



Urban materials such as galvanized metal are softened by lush planting, including the sweet-smelling honey spurge *Euphorbia mellifera* (centre) and the purple pom-poms of *Allium* 'Globemaster'.

**OPPOSITE, LEFT:** Climbing plants surround the garden in a cascade of green foliage.



# Sweet petite

Elspeth Thompson explains how she created a beautiful garden in the tiny back yard of her home in inner city Brixton. Photographs Maayke de Ridder

"THE HOUSE IS GREAT, but I'm going to get frustrated by such a small garden," I remember saying to my husband, when we first saw our London house eleven years ago. We bought it, in spite of my misgivings, and as building work began inside, I set about turning a tiny patch of bare concrete just seven metres by five into the garden of my dreams.

I had a vision of our open-plan kitchen-dining-living space opening directly on to a lush outdoor room with climbers scrambling up the high white walls and jasmine, lilies and other scented plants wafting their fragrance inside. We clad the walls with chunky home-made trellis and, inspired by the courtyard gardeners of Cordoba in Spain, strung them with potted pelargoniums while waiting for the climbers to establish. When it came to layout, one important decision dictated the final design. In a small south-west facing plot, should we save the sunniest spot for plants or for sitting?

Gradually, the garden evolved as a series of squares of different sizes: a large sunny raised deck (yes, we won), a smaller lower deck by the French windows, a 1.8m square mirror that we mounted on the rear wall, and smaller squares in the trellis and galvanized metal grille that forms a bridge out into the garden over the basement area below.



Elspeth says the garden requires 'almost zero maintenance'.

When choosing materials, we couldn't ignore our city surroundings. *Rus in urbe* – rustic style in the city – somehow doesn't cut it in Brixton, and I enjoyed using second-hand scaffolding planks for the decking, salvaged London stocks for the brickwork and old grey dustbins as planters, dragged in from the street when the council brought in the hideous plastic wheelie bins. Limiting ourselves to white-painted wood, brick and metal kept things simple – vital in a small space – and I left it to the plants to provide the contrasting curves and

softness. I've long believed in the dramatic impact of large furniture in small rooms and, as the garden was, in effect, a high-walled room without a ceiling, continued this philosophy outside by filling the wide back bed with bold architectural foliage plants such as bamboos, bear's breeches (*Acanthus mollis*), the honey spurge *Euphorbia mellifera*, a healthy tree fern, spear-like astelias and the gorgeous glaucous grey-green *Melianthus major*, with its pinkish-sheared leaves. Scented climbers such as jasmine, star jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*) and *Holboellia latifolia* romp around the walls, along with a crimson glory vine (*Vitis coignetiae*) and *Clematis montana*, whose blooms are strung about like bunting every spring.



Elspeth carefully limits the materials in the garden to brick, metal and white painted wood.



Lavender is excellent for attracting bees and butterflies to the garden.



A scented *Pelargonium* is placed within arm's reach. One pinch of its leaves releases its sweet scent.

## 'The little London garden came into its own: almost zero maintenance, great for summer lunches with friends, and a peaceful, shady haven after busy days in town'

The white rose 'Madame Alfred Carrière' has finally framed the arch around the French windows, while alliums, lavender and bearded iris provide colour amid the silver, white and green.

A few years ago, I got the urge for more space, and began dividing my time between London and the south coast, where a bramble-strewn plot around a house made from Victorian railway carriages became my next project. The little London garden came into its own: almost zero maintenance (an annual spring and autumn clear-up and mulch, and day to day pottering), great for summer lunches with friends, and a peaceful, shady haven after busy days in town. Far from being frustrating, it is even now evolving. I try different spring bulbs each year, and confess to being delighted when the odd plant gives up the ghost and obliges me to buy a replacement. I've added a mosaic table top in mauves and blues and replaced the jumble of pots and planters with two enormous galvanized metal troughs (one for herbs and the other for salad). And only last month, after lengthy deliberation, I dug up my winter-flowering cherry tree, which was being swamped by the climbers, and am enjoying seeing the astelias and *Melianthus* flourish in the increased space and light. After more than a decade, even the smallest of gardens still packs the power to surprise. ■

### Further information

• *The London Gardener*, by Elspeth Thompson, is a guide to all aspects of gardening in the capital (Frances Lincoln, 2006).



### PLANT NOTEBOOK

Elspeth Thompson lists her favourite plants for a small urban garden

#### ALLIUMS

I grow many different alliums – the large mauve pom-pom heads of *A. 'Globemaster'* (pictured) and *A. giganteum* pack the most punch.

#### ACANTHUS MOLLIS

I love the glossy, scrolling winter foliage as much as the spires of white and mauve flowers. Keep well watered to avoid powdery mildew.

#### FOENICULUM VULGARE 'PURPUREUM'

Fennel's habit of self-seeding all over the garden makes for lovely unexpected plant combinations. The seeds are delicious too.

#### OXALIS TRIANGULARIS 'ATROPURPUREA'

It's dark, triangular leaves make this a stunning ground cover plant – and great contrast with silvers and fresh greens.



The fragrant evergreen climber *Trachelospermum jasminoides* thrives against the sunny south-facing house wall, along with aromatic herbs which flourish in a large