

# Surface Value

At a complicated London site that sits on top of the property's garage roof, designer Sara Jane Rothwell has made the most of the space to create a stylish and rewarding multi-level garden

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A zigzagging path and generous planting completely hide the fact that this garden is built on top of a garage roof.



Most Londoners are grateful if their house or flat comes with any outdoor space at all, so it seems churlish, if you do have some, to question its size or suitability for creating a beautiful and useful garden. But it would have been easy to sympathise had the owners of this house near Hampstead felt slightly crestfallen on first surveying the outside space that came with their new home. It wasn't very big, it skewed away from the house at an odd angle and, perhaps most challenging of all, the second half of it was built on top of a garage accessed at street level below.

A path along the right-hand side dropped down to the back gate, beyond which was a flight of steps to reach the garage below, while the garage roof itself was covered with unevenly laid, broken slabs with weeds growing in the cracks. Between the level garage roof and the sloping path along its side there was a not-insignificant drop – anyone using the garage roof part of the garden had to take great care not to plummet off the edge. Clearly something drastic needed to be done. Step forward a garden designer unafraid of a challenge: Sara Jane Rothwell.

"I can't remember if the owners told me at the start of the project or at the end, but apparently another garden designer had walked away," she confides. Sara Jane didn't hesitate to take the garden on though: "I prefer a project to have challenges like this one. It makes it more interesting and the end result is more rewarding."

To radically rethink the space, bold decisions were required – the first of which was to move the steps leading down from garden level to the street and garage below. Shifted further back and accessed via a new, discreet gate in the garden's far right corner, the path that had previously led to them was rendered obsolete, freeing up lots of space. Of course, the portion of the garden that sits above the garage is effectively a roof garden, so its design had to meet certain engineering criteria. "Whenever we do a roof terrace, we always get a structural engineer to look it over," explains Sara Jane. "The garage is built out of concrete though, so structurally it was completely fine."

The next task was to re-waterproof the garage roof, an important job to get right from the outset since the only way to access it again would be to pull up the entire garden, and install suitable drainage. For budget reasons, the garden's existing fencing was kept along the left and right-hand sides, and a new section added just along the back, but once it had all been painted a harmonious grey and strung

with wires for *Trachelospermum jasminoides* to climb, the boundaries were much improved. With the structural fundamentals taken care of, Sara Jane could turn her attention to the space within: how to disguise its funny angles and its planting.

"The owners are enthusiastic gardeners and they were keen to have a real mix of plants," says Sara Jane. The strip on the right that had been the old sloping path was given over entirely to planting. Because the path sank below the level of the garage roof, this strip could be filled with a really good depth of soil, and it's here that Sara Jane positioned trees, so they could enjoy a decent root run. On the garage roof, plants grow in raised planters made from Corten steel to fit the space.

"It was a complicated build," she admits. Clinton Wootten of Wootten Landscaping, with whom she works regularly, was in charge on this one. "Nothing fazes him," she says, "although he does occasionally say: 'Can't you just give me an easy project?'"

Bifold doors at the back of the house open onto a rectangle of ipe decking that gives way to the path, flush with the deck and laid with Vande Moortel bricks in a shade of grey that matches the fence.

The path zigzags through a chicane of parallel low yew hedges, its angles the perfect distraction from the way the garden twists to the left. A couple of neat steps up and the grey brick path segues into the

