

Looking out from the house over a grey-green clump of *Echium fastuosum*, white painted render edges a border of tall *Verbena bonariensis*, *Salvia uliginosa*, and wispy *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire'



PHYSICIANS' GARDEN

When two doctors commissioned Jinny Blom to design a modern, child-friendly outside space gardening was the last thing on their minds. By Elspeth Thompson

Jinny Blom's brief to create a garden for two busy young doctors in Stockwell, south London, was clear from the start. 'They simply told me, "We don't garden, we have three children and we entertain a lot,"' she remembers. The house attached to the garden had once been occupied by squatters but the couple had spent the previous two years transforming it into an award-winning contemporary family house with an open-plan, split-level living space, floor-to-ceiling windows and an over-sized glass door opening on to the garden. 'They wanted a garden that was as modern as the house,' says Blom. 'And the house did need anchoring in its surroundings.'

The doctors had seen a few garden designers before commissioning Blom in 2000. 'We were impressed by her willingness to see this as a one-off individual project, rather than yet another variation on a theme,'

says one of the owners. This was well before Blom hit the public eye with the 'Healing Garden' she designed with the Prince of Wales for last year's Chelsea Flower Show. Blom's career rocketed, and she now works almost exclusively on stately country house projects in the Cotswolds and Scotland, where huge budgets and confidentiality agreements are the order of the day. 'They got me when I was cheap!' she jokes.

Strong clear lines were vital to divide the awkward fan-shaped plot (100ft long, and 80ft at its widest) into useable modern spaces, and Blom took her principal design proportions directly from the house's rear façade. The ground floor living-space now opens directly on to a large terrace (intended for adult use), which is separated from the lawn and the children's play area by two enormous raised flowerbeds. Between them runs a timber causeway whose shape reflects that of the

tall glass back door. To accentuate the modern look, the hard materials have been kept to a sleek minimum: slatey black limestone for the terrace, white painted render (which matches the lower walls of the house) to edge the flowerbeds, and pale timber for the causeway and other decked areas. Behind the largest bed, three catalpa trees have been planted in pinkish grey gravel, their slim trunks rising through low square seats made from the same pale wood as the causeway.

Keeping the garden simple was also intended to make maintenance easy – another of the owners' concerns. Apart from easy bamboos and robust perennials around the edges of the lawn, planting has been confined to the raised beds, which are filled with a glorious mixture of smoky grey-green and mauve plants that need the minimum of care. Alliums and dusky nectaroscordums are first to push up through the

new spring growth of the perennials, which are planted in subtle drifts and get taller and taller as summer progresses. By July or August, the rest of the garden is glimpsed through a gauzy screen of bronze fennel, mauve *Salvia uliginosa*, feathery white gauras and *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire', with the tiny electric violet flowers of *Verbena bonariensis* waving on spindly 6ft stems above. 'These plants are tall anyway,' explains Blom, 'but having them in the raised bed gives them that little bit extra. The idea was also to help to hide the children's playthings behind.' Many of the plants have attractive seedheads and they are all left to provide height and structure through the winter. The only major annual intervention is when the whole lot is hacked down in February. Apart from that, just a little judicious thinning is necessary to prevent the salvias gaining too much ground on the more desirable *Verbena*