



bloom

gardening • nature • inspiration



The zero- waste garden

Photography Aloha Bonser-Shaw

Ripping out a garden to install a new design can cost the earth. Landscape designer Miria Harris takes on a skip-free challenge



Everyone says there is a sweet spot in business where you find yourself able to choose your clients, rather than wait for them to choose you. I'm not sure exactly when that happened for me, or actually if it has happened at all, but I feel fortunate that in the early days lovely jobs came my way and they in turn seeded others. When I met Nicky, I remember being a little sad that she only wanted to do a planting design rather than the whole garden, but I quickly realised what a passionate plant enthusiast she was and what a dynamic meeting of minds it would be. I can genuinely say that I didn't make a garden for her, but that we made a garden together.

When circumstances meant Nicky had to sell her home, she and her two children said it was leaving the garden behind that was the most heartbreaking and that the only way they would feel at home in their new East London house was if we made a garden together again. And so part two began in earnest.

This time, the brief was to design the whole garden. I knew this space couldn't be a repeat of the first, but I also knew it shouldn't be entirely new. We were faced with some very mature planting

and nothing in the existing garden made sense in the design style and colour scheme that mirrored Nicky's previous garden. In contemplating this I was deeply troubled by the idea of ripping everything out to achieve a blank canvas.

People like to talk about how environmentally conscious the landscape industry is, but in reality, like many industries, it is responsible for too much waste. I've always found that dealing with waste is the most difficult part of a landscape design process and I endeavour to find ways of incorporating, reusing or adapting existing features into new design schemes to reduce demolition and muck away. But this was something else.

Huge *Musa basjoo* plants, a beautiful mature *Tetrapanax papyrifer*, multiple multi-stem amelanchiers and grasses galore, and that was just the plants. The garden also included a whole load of composite decking, planters and fencing (none of which was ever going to decompose), a concrete raised section at the back of the garden, a timber pergola and a load of slate chippings and brick paths. It was a lot to deal with and had nothing to do with the naturalistic, perennial-rich aesthetic Nicky wanted. ➔

Because there was so much to think about – so much potential waste – I decided then and there to embrace the challenge and to ensure that none of it would be thrown away. This would be a project that would see zero waste to landfill. So we set about achieving the new without entirely sacrificing the old.

The first thing to think about was how to deal with the plants. After some discussion we decided to organise a plant giveaway. We paid for a team to dig up all the plants and bag them up in compostable bags. They were then moved through to the front garden so they could be easily collected. We advertised on social media and within 48 hours all the plants were gone – some to community gardens and some to private gardens both locally and as far as Essex.

And the composite timber? Well, it turned out that on hearing it was going for free, a handyman Nicky worked with was happy to take it and repurpose it in his own garden along with the timber from the decommissioned pergola. Serendipitous. And everything else? That is where the design came in.

Rather than demolish the raised concrete area at the back, I decided to work with the level change. But instead of keeping the garden flat and stepping up at the base of this raised area, I designed a walkway that stepped up gradually through sloped planting. The build up of these planting beds would be formed from the waste that no one wanted to take away and reuse, and the rubble mix of slate and broken-down bricks would be packed tight under the walkway to minimise soil migration and allow ventilation for the deck so it would be more resistant to rot. The idea was that it would also create a series of bug hotels, which would in turn aid biodiversity across the garden. It was an interesting process burying remnants of the old garden in the structure of the new. I have a rather macabre photo of a



