

Tantallon Road features a diagonally designed courtyard garden with patio area, large planting beds, cream-painted walls and a path down to a restful bench.

Mini marvel

It's a challenge to create a small garden that's interesting, but one designer's ingenious solution was to flip the tiny space off centre ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS | WORDS PATTIE BARRON

Stephen's plan contrasted his contemporary on-the-slant design with traditional materials, although the terrace's paving stones are realistic fakes of reconstituted stone that have a yellow tint, which echoes the warm, mellow tones of the London stock brick of the house wall and surrounding houses. 'I was careful to choose a smooth finish, because to my mind, however expensive the reconstituted stone is, riven looks cheap,' he says.

The rendered walls were painted Cornish Cream, and honey-toned Cotswold chippings, laid over membrane and kept in place with a steel edging, formed the path that leads to the oak bench in the corner. This faces southwest, so gets sun for most of the day.

Aside from the table and chairs on the patio, there is another perch, at the other end of the garden by the house - a long, low storage unit, which is the official garden shed and which Stephen chose to be less obtrusive than an upright sentry-box-type structure.

The lilac tree behind the bench is an indulgence. Although lilac's flowering period is brief, Jonathan wanted to enjoy those gorgeous blooms with their nostalgic perfume even for ▶

LEFT An espaliered *Malus domestica* 'James Grieve' grows up the wall behind *Sisyrinchium striatum*, *Allium schubertii* (seedhead), astrantias and rosemary. **BELOW**

LEFT A shadier spot hosts *Imperata cylindrica* 'Red Baron', and ferns *Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum* and *Polystichum setiferum* (Division Group) 'Herrenhausen'.

BOTTOM The patio has a table and chairs from Barlow Tyrie, and is edged with lavender 'Imperial Gem'.

As well as generous beds for plants, there had to be room for entertaining

ABOVE The gravel path that leads down to a wooden bench is lined with *Lychnis coronaria*, *Rosa* 'Munstead Wood', *Cosmos bipinnatus* Sonata Series, *Alchemilla mollis* and *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Tom Thumb'.

Turn quite a dull rectangular space on a slant, and at a stroke, you have a rather thrilling contemporary space with all sorts of possibilities. For this two-year-old town garden in south London, garden designer and landscape historian Stephen Smith avoided the predictable route of slicing up the garden horizontally. Instead, he turned the patio at right angles to the house, then ran the garden path on the same grid so it led to a focal point - a beautiful curved bench in the far left-hand corner.

These simple but smart design moves gave owner Jonathan McKee - a first-time keen gardener - two ample triangular beds on either side that, now packed with plants, create a more exciting effect than two predictable border strips could ever achieve.

Jonathan moved into his Victorian house in Balham three years ago, and took on a concrete-walled outside space, just 5.5 x 7.5m, that comprised rough grass and a camellia that had seen better days. He wanted to replace these with a garden full of flowering plants that he and visiting wildlife could enjoy (Balham has its own tagged community of sparrows). He also wanted a garden that connected, in some way, to the Victorian period of the house, without revisiting

GARDEN NOTES

Tiny new city garden designed on an angle

the sometimes dour planting of that era. 'I wanted contemporary - and I wanted traditional too,' recalls Jonathan. 'The house has lots of original features, and we're surrounded by beautiful London stock

brick, so there has to be some reference. On my wish list were traditional landscape materials, and also traditional country garden planting - no spiky plants, no prairie grasses.'

One of the key problems with town gardens is the lack of direct access to the garden other than straight through the house, so Jonathan sensibly decided to get the new garden installed and good to go before the new kitchen - a glass-fronted extension - was completed. 'I didn't like the idea of flagstones and compost being carted over the new kitchen floor,' he says. 'The architect was surprised at my decision to create the garden at the same time as the kitchen, but the builder felt it made sense.'

As well as generous beds for plants, there had to be room for entertaining. As a keen bridge player, Jonathan needed enough space for the four or five tables set up in the kitchen extension to comfortably spill over onto the patio. He also wanted the garden to peak at the time of his birthday - which, thankfully for Stephen, is at the end of June, and not in January.

TANTALLON ROAD NOTEBOOK

TWO TO TANGO

Apple trees bought as espaliers make the garden look established. In a small space, if you only have two, cautions Stephen, make sure they are in the same pollination group for the maximum amount of fruits. His choices were 'James Grieve' and 'Discovery'.



GIN & TONIC SPOT

The spot for end-of-day sun, the curved oak bench from Gaze Burvill was, acknowledges Jonathan, expensive, but he considers it an investment that will last a lifetime. He and Stephen chose the curved, organic shape to counteract the sharp angles of the surrounding walls and houses.