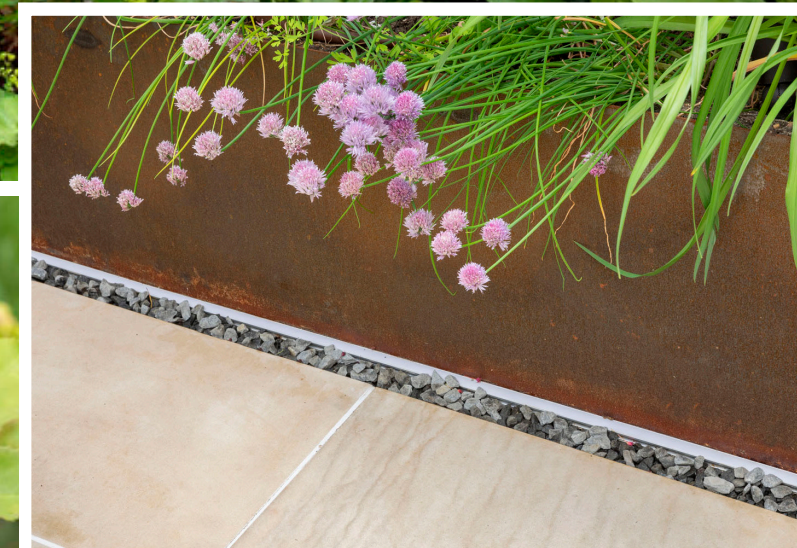
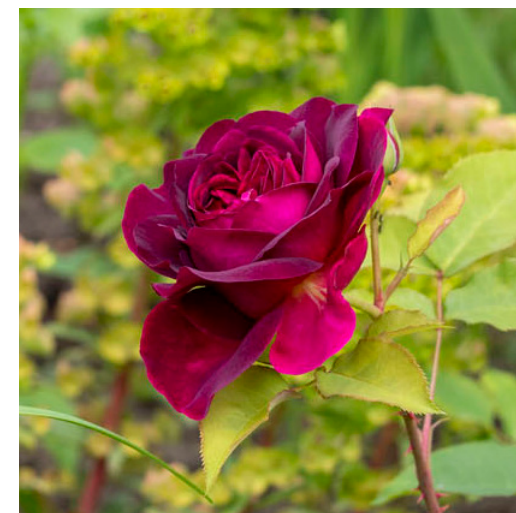
terrace over the garage, paved with a stylish paler sandstone. There's room here for a barbecue, the gate that leads to the steps, and seating.

Surrounding it all are the plants, chosen to ensure plenty of floral interest. In early summer, the colours

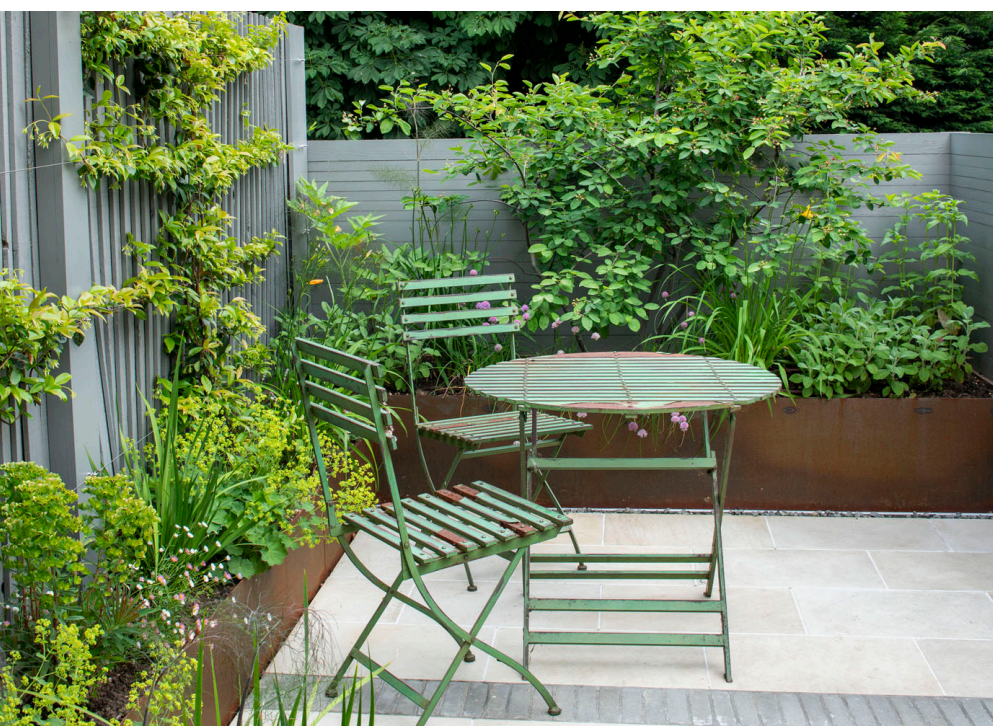
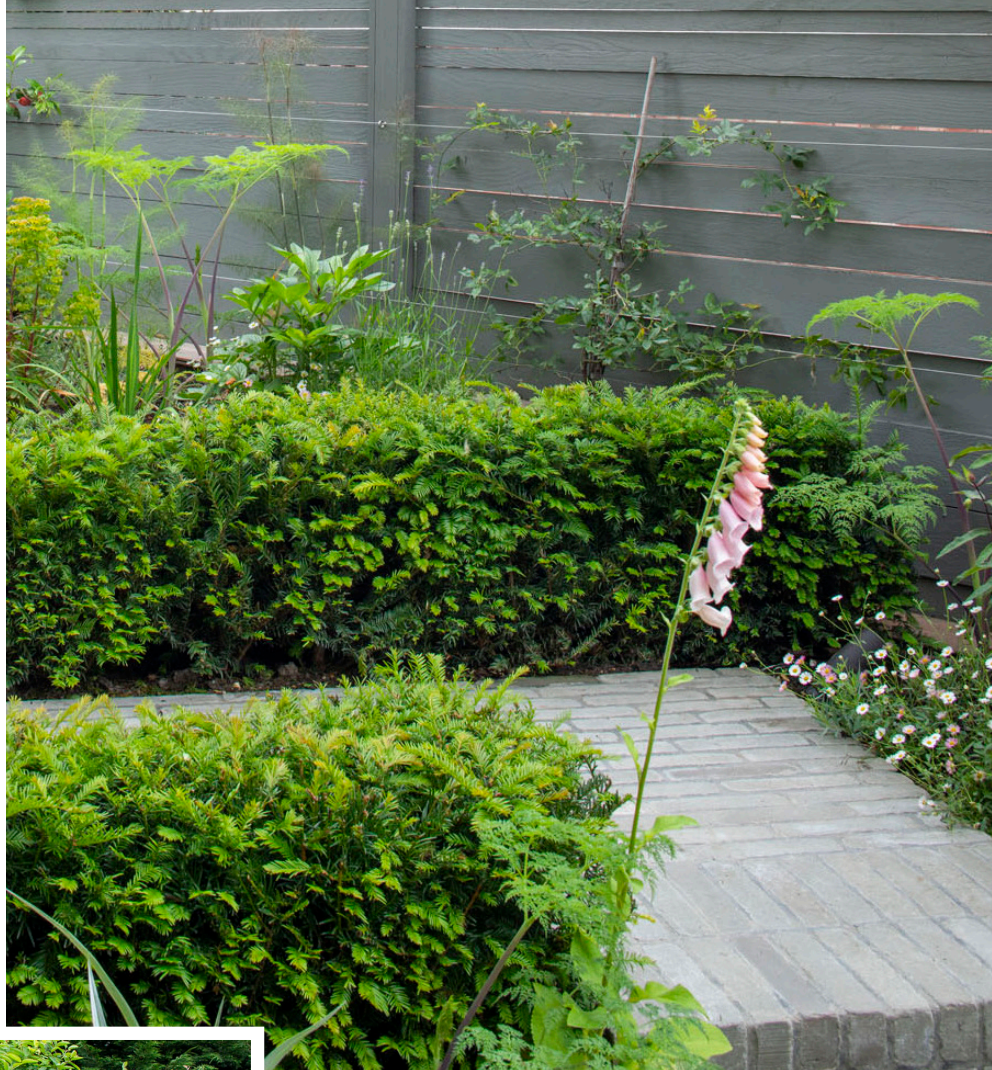
*"I prefer a project to have challenges like this one. It makes it more interesting and the end result is more rewarding"*



