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Cornered by nature

A previously tricky, small, corner plot of this Grade II-listed Georgian house is now a lush, multi-sensory space for dining and entertaining guests, while also welcoming vital pollinators

WORDS SONYA PATEL ELLIS PHOTOGRAPHS RACHEL WARNE

KEY ELEMENTS

What Small, urban garden adjoining a Grade II-listed Georgian house.

Where London.

Size 35 square metres (a corner plot).

Soil London clay, improved and regularly topped up with mulch.

Aspect East-facing.

Special features A dining area and pond.

Designed by Miria Harris, landscape designer (miriaharris.com).

There's a beauty in not knowing what's around the corner – or in this case, what to expect from the three-cornered plot of land attached to the back of the beautiful, three-storey Georgian townhouse, owned by art-collecting couple Gareth and Dave, and transformed by landscape designer Miria Harris into a relaxing urban oasis.

Just seconds from a recently greened-up yet still busy Highbury Corner, through the cool, period-featured corridor to the corner-scape kitchen, the big reveal instantly rewards. With a finely tuned eye for design and curation, and a keen ear for listening to her clients and to the rhythm of nature, Miria has created an impressively multi-fold garden. Within the sanctuary of its boundary walls lies a series of beautifully planted, connecting spaces, each of which leads to an interior dining area beyond. Al fresco entertaining is at the heart of the plan.

“With four entries to the garden from the house and two levels to navigate, the original garden was a mismatch of badly designed steps and poorly laid hard landscaping causing drainage problems and trip hazards,” says Miria. Now, a jauntily angled Californian basketweave of Belgian Vande Moortel bricks knits the whole lower courtyard together, with reclaimed York-stone flags above.

The new, mostly evergreen and successively sensory planting plan, incorporating a wonderfully gnarled *Cotinus coggygria* ‘Royal Purple’ and a mature *Wisteria sinensis*, is similarly cohesive. Ferns – including two of Miria’s favourites, *Polystichum polyblepharum* and

Lush evergreen and perennial planting softens the upper terrace of York flagstones and creates a frame for the pond. Anchoring the corner is a gnarled *Cotinus coggygria* ‘Royal Purple’, its light-catching maroon foliage sets the tone for a succession of flowers in shades of purple, blue and dark red.

You may think shady courtyard gardens are limited when it comes to flowers, but this garden is full of them

▷ *Dryopteris filix-mas* – were a must, with the arching blades of *Hakonechloa macra* providing the perfect textural foil. Miria also ensured a long succession of flowering interest, using *Trachelospermum jasminoides* on the bespoke, anthracite-grey, square-profile trellis to bring a heady, summer scent from June into September.

