

PHOTOGRAPHS: Marianne Majerus

WORDS: Jane Brockbank

SMART CASUAL

Jane Brockbank MSGD transformed a tired formal garden into a modern 'country' design for a family's new-build, old-style home

The terrace contains four Sorbus and a fire bowl by Alexander Armstrong with sculpture by Cathy Azma



Jane Brockbank MSGD

Jane runs a garden design studio in London. She has twice exhibited at RHS Chelsea Flower Show and her work has been published in many books and magazines. www.janebrockbank.com

This commission was part of a larger scale project to build a new house and garden on a site in north London, down a pretty private road. There was an existing house, but it was a large, lumpy affair, and the plan was to knock this down and build a completely new house designed by Charlton Brown, a well-known Hampstead architectural practice that specialises in a more traditional style of architecture.

The owner and his wife had already had a landscape plan drawn up for planning purposes, but weren't happy with what the landscape architects had done, and were looking for someone who might take a less formal approach. They had seen the RHS Chelsea show garden I did with Angus Thompson back in 2009, and contacted me directly.

The site

The rear garden was southeast facing, and covered approximately 35 x 25m. When I first visited, it was winter and it felt dark, heavy and joyless. The space had definitely been professionally designed, with a curving water feature, fountains, a swimming pool and clipped yew cones.

There were many mature trees along the boundaries, including a massive plane tree, three huge Lombardy poplars and a large leylandii. The soil was essentially slow-draining London clay, but years of cultivation had improved the top soil profile to give a reasonable working soil. Thankfully, the garden did not feel overlooked and was of fairly generous proportions for London.

The brief

Although the new house was designed in a Neoclassical style, the clients did not want a formal garden alluding to that period – they wanted it to be more contemporary and reference a relaxed English country garden. They were insistent it should not be precious in any way and was to be a family garden that all ages could enjoy.

They did a lot of entertaining and wanted the large balcony/upper terrace

that came off the kitchen on the first floor to be primarily for this, with a fixed table and chairs and large planted pots. They also requested some kind of heating for this space, so we had to explore the possibility of a heated floor. We spent a considerable amount of time discussing James Bond-style concealed heating systems, which were slightly crazy. Needless to say, we compromised and ended up with more pedestrian patio heaters.

The clients stated they also wanted play equipment for the kids, with storage, a generous lawn and a firebowl to extend the time they could be outside.

The design

The main challenge was making a garden that sat with the grandness of the house without being grand itself – I was aware of the need for a strong structure, but I wanted it to be a little looser and asymmetrical. There were two levels required for the new landscaping – the upper terrace, and the main rear garden at the lower level. The fountain had to come out and the swimming pool had to be filled in.

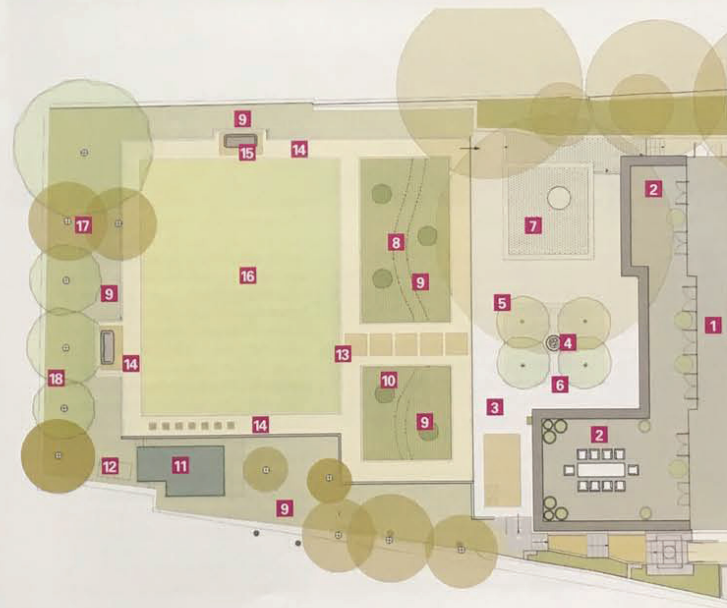
I was desperate to remove the trees along the boundary as they were so dominant and out of scale with the space. The local authority wouldn't let me take the poplars out, much to my disappointment, but did give permission for the leylandii.

I based the design on a central axis from the house with asymmetrical beds either side, a terrace with firebowl for adults and a playhouse in the corner for the kids. I decided to use four Japanese rowans, *Sorbus commixta*, on this main terrace as a focal point and softener to the house.

The paths were to be gravel with a feature pattern with pavers on the central sightline, and I chose Carcastle Grey for paving the terrace around the house. This is an unusual and very expensive sandstone that comes from only one quarry in Yorkshire. It is textured and can be quite variable in tone, which looks great when laid but can frighten clients when

"THE CLIENTS WANTED A MORE CONTEMPORARY, RELAXED ENGLISH COUNTRY GARDEN. THEY WERE INSISTENT IT SHOULD NOT BE PRECIOUS IN ANY WAY"

FACING PAGE
Topiary shapes in Urubis pots on the upper terrace
ABOVE Deep planting beds sit in front of a large games lawn



GARDEN PLAN

1. Main house
2. Upper terrace with pots
3. Stone terrace
4. Fire bowl
5. 4 x *Sorbus*
6. Gravel bed
7. Raised bed with large sycamore
8. Informal paths through planting
9. Planting beds
10. Fastigiate box
11. Children's play equipment
12. Compost bins
13. Patterned clay pavers
14. Path gravel
15. Oak benches
16. Lawn
17. Existing trees (in darker green)
18. New trees (in pale green)



"THE PLANTING AROUND THE BOUNDARIES HAS MORE OF A SPRING EMPHASIS WITH A WOODLAND FEEL"

comparing samples. It gave me some sleepless nights worrying about what they would think, so I showed them photographs of other gardens where I've used it, and also went to the quarry in person to hand-select the pieces of stone I wanted to have cut.

