

King of the garden cover-up: garden designer John Davies



Brights: geranium Rozanne; Persicaria amplexicaulis Taurus



Screen envy: two free-standing walls set behind a handsome row of Himalayan birches conceal the unavoidably messy end of the garden

PICTURES: RICHARD BLOOM

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What's that you're hiding?

Screen out eyesores with richly coloured climbers and glossy, evergreen hedges

EVERY garden has something to hide, whether it's a compost heap or a rusty barbecue. But there are some things that can't be stuffed behind the shed. For the clients of this small garden near Greenwich Park, their problem was the end of their neighbour's garden – a dark bank of brambles and unkempt trees looming over their whole space, draining it of light.

Since it was outside the boundary, there was nothing designer John Davies could do to change this gloomy feature when he was called in to remodel the garden. So he came up with an elegant solution. He built two purplish-brown free-standing walls in front of it, leaving a small gap in between as handy storage space. In front, a row of white Himalayan birches stands out perfectly against this backdrop, especially when they are uplit at night.

Result: the eye is drawn to that point and not beyond into the dark ascending space, and the problem disappears.

For Londoners especially, there is always something out of their control that they would like to mask. Evergreen hedges, trees or climbers such as solanum, clematis armandii, trachelospermum or ivy, are good camouflage material. Try hedgesdirect.co.uk for instant hedging and ivy screens. But large eyesores are difficult. Davies believes in the art of distraction as a solution.

"In London you're always creating your own little oasis, hiding from the rest of the world, creating your own magical space. I think of it as stepping out on to an operatic set," says the former opera singer. And there is indeed something subtly theatrical about this garden.

Emerging from the house, you stand on a narrow surveying platform paved in Chinese basalt. Crossing over a rectangular fish pond complete with koi carp you then enter what Davies calls

Alex Mitchell



the "transition" area, where silver and grey granite chippings make the perfect foil for mounds of emerald Japanese forest grass, their arching fronds contrasting with clipped pittosporum tobira Nanum. Two Fermob lounge chairs are invitingly positioned on the gravel.

Finally, you ascend to the dining area at the back where a large table and benches stand out nicely against the dark rendered screens. People talk a lot about creating a sense of journey in the garden and here it is, choreographed to perfection.

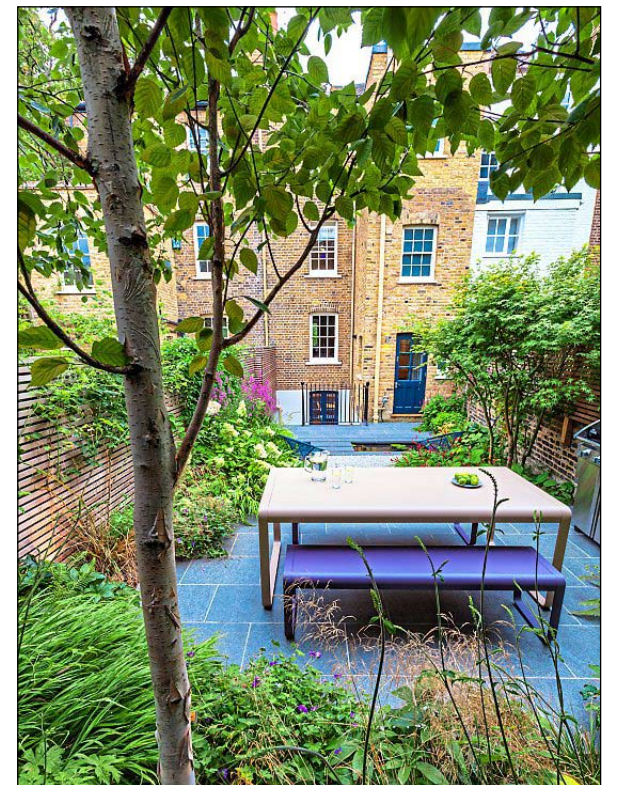
Though there are strong lines in the garden, the plants soften all the hard edges and everything is offset slightly, so nothing feels too symmetrical. "I like planting to be muscular, dramatic, architectural. It softens down the geometry." Leaf contrasts are everywhere. Large-leaved rogersias and hellebores grow in and among the delicate filigree fronds of evergreen fern polystichum setiferum Herrenhausen.

A mature multi-stem acer palmatum, kept restrained by yearly crown trimming, is underplanted with Japanese forest grass contrasting strongly with the much larger, arrow-shaped leaves of persicaria amplexicaulis Taurus. Their red flower heads in full throttle, even this late in October, are a bonus.

"Don't be frightened of using architectural shapes in a small space," says Davies. Jostling together at the back are the spires of actaea cordifolia still in bud, elegant aruncus and the rarely seen Japanese plant kirengeshoma palmata with lush, sycamore-like leaves and waxy yellow bell flowers in summer.

Borderlines: planting softens the garden's strong geometry

AMONG this flamboyance, more familiar plants cohabit happily, including hydrangea Limelight, geranium Rozanne, rosemary and climbers clematis Etoile Violette, and hydrangea petiolaris. "I choose plants for their leaves and textures and how they go together." It all works like magic in this garden that defines its own boundaries and makes its own rules.



■ **Commission John Davies:** johndavieslandscape.co.uk
 ■ **Screens:** rendered blockwork painted in Weathershield Exterior Quickdry Satin in Maraschino Mocha 3 from Dulux
 ■ **Garden build and Fermob furniture:** Hortus (hortus-london.com)
 ■ **Trees:** Deepdale (deepdale-trees.co.uk)
 ■ **Perennials:** Hortus Loci (hlplantcentre.co.uk)