *Amelanchier lamarckii* ‘Robin Hill.’ ■



**Top** The Corten steel raised bed, planted with a mix of ornamentals and edible plants.

**Above** Low growing *Euphorbia* and *Galium odoratum* (sweet woodruff) in the gaps between concrete ‘stepping stones’.

**Left** The floating step and hardwood bench.

