

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICOLA BROWNE

The white stuff

A small plot in west London was a welcome challenge for a woman more used to landscaping acres in the shires. By Elspeth Thompson



In a part of Notting Hill where the large stucco houses are painted in ice-cream colours lies an essentially monochrome garden. The paths are palest limestone, the wooden fences and furniture have bleached silver grey, and the only plants allowed in the flowerbeds are white and shades of green. White marble mosaics fill the gaps between decking and paths and the containers are purpose-made in grey galvanised zinc.

The owners, a textile designer and her husband, gutted the house to create a modern, open-plan interior, and wanted the garden to have suitably strong lines, but not at the expense of the plants. They called in Jinny Blom, whose architectural style and exuberant, naturalistic planting has gained a following among the fashionable and famous. Many of her jobs are in smart parts of Gloucestershire and Scotland but, as a Londoner herself, she enjoyed working on a small city garden.

'There are all sorts of constraints in London – shade, poor soil and pests,' says Blom. 'This site was challenging as it faces north-east on almost solid London clay and backs on to communal gardens.' The brief was to creating a space for outdoor entertaining that didn't feel overlooked. 'We started by layering the planting so that between the table on the deck and the boundary with the communal gardens there are pleached limes, woodland planting beneath, and this huge mound of lavenders and sculpted box that make you feel more secluded,' she explains. There was some resistance at first about creating such large beds where most people might have imagined open space, but in the end the desire for privacy won.

Rather than cutting through the screen of plants on its way from the french windows to the gate, the white limestone path follows a lateral 'U' shape around the lavenders and across the entire width of the garden. 'It

This page, clockwise from above: tree ferns shade the lightwell; Jinny Blom designed the table and benches; mallows, astrantias and regale lilies overhang a limestone path. Opposite: pleached lime trees line the communal-garden railings





forces people to walk right through the garden and makes them really look at the plants,' explains Blom. 'It's a good way to get the most from a smallish garden.' She has been particularly rigorous with the hard landscaping. 'A modern minimalist garden is only as good as the detailing,' she explains, pointing out the plugged and sanded screw-holes in the ipê hardwood fences and decking, and the uniform finish of the paving. Blom also designed the table and benches to echo the narrow banded strips of her trademark fencing.

With the structure in place, she turned her hand to the subtler infill planting, choosing ferns, white aquilegia and dicentra, lime-green telli-mas and feathery *Luzula nivea* in the dry shady bed beneath the lime trees, and a frothy mix of white malva, agapanthus, *Astrantia major* and regale lilies in the wide bed against the north-west-facing fence. Some of the plants in this border are tall – the unusual white sanguisorba can top 10ft, while spires of white foxgloves, *Veronicastrum virginicum album* and white *Epilobium angustifolium* push up between lower-growing plants. Any gaps in summer are filled with fast-growing annuals – mounds of *Ammi majus*, peony-flowered white poppies and fragrant *Nicotiana sylvestris*. In the rest of the garden, height is provided by a small amelanchier tree (whose starry white blossom in spring and fresh lime-green foliage give it the right credentials) and five 30-year-old vines trained up the house.

Blom's work was not confined to the back garden. The front garden had been tunnelled under to create a laundry room, leaving a lightwell at one end of the basement kitchen. Since the owner likes tree ferns, three large *Dicksonia antarctica* were planted to form a dense feathery canopy over this internal courtyard – also creating a surprisingly effective sound barrier from traffic noise. The excavations meant there was no depth for planting in the front garden, so Blom suggested a larger area of the white pebble mosaic used around the back, and white-flowering lilac, *Viburnum tinus* and *Centranthus* in raised beds around the sides.



An amelanchier tree provides height in the garden

Blom visits two or three times a year to check up on the garden and to 'tweak' and re-plant. 'Most city gardens require a major re-plant every three years or so,' she explains. 'Many plants do not thrive, and those that do can grow too big.' Here, she has kept the trees and larger shrubs, but re-planted the original, poorly performing lavender with *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Munstead Dwarf' that should do better on London soil.

She also patrols the borders for rogue flowers, and has rooted out yellow aquilegia and self-seeded mauve foxgloves. The hard landscaping, too, requires attention, as white limestone needs pressure-washing to keep algae at bay. Simplicity does not come easy (or cheap) in the city. ●

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