**Left** A rectangle of ipe decking creates a useful area close to the house. **Above** The garage roof starts where the second set of steps raises the path's level to its height. **Right** Crimson Rosa 'Munstead Wood'. **Far right** A gravel strip protects the sandstone from rusty water run-off.







**Top left** Luscious lemon meringue blooms of *Rosa* ‘Teasing Georgia’.

**Top right** The yew-edged zigzag path acts as a bridge between the decking and the terrace, while disguising the garden’s skewed angle.

**Above** Corten planters on the garage roof.

are soft: green *Alchemilla mollis* and *Euphorbia* x *martini* provide a backdrop for ‘Sutton’s Apricot’ foxgloves, ‘Teasing Georgia’ and ‘Munstead Wood’ roses, and *Erigeron karvinskianus*. But clumps of *crocsmia* foliage hint at hotter colours to come. “It’s more colourful later in the year,” Sara Jane confirms.

Owners Laurence and Alice Tailby love the garden. “There’s enough variety in the planting to make it interesting to look at, while also making

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sure that it’s easy to maintain,” says Laurence. Both he and Alice completed a course at RHS Wisley when they moved here from their central London flat – “gardening for people who don’t know what they’re doing” he jokes. “I mainly wanted space for a barbecue,” he adds, which Sara Jane supplied with the end terrace, although that’s now also home to a trampoline for the couple’s two-year-old son. “I like the fact there are two living spaces: the bit at the back, which is great for sitting out in the evening and then the decking next to the bifold doors. There’s a balance: our son has space to run around, and there’s grown-up space, so it works well,” Laurence says. “Having a garage in London is worth its weight in gold, but the challenge was this big thing in the middle of the garden. The genius is that the garden completely hides the fact it’s there. I can’t praise Sara Jane highly enough – it’s fantastic.” ■

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