The children

In a family garden like this, I am always aware of the need to consider how the design will be used by children. It seems obvious, but it is easily forgotten when getting carried away designing planting schemes, which need to be fairly robust if in proximity to a lawn – *Stipa gigantea* and footballs don't mix.

We did install a wendy house on this project, but I have removed so many from other gardens after the kids get bored of them, that I personally feel temporary tent-like structures are better value for money.

The safety of the children also needs to be carefully considered. One example on this project was the switch to turn on the firebowl – it needed to be high up, out of reach of little hands, in a box that could only be opened with a key.

The build

As always in a new-build project, many issues arose during the build: dealing with the large mature trees in such close proximity to the new house and landscaping was very challenging for everyone, and took considerable compromise and careful instruction by an arboricultural consultant.

It turned out that the exact planting spot I had marked out for the four rows by the house was the only practical place for the deep reinforced-concrete pad to be placed to take the huge crane used during the building of the house. It wasn't practical to remove the concrete after the build, so we were forced to work around it – changing levels, altering drainage and accepting that the reduced soil depth would effectively 'bonsai' the trees. Architects and builders rarely understand the depth of soil required for planting beds or how vital good drainage is, and tend to have unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved.

Also, the frequently encountered problem of paving on top of roof terraces arose on the upper level – build-ups become so reduced it was

ABOVE Gravel paths lead past shady planting including *Libertia grandiflora* to the playhouse by Stone & Watkins (now The Children's Cottage Company), which includes storage on the lower level

difficult to fit paving and planting on top of them. We had to use stone laid on a very shallow pedestal system on the upper terrace, which I find rather unsatisfactory in terms of finish, and then you have to place heavy pots on top.

The planting

The planting was divided roughly into two main categories: the boundaries, where it was mostly semi-shade; and the two main central flower beds, which were sunnier and would add the drama – the 'wow' element. We planted the trees along the rear boundary early on in the project so they could settle in while the house was being built – this really helps give a sense of maturity to a new garden. We used *Acer rubrum*, *Prunus avium*, *Crataegus x lavallei* 'Carrieri' and *Liquidambar styraciflua*.

The planting underneath them and around the boundaries was meant to blur the edges of the garden and extend seasonal interest beyond just the summer months. It has more of a spring emphasis with a slight woodland feel – spring bulbs give way



to early *Geranium*, *Euphorbia*, *Brunnera*, *Digitalis* and *Libertia* then run into *Persicaria bistorta*, Oriental poppies, Melica and peonies. In late summer and early autumn, they fill in with *Persicaria amplexicaulis*, Japanese anemones and asters.

The large central beds have flowers of similar colours flowering at the same time, ie early summer is blue, with Iris 'Jane Phillips', *Amsonia tabernaemontana* var. *salicifolia*, *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna' and *Geranium Rozanne*, with *Euphorbia palustris* as a foil. Mid-to-late summer is more pink, with *Astrantia major* 'Clare', *Saponaria x lempergii* 'Max Frei', *Erodium manescavii* and *Sedum* with *Eryngium* and *Anthemis* Susanna Mitchell as a foil.

The fastigate box in the flowery beds were sourced from Belgium. They hold everything together through winter, and add a touch of formality in among the summer 'fluff'. We did, however, have to replace two that we lost in the first year. The box topiary pieces in the large pots on the upper terrace were added as a bit of fun and were a riff on the English country garden theme.

The result

I learned some important things during the build, such as the process of working as part of a large team and the importance of good communication within that team, from the architects and the structural engineers, to the lighting designers, interior designers,

ABOVE Secret paths run through the large planting beds of *Allium nigrum*, *Amsonia tabernaemontana* var. *salicifolia*, *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna', *Geranium Rozanne*, *Euphorbia palustris* and *Anthemis* Susanna Mitchell

main contractors, landscape contractors and arboricultural consultant, and, indeed, the clients, who can easily get forgotten in the decision making on such a large project.

The clients were really happy with the finished product. The first summer after they moved in, they threw a large party and had lots of families over with children of all ages. They said there was a magical moment when the sun was shining, the garden was looking glorious and the grown-ups were on the upper terrace eating and drinking, while watching the children happily run riot in the garden below. The garden was full of noise and laughter and was being enjoyed. It means a huge amount when you get this sort of feedback. ◯

WHO'S WHO

Landscape contractors
Bowles and Wyer
www.bowleswyer.co.uk

Paving stone
Catcastle Grey sandstone
from Dunhouse
www.dunhouse.co.uk

Pavers
Vande Moortel
www.vandemoortel.co.uk

Gravel
Cedec Gold from CED Stone
www.ced.ltd.uk

Trees
Deepdale Trees
www.deepdale-trees.co.uk

Arboricultural consultant
Tim Price of Tretec
Tel: 01209 821186

Plants
Hilliers (shrubs and climbers)
www.hillier.co.uk
Hortus Loci (topiary)
hortusloci.co.uk
Orchard Dene (herbaceous)
www.orcharddene.co.uk