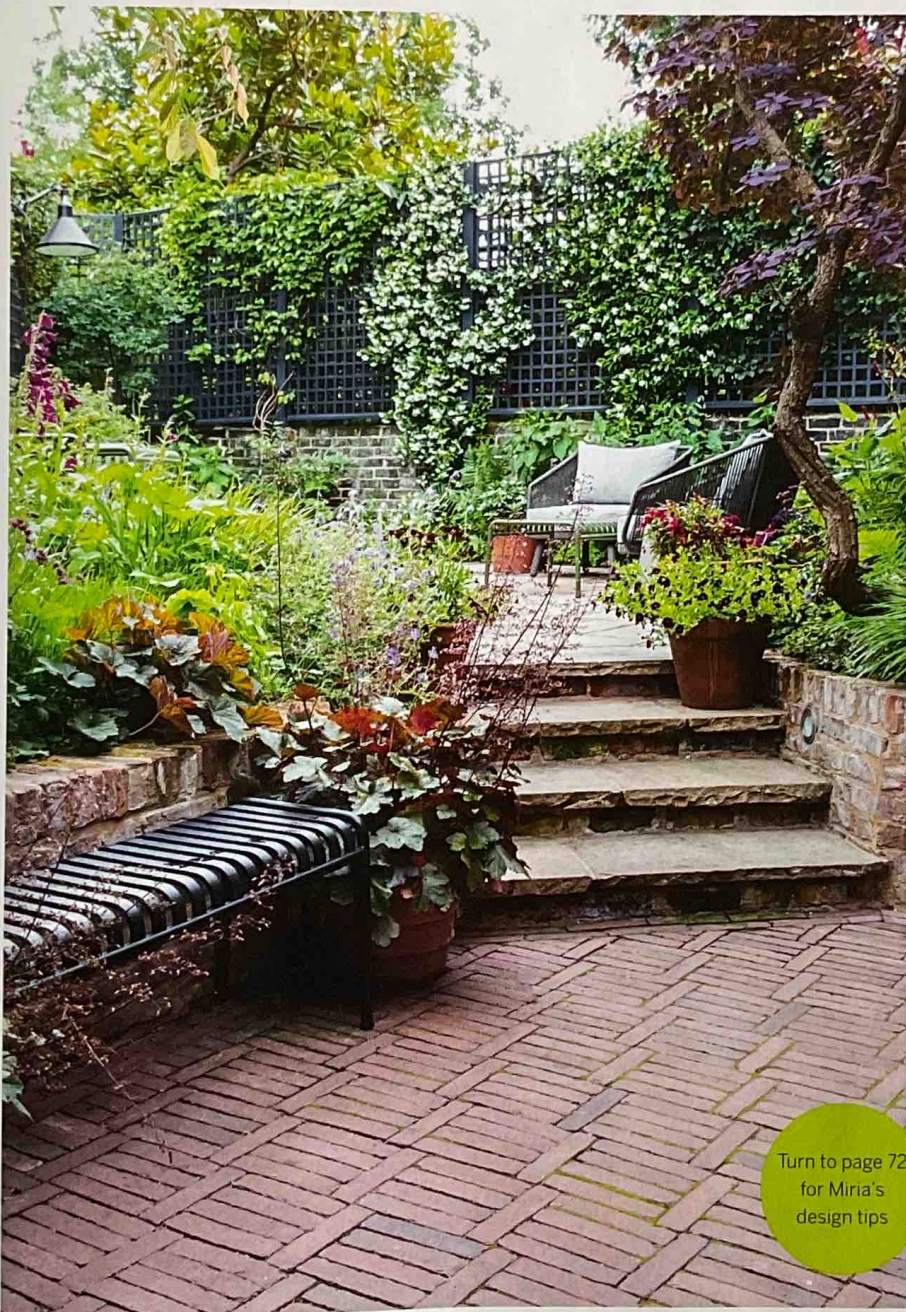
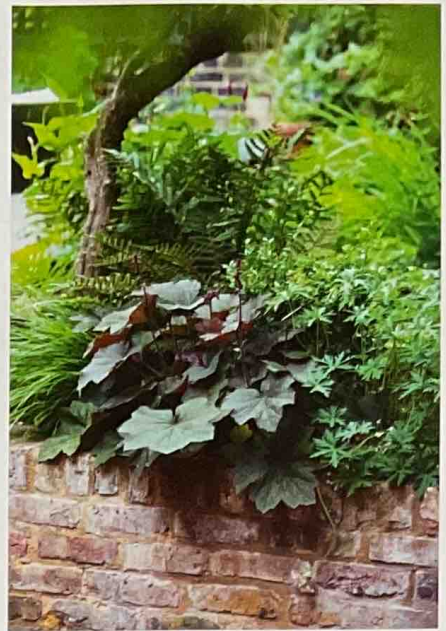
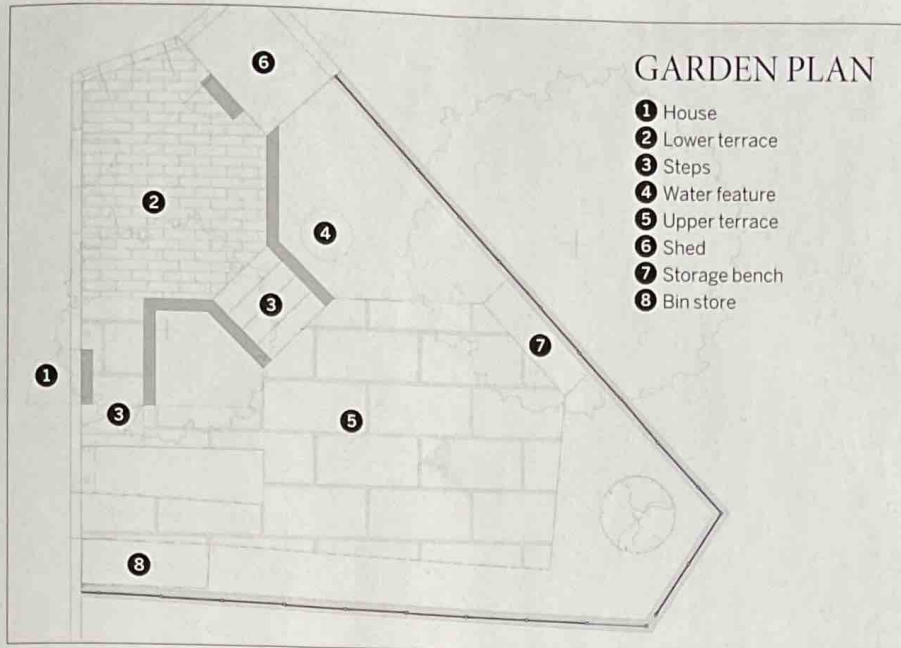
“You may think that shady courtyard gardens are limited when it comes to flowers, but this garden is full of them,” says Miria. The tapestry includes sultry *Rosa* Night Owl (= ‘Wekpurosot’), *Leycesteria formosa* ‘Purple Rain’, with its flamboyant flowers and purple-tinged, crinkly leaves, crimson *Persicaria amplexicaulis* ‘Blackfield’, reddish-purple *Astrantia* ‘Hadspen Blood’, violet-blue *Geranium* ‘Brookside’, and the deep-purple *Penstemon* ‘Raven’, which, alongside red-purple *Fuchsia magellanica*, is particularly attractive to bees: “I make a conscious effort to weave wildlife-friendly plants into my designs,” says Miria.