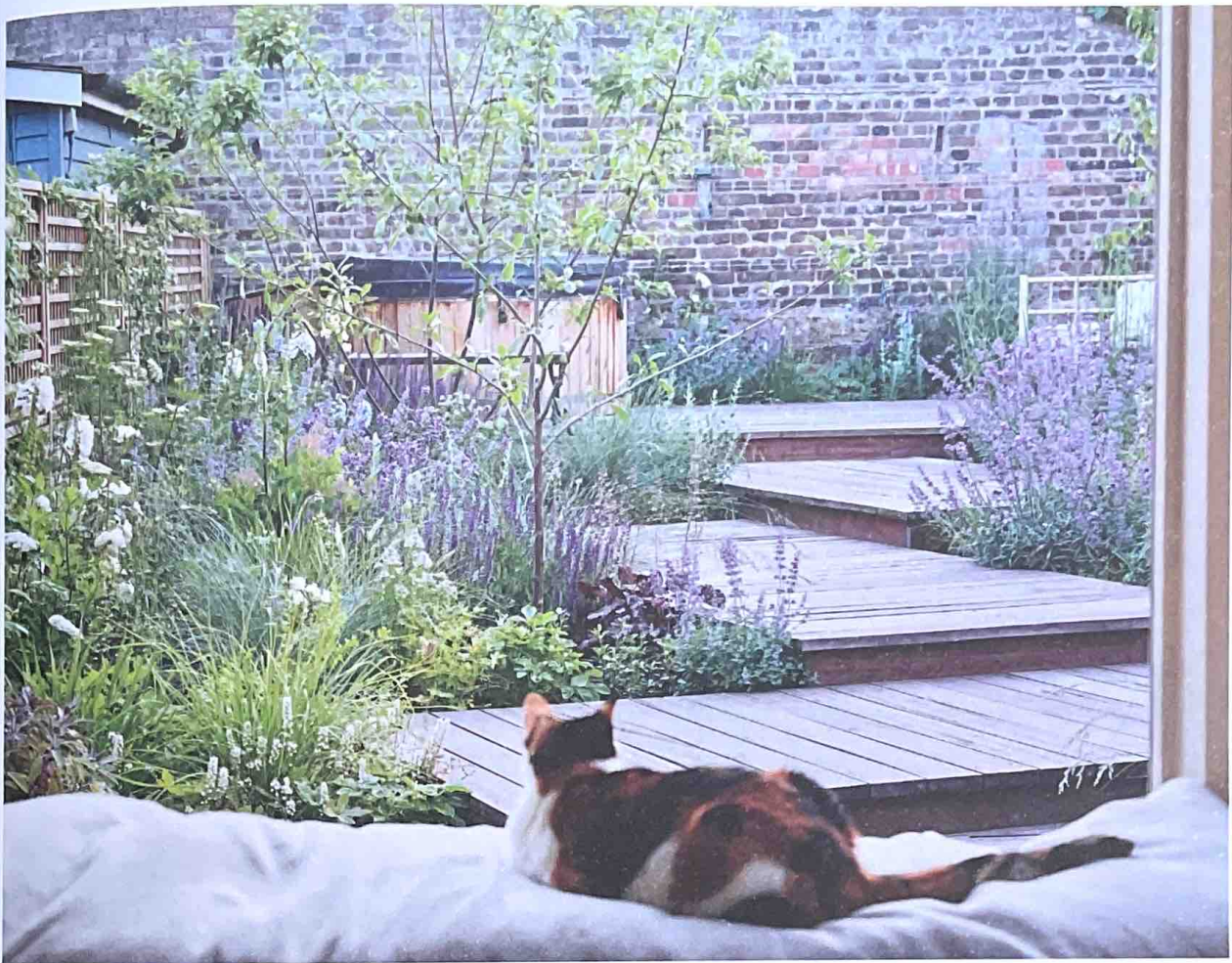
child's broken doll that was dug up and then buried again!

Other strategies for avoiding landfill included reusing the old decking subframe and using metal anchor legs for the new walkway instead of concrete footings or plastic pedestals with a mindful eye on limiting future waste if, as would probably be the case, the garden

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was reinvented again in years to come. We also made a point of using reclaimed timber for the walkway, deck and fencing in an effort to further support an anti-waste objective.

And as for the dreaded plastic plant pots... well, those that could go into



Above Includes a multi-stem *Halesia carolina* and fruiting *Prunus domestica* 'Czar' Below *Astrantia major* 'Florence' and *Poa labillardierei* Opposite *Verbascum chaixii* 'Album' Previous page *Delphinium* 'Blue Bird' and *D.* 'Summer Skies'

domestic recycling (the coloured ones) did and those that couldn't (the black ones) were either collected by a nursery for reuse or sent to be recycled by a specialist plant that could deal with black plastic.

By the end of the project, I am proud to say that not a single thing from the garden had been dumped and not a single skip had been hired. Success. And a lot of lessons learned. I found out it is possible to create a new garden without throwing things away, but it should never be done as a cost-saving exercise. It takes time, and therefore it takes money, to do things consciously and responsibly. The only cost to be saved, and one that is ultimately paramount, is the cost to the environment. **b**