

RIGHT ON KEW

When compared with their Royal Botanic neighbour, some gardens in Kew can be forgiven for having an inferiority complex – but here is one that holds its own. Starting a new occasional series on designed gardens, **Chris Young** charts the evolution of this interesting, T-shaped plot. Photography by Marianne Majerus

POSSIBLY THE MOST IMPORTANT

part of a project for a garden designer is the relationship he or she has with the client. If they click, then ideas and suggestions often get accepted easily; the client allows trust to pervade the process, but not without a probable pang of uncertainty. If client and designer don't get on, however, the project is doomed from the start – I know of many designers who have terminated a potentially lucrative contract for this very reason.

It is therefore both unsurprising, and rewarding, to know that in creating a garden for two of her best friends, garden designer Jane Brockbank was left not only richer in experience, but in friendship too. Based in southwest London, Jane is – as with many garden designers – a second-career professional. Holding a fine art degree, she was a painter, textile designer and florist; but with the arrival of children she needed a profession that could be flexible and visually creative at the same time. She set up her garden design practice in 2000. 'I don't have one particular style,' Jane says, 'but if anything, I like to be more heavy on the planting – loose, somewhat open, naturalistic arrangements, but married to more pared-down hard materials.' ▶



SANDYCOMBE ROAD, KEW, SOUTHWEST LONDON

Owners Sally Woodward Gentle and Henry Gentle, their three children (aged 15, 13 and 11) and two dogs

Occupations Sally works in television; Henry restores paintings

Property Large Edwardian semi on a main road in Kew; moved there in 1995

Perceptions of the area Sally says: 'I grew up round here and love the community, the Royal

Botanic Gardens, Kew, the river and so on – it is like being in the country but with all the amenities of the city.'

Interest in gardening RHS members, but at 'interested-amateur' level; also rent a plot on the local allotment site that they garden regularly for produce

Brief for garden designer No lawn; low(ish) maintenance; all garden used; interesting plants



Garden designer Jane Brockbank

Total garden area 365sq m

Soil sandy and well drained

Aspect southeasterly

Timescale design agreed beginning 2004; work on lower garden spring 2004; upper garden undertaken over winter 2004/5

Total cost £25,000 including design, plants, hard materials and contractors' fees



SURPRISE IN THE CITY Looking out from the back of the house at Sandycombe Road, Kew (above), reveals a densely planted garden with elements of surprise and delight – especially when you realise that steps at the back of the space lead to an even bigger garden 2m higher up. The Gentles (left) sit with garden designer Jane Brockbank (seated far left) and one of the two mischievous bassett hounds

Lower garden

A view from the centre of the garden, back to the house

Vertical accents

Self-sown *Digitalis* spreads through the lower garden adding drama and height; two deckchairs sit on the old-scaffold-plank terrace outside the kitchen window

Simple path

Garden designer Jane Brockbank has chosen a limited palette of materials for this garden: the 'harder' paving choice, for the path, is compacted scalping dust leading to a brick-paved circular area

Low edging plants

As the visitor walks down the path to a seating area, the informal planting becomes lower: here, *Artemisia ludoviciana* gives a silver tone, with red *Knaulia macedonica* peeping through



Mixed bunch

Allium christophii acts as a focal point in this planting: its spherical heads contrast with spires of *Digitalis* (foxglove), emerging green leaves of *Salvia transsylvanica*, mounds of *Euphorbia* at the front, and climbing *Lonicera periclymenum* 'Graham Thomas' on the back fence

silver-foliaged *Cynara*. She also added woody plants, including silver birch, hazel and lavenders.

The effect of both spaces is inviting and also informal. Sally and Jane are relaxed about what grows and what doesn't – 'with two bassetts you have to be ready to accept that they will ruin any plant' – as can be seen from the inclusion of foxgloves in the lower garden. Jane had wanted *Verbascum phoeniceum* 'Violetta' but because the dogs kept digging these up, self-sown *Digitalis* were allowed to grow. The effect backs up Jane's original idea of wanting people to walk through a 'tall meadow-like space, while going further into the garden' and exploring

Range of materials

'When I came up with the design,' says Jane, 'I didn't want it to be an obviously-designed garden; Sally, Henry and I all wanted it to be understated and whittled down to its simplest materials.'

