

The Garden



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Sun, shade, seclusion

Big design ideas in a small Suffolk courtyard

Gardening on the up

Frida Grundberg and Peter Dahlen were thrilled – and terrified – by their dramatically sloping garden in north London. Terraces, steps and fiery planting have now made it a special place of serenity and warmth to enjoy views of the capital

Author: George Hudson, gardener, plantsman and Green London curator at the Garden Museum, London
Photography: Marianne Majerus

Steps to success

A zigzag of Corten steel risers, infilled with grey stone chips to make steps, slows the ascent to the top of the garden. Simple repeat planting of *Pinus mugo* and *Hakonechloa macra* adds structure, while crocosmias and heleniums provide fire

Gardens are especially precious in a city, so when Frida Grundberg and her partner Peter Dahlen were house-hunting in north London, they were not going to let a steep slope put them off. “We were partly in love with the slope and partly terrified by it,” says Frida. “From the back door to the end of the garden there’s a full 7-metre difference in height. We’d never seen anything like it.

“It slopes dramatically up and away from the back terrace, so the top of the garden is actually higher than the house roof, offering views right over London,” she says.

Before their arrival in 20XX, the garden had been neglected – its gradient making the space too difficult to mow or manage. Unkempt shrubs were ranged around the perimeter and a large, diseased lime tree dominated the middle, overshadowing neighbouring gardens.

The couple knew they would need help to realise the garden’s full potential. “We began searching online for garden designers in our area, looking at examples of their work for something we liked,” says Frida. They were drawn to the work of Sara Jane Rothwell and particularly her stylish use of hard landscaping. “She has a way of working with materials that is contemporary but not too overbearing,” says Frida.

Sara Jane’s brief was to make the garden more accessible for the whole family. “We knew we needed an area for entertaining,” says Frida, “and wanted somewhere safe for our children to play, as well as a discrete garden studio and yoga space.”

The design puts the garden studio and yoga space in the sunny top third of the garden, leaving a large central area as an entertainment space part-circled by vibrant planting, and a new extended seating area at the bottom of the slope, by the house.

Natural materials

From a structural point of view, a simple palette of natural materials helps to form the backbone of the garden. By the house, the slope is retained by a chunky concrete wall, into which are cast the first few steps up the garden. An iroko bench wraps round the terrace, doubling as another step, tying together the hard and soft materials and creating an elegant horizontal line that helps the garden seem wider.

As you progress up the slope, the concrete is replaced by the russet tones of Corten steel. Neat bands of this tactile material create risers for steps infilled with grey stone

chippings, as well as edging an area of turf and raised beds for planting. Their overall effect is to knit together the lawn at the top of the garden with the landscaping below, also echoing the warm-toned flowers of heleniums in late summer.

The planting palette is equally dynamic – teaming purple with orange flowers with a range of architectural shapes in soothing greens. Large blocks of summer-flowering perennials include hot-coloured *Helenium* ‘Waltraut’ AGM and *Crocosmia* ‘Lucifer’ AGM. These follow spring blocks of softer pinks, blues and mauves, including Siberian *Iris* ‘Perry’s Blue’ and *Bistorta affinis* ‘Superba’ AGM. Dispersed between the blocks of perennials are plants that provide mounds of foliage such as *Euphorbia* x *martini* and *Pinus mugo*, *Hakonechloa macra* and *Alchemilla mollis*. The blocks of planting and meandering path slow down the eye, and, being on a slope, create a theatrical spectacle of colour throughout spring and summer.

Material gains

Frida and Peter love the new layout. “This is our first garden,” says Frida. “We’ve learned a lot in the process, especially about materials. I hadn’t realised concrete was such an organic material, in the way its colour and texture can be manipulated.”

As you might imagine, the transformation of such a steep slope is not without its challenges. “Before the work could begin we had to take out a lot of the overgrown shrubs, but we did manage to save some large rhododendrons, which now run along the right hand side of the garden,” says Frida. “We also had to support the level changes at the bottom with a large concrete retaining wall, and we had to excavate a lot of soil to expand the terrace at the bottom.”

The garden was built in phases over a two-year period, owing to the complicated nature of the site and costs, starting at the back of the garden and working forwards, before completing the front garden in the same style. Today, the couple have a little bit of hired help maintaining the plot, employing the services of a professional gardener on a weekly basis through spring and summer.

