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GARDEN DESIGN INSIGHT

**A SPACE TO RELAX
AND LEARN**



IN PLAIN SIGHT

Little is hidden in this rectangular city garden, yet it stylishly manages to blend three distinct areas

WORDS CHRIS YOUNG PHOTOGRAPHS RICHARD BLOOM

The design brief

The owners, Cambridge professionals with four young children, weren't too prescriptive about the design for their new garden. "The brief was fairly open," says designer Jane Brockbank, "but there were practical issues, such as ensuring there was plenty of privacy and enough space for the children to learn and play in." The couple home educate their children so it was vital the space could not only be a place to relax in and enjoy looking at, but a place that would offer opportunities for education and stimulation too.

The overall design is, on plan, quite simple. A terrace leads from the substantially renovated house: "We didn't need a big terrace as the large kitchen doors, when open, make you feel like you're outside anyway," explain the couple.

An almost-rectangular lawn with a single, statuesque *Sorbus* allows plenty of usable open space in the first third of the garden, and then leads on to a productive vegetable garden. Further down, through an inclined path and ornamental-inspired meadow, is the final third – the 'dark spa' as the architects call it. Housing a gym, sauna and guest suite, its black charred timber façade make it the perfect backdrop to any planting.

The central part of the garden houses the greenhouse, raised beds and shed. Unusually, Jane didn't try and hide these – in fact, she deliberately kept them in clear line of sight to both help break up the garden and to show that growing, harvesting, caring and nurturing plants is an integral part of the garden experience.

Throughout, the hard materials were chosen for a consistent feel with the brick house extension: the terrace is an irregular shape with irregular shaped beds; the paths are Petersen bricks, surrounded by self-compacted gravel; and the raised beds are simple timber sleepers.

"There was no restriction on the colours or types of plants I could use," explains Jane – the owners were happy to be led by her choice and as a result, Jane's design has an abundance of planting that helps soften the boundaries and create an immersive experience.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Jane's work at janebrockbank.com

Turn the page to see more of the garden ▶



The ornamental meadow

The area in front of the 'dark spa,' the guest suite building at the bottom of the garden, is a great example of blending planting with experience.

Key to the feel is the ornamental meadow. Situated in front of the spa building the planting gives a nod to the Cambridge Fens. It isn't a replica but rather an evocation of the plants, textures and colours of the lowland Fens in this part of East Anglia. "I wanted to create a wildflower and long-grass area on one side, and a more ornamental version of it on the other," says Jane.

Jane used a flowering lawn mix from Emorsgate Seeds, which includes several key plants, including lady's bedstraw (*Galium verum*), white clover (*Trifolium repens*) and meadow buttercup (*Ranunculus acris*). "What's great is that it flowers early in the season so you can then cut it down and it becomes a shaggy lawn for the rest of the year," says Jane.

A mini 'orchard' of two small apple trees adds to the meadow feel, while a taller downy birch, *Betula pubescens*, gives height.

On the opposite side of the path is the spa border, which takes visual cues from the meadow but by using ornamental plants – for example, *Anthemis punctata* subsp. *cupaniana* references meadow daisies, *Cirsium rivulare* 'Atropurpureum' relate to common thistles, while *Geranium* 'Nimbus' references meadow cranesbill.

There is a slight incline to the path and wildflower mound (spoil from digging out the guest suite), but as you approach the building the slope reduces and you feel as if you are entering another world – both architecturally and physically. Even just over a few metres distance, the main garden seems a long way away, the main house further still. It's a clever piece of engineering in a relatively small space.

Turn the page for more ideas from the garden ▶



Essential elements

Some of the key design elements that help to create a seamless link between the newly renovated house and the guest spa at the bottom of the garden



KEY FACTS

Where Cambridge.

Size 12m x 35m.

Soil Light and sandy that dries out quickly but with a clay subsoil.