This aim has been achieved well. The timber decking near the house is made of reclaimed scaffold planks (inexpensive yet attractive); the path in the centre of the lower garden is made of scalping ►

functional space now as well as having an exciting, slightly overgrown feel that adds to a sense of privacy, the unknown and unexplored.

The planting throughout the two gardens is relaxed, informal and soft. When Sally and Henry first moved in, they planted olives, tree ferns, *Acanthus* and bamboos – bold and structural planting, typical of many first-time gardeners. Jane retained these in the lower garden, and they give the design a sense of age. She also kept a large (8m) *Pittosporum tenuifolium* that was growing out of the bottom of the upper garden's bank; it acts as a focal point and diffuses the eye when looking to the rear of the garden.

Linking the two areas together are many perennials – softer and more intermingled lower down near the house, more robust and tough in the upper. In the lower garden Jane threaded masses of *Stipa* grasses, lime-green mounds of *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, burgundy-red *Knaulia macedonica*, spires of blue-flowered *Salvia transsylvanica* and allium bulbs. In the upper garden, she used spiky *acanthus*, sedums and

still problems with the upper garden: the soil was full of rubble, builders' waste and other debris (they believe, from the remains of bombed-out buildings in the Second World War). 'At weekends Henry would be hacking things back, or trying to find planting pockets on the upper garden,' says Sally, 'but it was almost impossible to keep on top of it. Soil was hit and miss, and the slope was so steep.' This experience guided Jane into designing terraces made from treated softwood timber, which necessarily retain the soil, but also create natural planting pockets.

Planting for use

By creating open spaces Jane has made the top garden feel considerably bigger than when it was a slope. There are dedicated areas for sitting, paths and planted areas, all held together by a consistent gravel mulch. It has become a gratifyingly

of wooden steps. Here your head is above the tree canopies, and there are views over many of the neighbouring gardens.

Connecting the spaces

The connection between the two parcels of land was key to the garden and Jane's primary design challenge. For the first few years, Sally and Henry had maintained the lower garden happily, but were always faced with a large wall and a further garden accessible only by a circuitous route. One of the most significant, and expensive (£7,500), decisions that Jane undertook was to ask structural engineers to survey the bank and then build reinforced concrete walls – crucial for the long-term use of the garden. She then added wooden steps to make the physical connection, and the two parts became an accessible one.

Once up the steps however, there were

This summary of her work sits well with the garden she created for long-term friends Sally Woodward Gentle and her husband Henry. They have three children, full-time jobs, two basset hounds and an allotment, so their garden had to be tough, durable but beautiful. They moved to the house in 1995, and for the first few years did little with the garden. 'As with so many gardens,' Sally says, 'we had some old lawn, an apple tree in the middle and not a lot else.'

The garden is a hammerhead shape (see plan, p182): the immediate plot that extends from the house (the lower garden) is 26m long and 6m wide, yet an additional plot of land (the upper garden) is on a raised, steep bank at the end of the garden (26m wide and 8m deep). Access to the second plot of land, which starts a sheer 2m above the lower garden and climbs a further 1.6m, is by means

Green roof

In a small corner at the back of the garden, a home-made green roof has been installed to protect the bikes from weather damage. Plants include *Armeria maritima*, *Sedum* and clusters of *Sempervivum* planted into a 50:50 mix of soil and fine grit, at 100mm depth

IN COMBINATION: SANDYCOMBE ROAD

Planting and hard materials combine well: designer Jane Brockbank gives her thoughts:

'I like 'raw' materials (timber, brick, concrete, grit) to be used to make clearly defined bold shapes – the circular brick paved area in the lower garden; the concrete retaining walls which form big rectangles; the fat, wide gravel paths.

'I love the contrast of the olives and artemisias in the lower garden, with their silver colours near the screaming lime-green heads of *Euphorbia*.

But most of all, I enjoy the depth of the beds in the lower garden – they are so much more generous than is normal for a small space and I find it exciting to walk through really tall plants.'