This handsome garden is evidence that, despite the challenges of topography, out of adversity can come great things. “I enjoy the top of the garden most,” says Frida. “It’s a joy to climb the steps each morning and to reflect in the serene space at the top, surrounded by trees and looking back over the garden with London in the distance.”

Theatre of colour

In the centre of the garden A sun-bleached wooden deck is space to socialise among the foliage and flowers. Planting here includes Japanese anemones, *Alchemilla mollis*, *Stipa* grasses, *Pinus mugo*, *Erigeron* and *Geranium* Rozanne (‘Gerwat’)



Strong lines

In the front garden, brick steps are edged with Corten steel risers leading up to the door. Clipped yew hedging adds to the formality, while wispy *Anemanthele lessoniana* and a trailing rosemary help to animate the space

The details

Location: north London

Size of garden: 610sq m

Age of garden: XX years

Maintenance: “The garden requires little maintenance during summer, as long as the preparation work has been done beforehand,” says part-time gardener Katie Findlay. “The right plant is occupying the right place here – a testament to Sara Jane’s good design.”

At the start of winter Katie mulches the garden with spent mushroom compost. “Then, I only cut back what needs to tidied, leaving the seedheads as long as possible to provide interest and wildlife value through winter.

“In summer I’ll deadhead the heleniums to prolong flowering, and apply a dilute foliar feed of seaweed extract to *Pinus mugo*. Last year the heleniums took a hit with slug damage, so this spring we patched in a few more to keep the planting design complete.”

This garden is not open to the public. »



Hidden studio
A grove of silver birch (*Betula pendula* subsp. *pendula* ‘Zwitsers Glorie’) hides a studio at the top of the garden. Seedheads of spring-flowering alliums punctuate a clump of orange *Helenium* ‘Waltraut’. The garden’s colour scheme shifts through the seasons from pastel pinks, mauves and whites in spring, to hot oranges and reds in summer

Pots on deck
Raised timber decking at the top of the garden is softened at its edges by wispy ornamental grass *Anemanthele lessoniana*. On every level, contemporary pots in varied tones and sizes provide more planting opportunities



Stylish seating
Cast concrete steps lead away from the house – a wooden bench takes the place of a step. *Erigeron karvinskianus* and *Geranium Rozanne* (‘Gerwat’) help to soften the edges

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Midsummer glow

Large swaths of *Helenium* 'Waltraut' and *Crocosmia* 'Lucifer' bring a fiery glow to the garden in midsummer. The colour palette of the garden shifts through the season, starting with pinks and mauves in spring

How to create a garden on a slope

Tips from the designer, Sara Jane Rothwell

1 Work with the existing topography.

This is especially important around the boundaries. Every change you make will necessitate a retaining wall to hold back the soil, significantly increasing the cost of a project. Instead, aim to create a gentle meandering transition between levels, with sloped beds that accommodate existing gradients and where steps sit in the landscape.

2 Consider the experience you create.

Avoid making too many angular retaining walls, which are boring. You'll soon lose the balance between hard and soft landscaping. Similarly, avoid placing a flight of steps up the centre of the garden – they'll just lead your eye straight up, so all enjoyment of the garden is over in mere seconds.

3 Seek advice from a structural engineer.

If you have to construct retaining walls more than 1m in height, make sure you engage a structural engineer. These walls will be holding back a lot of soil, and increase the risk of

flooding. It's essential to consider drainage carefully, otherwise you may end up with a swimming pool for a patio, as the water naturally drains to the lowest point.

4 Use planting to soften hard edges.

When designing a path through a garden on a slope, stagger the steps and landings if you can. This will allow softly cascading plants such as *Erigeron karvinskianus* AGM and *Geranium Rozanne* ('Gerwat') AGM to drape over the edges. The aim is to entice you upwards to slowly explore the garden, pausing between levels to enjoy the views and details in the planting.

5 Embrace the slope.

Gardens on a gradient provide far more interest and excitement than a flat garden, and too often the first approach is to try and level it. A gradient offers theatrical views where plants appear to cascade down the hill, between which are hidden smaller level platforms and terraces from where the garden can be enjoyed. Use benches to create and invite natural pauses.