

PRIVATE VIEW

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS | WORDS VERONICA PEERLESS

Designer Claire Mee has given this small, smart London garden a contemporary Mediterranean look, which can be enjoyed all year-round



When designer Claire Mee first set eyes on this London garden, it was 'dank and dreary, like an overgrown Victorian shrubbery'. Now, it is a modern space with a Mediterranean feel, in accordance with the owners' wishes.

The garden was redeveloped at the same time as the flat it belongs to, and the 17m x 11m space needed to work hard. 'Many London homes - like this one - have large glass doors that frame the garden and open directly onto it, so it needs to look good all year round,' says Claire. In this case, the garden also needed to look equally good from the other end, where a new garden room was being built. →



◀ LET THERE BE LIGHT

The lighting was designed by Mark Tavener, the architect who worked on the flat and garden room (www.attol.co.uk). The bed is edged by myrtle, *Myrtus communis*. Myrtle is one of Claire's favourite plants (*M. communis* subsp. *tarentina* is also used). It is on the tender side, but thrives in London gardens. 'It is evergreen with white flowers and purple berries, smells gorgeous, is very neat, and has beautiful bark as it ages.'

→ The clients wanted an evergreen, low-maintenance garden with a Mediterranean feel. Scent was important too

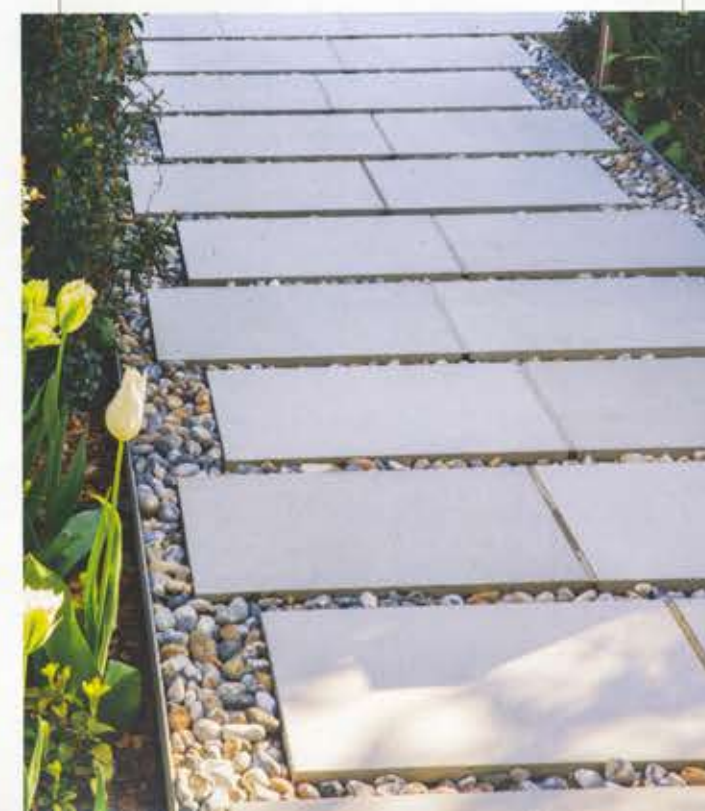


▶ SCULPTURAL SEATING

The furniture is Obelisk by Dedon. The four chairs and cocktail table stack together to form a free-standing sculpture (www.dedon.de). Five pleached hornbeams give privacy. The seating area outside the garden room is decked with ipe, a hardwood chosen for its longevity and good looks. Claire always uses flat – not ridged – decking for a cleaner look.

▼ ONLY CONNECT

The path connects the two seating areas. It is made from the same grey stone as the seating area near the house. River-washed pebbles soften the look and add interesting detail. The path is lined with steel edging to stop the pebbles spilling into the nearby beds. →



→ Lots of clearing and digging was needed before the garden could take shape – it had 'terrible' London clay that would not have suited many of the plants used. French drains (trenches filled with gravel) were put in to increase drainage, and the soil was improved with lots of gravel, sharp sand and topsoil. Several huge trees were removed (with permission, as this is a conservation area), and five pleached hornbeams were used down one side of the garden to create privacy (in London, planning rules dictate that walls and fences can be no higher than 2m, but this does not apply to plants).

The garden is laid out in a series of rectangles, reflecting the design of the extension to the flat and the garden room. It has two seating areas – one outside the house, and the other in front of the garden room. The terrace near the house is six-sided sawn contemporary grey stone, which ties in well with the London brick of the walls, while the

area outside the garden room is decked with ipe hardwood, which is long lasting and ages beautifully. The two areas are joined by a path made of the same stone as the terrace; there is no lawn, but blocks of planting throughout.

The clients wanted an evergreen, low-maintenance garden with a Mediterranean feel, as they spend a lot of time in the south of France. It would also need to look good in spring and autumn, as this is when they are around to enjoy it. Scent was important too. Therefore the garden has a 'grove' of nine olive trees, hedges of myrtle, and a fig.

The planting scheme is predominantly green, white and lime and includes aquilegias, astrantia, tulips, foxgloves, euphorbia, fennel, white hydrangeas, white agapanthus, Japanese anemones and a hedge of scented, white *Trachelospermum jasminoides*. The clients are 'thrilled' with the finished result. 'It works perfectly,' says Claire.



◀ ROOM WITH A VIEW

The timber-clad garden room at the end of the garden reflects the style of the house. The olives are underplanted with box balls, *Anemone leucophaea*, *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, *Tellima grandiflora*, *Campanula lactiflora* 'White Pouffe', *Anemone x hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert' and *Gaura lindheimeri*. Bulbs include *Allium stipitatum* 'Mount Everest' and white muscari.



▲ LOOKING OUT

Claire points out that many London homes have large glass doors framing the garden and opening directly onto it. Therefore the garden has to look good all year round. The seating areas are used at different times - the terrace gets the morning rays and the decked area enjoys the evening sun.

► SITTING PRETTY

Claire treats city gardens as outdoor rooms, which need to be furnished not just with plants but comfortable, accessible and usable furniture (e.g. cushions with waterproof outdoor fabrics). The outdoor seating on the terrace is the modular Cloud range from Gloster (www.gloster.com).

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◀ GORGEOUS GROVE

The 'olive grove' contains nine trees. Olives are another of Claire's favourite plants. She explains that in Italy, they are clipped, but not too tightly, so as to let a small bird such as a wren fly through it - this gives the tree some movement. Claire thinks that olives look especially good during the winter months, when the leaves look silver and sparkling. The owners' sculpture can be glimpsed through the trees.

► GREEN DREAM

In a bed near the house, a fig tree is underplanted with green, white and lime-green plants including *Origanum vulgare* 'Aureum', *Hebe rakaiensis*, *Euphorbia amygdaloides* var. *robbiae*, *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldschleier', *Myrtus communis* and *Lychnis coronaria* 'Alba', plus *Narcissus* 'Thalia', and tulips 'White Triumphator' and 'Spring Green'.



DESIGNER PROFILE



CLAIRE MEE worked in the fashion industry until 1992, then sold her business and took up gardening. She trained in horticulture at Norwood Hall, the old Middlesex agricultural college. She now works with fellow designer Fiona O'Neill, who hand draws all the garden plans. They design together, and work very closely with their clients to achieve a garden that works for them and will get better with every year. 'We try not to follow fashion, as the garden must not age or date - only improve.' The pair won Best in Show at the Urban Garden Show at Olympia, London, 11 years ago. 'We don't do garden shows now,' Claire explains. 'We concentrate on our clients.' www.clairemee.co.uk