This elegant palette is mirrored in the bronze-maroon foliage of *Heuchera* ‘Walnut’, a plant that’s repeated through the scheme to light up shadier spots, its tall panicles of frothy, white flowers on stiff stems giving structure to the winter garden. It is joined by autumn showstopper, Chinese Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus henryana*) and a multi-stemmed *Acer griseum* holding its own in an awkward corner.

The final touch of calm comes via a small pond, sunk into a raised bed and housing ornamental fish saved from the old garden. All in all, this is a low-maintenance, relaxing gem of a space but one where the owners can get creative by adding bulbs and annuals to a host of handpicked pots. As Miria muses “the ripple effect of greening up the city, corner by corner, is also powerful” – and that’s something on which we can probably all agree. □



The al fresco dining area is central to the design, furnished with Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec Palissade table and chairs, and a Lampe Gras exterior anglepoise lamp. Shrubs and perennials, including *Leycesteria formosa* ‘Purple Rain’, *Fuchsia* ‘Riccartonii’ and *Geranium* ‘Brookside’, envelope the setting with colour and scent.

**Left**

The lower terrace is defined by a beautifully laid basketweave of bricks, with the red-brown foliage of *Heuchera* 'Walnut' leading the gaze up into the green oasis above. The bespoke, anthracite trellis is the perfect foil for a sequence of pollinator-friendly, flowering climbers, including *Trachelospermum jasminoides* and a climbing hydrangea.

Above top

The clients love ferns and Miria was happy to include favourites *Polystichum polyblepharum* and *Dryopteris filix-mas*. The arching blades of Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra*) are the perfect textural foil, contrasting with a softly palmated heuchera and lacy-leaved geranium.

Above

"In small gardens, all plants have to work hard," says Miria. "*Penstemon* 'Raven' is one such grafter, its deep-purple, white-throated, bell-shaped blooms flower from May to October. The bees are rather fond of its nectar and pollen-rich blooms too." The height of this plant also lends architectural structure.

Turn to page 72
for Miria's
design tips

Designers' tips for small gardens

It's a fine art creating a garden in a tight space. We ask the designers of the small gardens featured in this issue to share their approaches to working with diminutive plots. The square metres may be minimal, but the ideas and techniques that can be employed are many



Consistency is key



Stefano Marinaz favours simplicity and continuity, with fuss-free hard landscaping, organic-shaped paths and planting to blur boundaries.

In small spaces, the textures, finishes and colours of the hard landscaping should knit together. For the project in northwest London, the light-coloured gravel path is a visual continuation of the tiles on the terrace and these blend well with the pots. You can adapt the use of elements such as pots to continue the scheme and give them another function, as we did, transforming an Atelier Vierkant pot into a firepit and coffee table. **We love using paths that meander through the planting.** The width of the path should vary, allowing for different angles and views of the garden. An asymmetric layout provides more viewpoints, and naturalistic planting brings the mind closer to nature. **It is important to green up the garden perimeters** so that it's hard to tell where the property ends. I soften boundaries with common yew, or scented climbers such as *Holboellia latifolia* (shady walls) and *Trachelospermum jasminoides* (sunny walls). Smaller gardens are often shadier, particularly in cities, so I use perennials that stay fairly compact (within 70-80cm in height) to reduce the chance of them leaning towards the light. *Pittosporum tobira* 'Nanum', *Sarcococca confusa* and *Daphne* work well in many situations.

Love thy neighbour



Miria Harris borrows from the surroundings to make a small space feel bigger and evokes the planting of the wider landscape beyond the garden.

Talking to neighbours and getting them on board with any plans is key to a successful small garden design. Privacy is something a lot of people crave, but that doesn't mean small gardens should be mean. Sharing plants (a climber from next door, for instance) or splitting costs can go a long way to improving the experience for all. **A garden that is connected to its environs always feels bigger.** When designing a small garden, I often think about *shakkei*, the Asian design concept of 'borrowed scenery'. The views of neighbouring gardens are important, as are the different views of planting and structures within the garden and how these will look all year round. **Climbing plants are perfect for greening up a small space.** *Trachelospermum jasminoides* is a good choice, or the creamy-yellow *T. asiaticum*. Another favourite plant for small gardens is hellebore and I often use the claret-coloured, double-flowered hybrid 'Pretty Ellen Red'. Its slightly tropical-looking, evergreen foliage can dance between different aesthetics and stylistic bents, and it grows well in pots. Fennel is also a plant I use often. The giant bronze type acts as a great diaphanous plant screen, filtering or teasing a view to another space in the garden.