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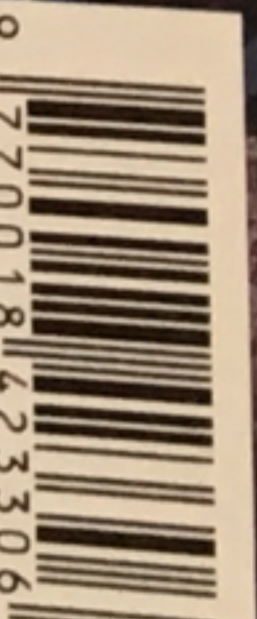
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The view from the boardwalk, over the swimming pond to the house. The garden was designed at the same time as the extension was built, allowing for a seamless integration of the two parts.

FAMILY DESIGN

TOWN & COUNTRY

With a natural swimming pond, wildflower meadows and a three-room tree house, this tranquil retreat belies its London location

WORDS STEPHANIE DONALDSON PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS





A growing family is often cited as the reason that city-based couples move to the countryside. Simon Tinkler and Ailsa Davies, however, have done things in reverse and created the sense of a rural idyll in south-east London. It is hard to believe that this garden, with its natural swimming pond, wildflower meadows and mature trees, is a mere five miles from the centre of the city. It is equally astonishing that it incorporates a large tree house, a trampoline, ping-pong table, football pitch, cricket space and swings without compromising the design.

When the family moved here, the garden was overgrown and unruly so it made sense to tackle it at the same time as extending the house. 'It allowed us to integrate the two,' says Simon. 'Ailsa and I wanted the garden to be relatively informal and low maintenance, with lots of naturalistic-style planting, and places to eat, drink, entertain and relax. We also wanted a space where our four children would enjoy spending time with their friends. There's the swimming pond, of course, but we also have a firepit where the older teenagers can hang out, separated from the adults, but still part of the family.'

Finding the right designer to deliver all this was the result of a happy coincidence. While Simon was looking for someone reasonably local, he came across Jane Brockbank's website and realised that she had created an award-winning garden that the couple had seen and loved at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show a few years earlier.

Working on this garden has been a good collaboration, both its owners and designer agree, although it was quite

ABOVE Along the side of the terrace, Simon's new vegetable bed provides easy pickings for the kitchen.

BELOW The gravelled front garden is equally informal with plantings of woodland perennials, including *Darmera peltata*, *Astrantia major* 'Alba' and *Deschampsia cespitosa*.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP LEFT Clay-tolerant perennials including purple-blue *Geranium* 'Rozanne', wiry-stemmed *Libertia grandiflora*, frothy acid-green

Alchemilla mollis, red thistle-like *Cirsium rivulare* and white spears of *Aconitum* 'Ivorine' thrive in the border.

TOP RIGHT Raised wooden planters filled with the grass *Molinia caerulea* 'Heidebraut' separate the two levels of the terrace, while their deep edges offer additional bench seating.

RIGHT The fire pit takes prime position at one end of the terrace, which overlooks the swimming pond and wildflower meadow beyond.





ABOVE The cascading branches of the weeping willow, which are reflected in the still water of the swimming pond, give the tree house a sense of secrecy. The three-room structure was built using fixings that allow the tree to grow.

BELOW The boardwalk is visible through a veil of marginal plants, including *Schoenoplectus lacustris* (common club-rush) and *Saururus cernuus* (swamp lily), which filter the water and provide a habitat for wildlife.



a challenge for Jane to fit in everything on the family's wish list. Fortunately, the garden (which backs on to a large, tree-filled park) is a fair size for London and has lovely mature trees, including a beautiful weeping willow.

These days, the swimming pond is the main focus, but initially the tree house was the centre of attention. 'Now that the children are teenagers, they would rather stay in their own beds than sleep in a tree,' says Simon. 'Their main concern is whether they can get a wi-fi signal there.' He is in no hurry to remove any of the play equipment, though. 'It's remarkable how everything fits in, but doesn't dominate,' he says. 'And when my oldest son comes back from university, he still wants to play football, as does my best man, who is coming up to fifty years old.'

Although installing the pond was not straightforward, Simon has no regrets. 'It's a wonderful thing to have,' he says. 'It's lower maintenance than a swimming pool, looks great all year round and the water is pure. I swim before work on most mornings from April to September, and as I bob around I think, this is so beautiful and peaceful.'

GARDEN GUIDE

Orientation South-west facing.

Soil type Solid London clay that is gradually being improved with compost and mulch.

Special features Seasonally heated natural swimming pond, wildflower meadows, naturalistic planting, a large tree house and variety of play equipment.

Garden design Jane Brockbank MSGD, Jane Brockbank Gardens. 020 7371 9475, janebrockbank.com.