DWARF DELIGHTS

'Plants can make effective sculptures in a small space', says Stephen. He gave a clipped globe of bronze-leaved *Pittosporum* 'Tom Thumb' (left) a plinth of yellow-flowered rock rose *Helianthemum* 'Ben Fhada', surrounding it with a band of black grass *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens'.

ALSO IN THE AREA

- **GARDEN 51 The Chase** Plant-filled designer's garden near Clapham Common with an intriguing geodesic dome greenhouse. Open by appointment from April to September. Tel: +44 (0)20 7627 0182. See www.ngs.org.uk for more details
- **NURSERY Neal's Nurseries Garden Centre** The largest plant centre within central London, this is where Jonathan and Stephen bought many of the plants for the new garden. Heathfield Road, Wandsworth SW18 2PH. Tel: +44 (0)20 8874 2037. www.capitalgardens.co.uk
- **PLACE TO EAT Chez Bruce** Overlooking Wandsworth Common and specialising in regional and classical French food. Jonathan rates it as the best place to eat in south London. 2 Bellevue Road, Wandsworth Common SW17 7EG. Tel: +44 (0)20 8672 0114. www.chezbruce.co.uk

GARDEN CHALLENGES

BUILD SCHEDULE: Because Jonathan wanted the garden completed before the new kitchen floor was down, it was complicated fitting in with the builders, who were building the kitchen at the same time. 'We managed to work together and get it done on time,' he says. 'Although it was a struggle, it was worth it.'



DESIGNER STEPHEN SMITH'S TIPS FOR CREATING A SMALL GARDEN

- **Make small, flat gardens more interesting** by exploiting vertical space, both with structure and plants. In Jonathan's garden, we planted a lilac and a birch as well as a succession of flowering verticals, from tulips and crown fritillaries in spring, to *Iligularia*, foxgloves, lupins and delphiniums in summer.
- **The golden rule for hardscape in a small space** is to use no more than three different materials, or the garden looks muddled. Whatever size the garden, the hardscape should be informed by the surrounding landscape.
- **Even in a small space**, a garden should not reveal itself all at once. When the garden is at its peak in summer, the full planting prevents you from seeing the path until you are actually standing in the garden, and only then is your eye led up to the bench in the corner.
- **You need a strong pruning regime** in a small garden. In spring, prune more radically to encourage more growth. In summer, prune simply to tidy and to limit growth.
- **Proper irrigation is vital** to establish new plants. For the first two years, we had a simple leaky hose system, but it was invaluable in helping plants get their roots down quickly. Now, a sprinkler is a more efficient option.

ABOVE The scene from the bench takes in neon-pink *Lychnis coronaria*, lime-yellow *Alchemilla mollis*, purple-leaved *Ligularia dentata*, and Jonathan's 'shed' - a zinc-topped storage box from Barlow Tyrie. **BELOW** The angle of the courtyard means the view from indoors is towards the planting and not straight down the path to the bottom.

a short while; a purple *Clematis viticella* threaded through, 'Polish Spirit', picks up the pace later in summer. Stephen installed the Chinese red-barked birch, *Betula albosinensis* var. *septrionalis*, near to the opposite, shadier, back corner, to provide some elegant screening from the neighbours, and also to give Jonathan a vista from his office, once the garden flowers have died down. Two espaliered apple trees, despite taking up very little space, have already produced an abundant crop of fruits, while on the back wall, the long, pale-green catkins of the silk-tassel bush, *Garrya elliptica* 'James Roof', brighten the view in winter.

Stand-out colours dominate the perennial flowers - scarlet rose 'Soldier Boy', purple *Salvia guaranitica* 'Black and Blue', orange *Geum* 'Mrs Bradshaw' - with the occasional clash ramping up the cottage-garden appeal, such as velvety cerise blooms of rose 'Munstead Wood' peeking through a flurry of *Lychnis coronaria* shocking pink flowers. Neat lavender 'Imperial Gem', a nod back to Victorian times, softens the long line between border and terrace.

Jonathan wanted a garden he could engage with, which included a willingness to go to battle with slugs and snails that permanently beat a track down the garden walls, so Stephen was able to plant covetable but susceptible perennials such as a blue delphiniums, crimson lupin 'Red Rum' and yellow *Ligularia dentata* 'Desdemona'.

In two years - given typically London clay soil, liberal applications of organic matter and regular irrigation - the plants have thrived, making the garden look established in a satisfyingly short time.

'Whether you use a designer or not,' acknowledges Stephen, 'your new garden is only the start. You have the template, but now the adventure of gardening really begins.'

Jonathan's garden on Tantallon Road in London opens for the National Gardens Scheme on Sunday 5 July 2015, 1-5pm. For details, visit www.ngs.org.uk