TOP DESIGN TIPS FOR A secluded suite

- **One of the key requirements by the clients** for both architect and garden designer was to ensure a high level of privacy in the guest suite. The guest bedroom opens on to the 'spa garden': a semi-circular space that is bordered by 11 tall Chinese privet (*Ligustrum lucidum*), a great evergreen shrub that isn't often used.
- **Slate pebbles and an offset boulder** give a calming, almost Japanese-inspired feel. The connection between inside and out is seamless, lending a relaxed and meditative air to the intimate space – large bi-fold doors frame the view.
- **Woodland plants**, such as *Disporopsis pernyi* and wild ginger *Asarum europaeum*, thrive beneath the Chinese privet and add to the calming green palette that also includes the alpine water fern *Blechnum penna-marina* and the grass *Hakonechloa macra*.

Turn the page for more design ideas ▶



BACK TO BLACK

The luxurious 'dark spa' building, clad in *shou-sugi-ban* charred timber, was designed by Neil Dusheiko Architects, who also designed the extension to the house and worked closely with Jane on the garden redesign, as they had done on other projects. Housing a gym, sauna and guest suite, its black charred-timber façade makes it the perfect backdrop for not only any planting but also to seemingly disappear into the shadows.



LEADING THE WAY

A natural-looking path, of Petersen bricks laid flat and compacted gravel, leads through informal, meadow-inspired planting, down to the garden spa building. The use of the same bricks as the extension is a nice visual connection from the bottom of the garden back to the house, while laying them in gravel denotes a move away from the more formal terrace to the more relaxed feeling throughout the garden.



RAISING THE BAR

Across the centre of the garden is the productive space – greenhouse, raised beds for vegetables, a narrow herb garden and tucked along the fence line, a shed. This bold decision by garden designer Jane Brockbank – to expose and celebrate this part of the garden, rather than hide it away – helps delineate the space between the formal lawn nearer the house and the ornamental meadow further on.



OPENING OUT

Looking back towards this Cambridge house (which was completely renovated and extended in 2019) shows the vital relationship between plants, open space and building. The informal, herb-based planting in front of the kitchen extension softens the Petersen brick walls, as well as visually fudging the horizontal lines of the space. The owners didn't feel that they needed a large terrace – opening up the large doors gives the feeling of being outside.



Approach to planting

Garden designer Jane Brockbank has used a blend of lower-growing and mid-range perennials, with bulbs, climbers, shrubs, grasses, herbs and trees to create year-round interest. Plants, such as evergreen *Sarcococca hookeriana* 'Winter Gem' (= 'Pmoore03') and *Helleborus argutifolius*, ensure winter interest, while a climbing *Clematis alpina* 'White Columbine' and the large shrub *Magnolia stellata* continue the show in spring. Summer sees plants such as *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis' and *Geranium Patricia* (= 'Brempat') come to the fore giving way to autumn flowerers such as *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Fat Domino'.

No specific colour palette was specified, but the combination of purple sage (*Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurascens') and yellow semi-double buttercup *Ranunculus acris* 'Stevenii' in the bed on the terrace is particularly successful. Not often seen in ornamental planting, the buttercup is a particular favourite of Jane's and also makes a deliberate connection with the ornamental meadow near the guest suite.

The inclusion of shrubs in the borders, such as *Viburnum opulus* 'Roseum', allow dappled light to the ground level below, where perennials *Astrantia major* 'Large White' and *Symphotrichum laeve* 'Calliope' can flourish.

How the garden looks from inside was also a key consideration. From the kitchen table, the spatial balance of planting, grass lawn, productive vegetable area and the long grass in front of the guest suite, are key. Jane has ensured that all the boundaries of the rectangular site are clothed in plants to help visually blur the edges while ensuring that maximum value is gained from the space. □

SUPPLIERS

Emorsgate Seeds

Tel 01553 829028, wildseed.co.uk

Neil Dusheiko Architects

Tel 07876 341273, neildusheiko.com

Petersen Bricks

en.petersen-tegl.dk

