

Hidden riches

From a small, square, city plot, Stefano Marinaz has created a luscious, multi-textured garden brimming with interest and life

WORDS NATASHA GOODFELLOW PHOTOGRAPHS RICHARD BLOOM

IN BRIEF

What Small residential garden with bespoke feature walls and multi-seasonal interest.

Where London.

Size 10m x 10m.

Soil 10cm of topsoil over chalk; new topsoil brought in for tree plantings.

Climate Temperate.

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

A curving path wends its way around the garden, expanding to accommodate the dining table and chairs, space for additional seating, and a firepit over which the family like to toast marshmallows. At its narrowest point, the path is just 80cm wide, allowing the owners to feel truly immersed in the planting.



Above left Water is one of the best ways of attracting wildlife into a garden. In small bowls such as this, Stefano recommends planting miniature water lilies such as *Nymphaea* 'Pygmaea Helvola' as well as oxygenators such as hornwort (*Ceratophyllum demersum*).

Above right Tiles matching those in the feature walls (see page 52) have been positioned at various points in the path to add interest, and to make a link between the vertical and horizontal planes of the garden. The path is slate chippings, which allow water to permeate into the earth below.

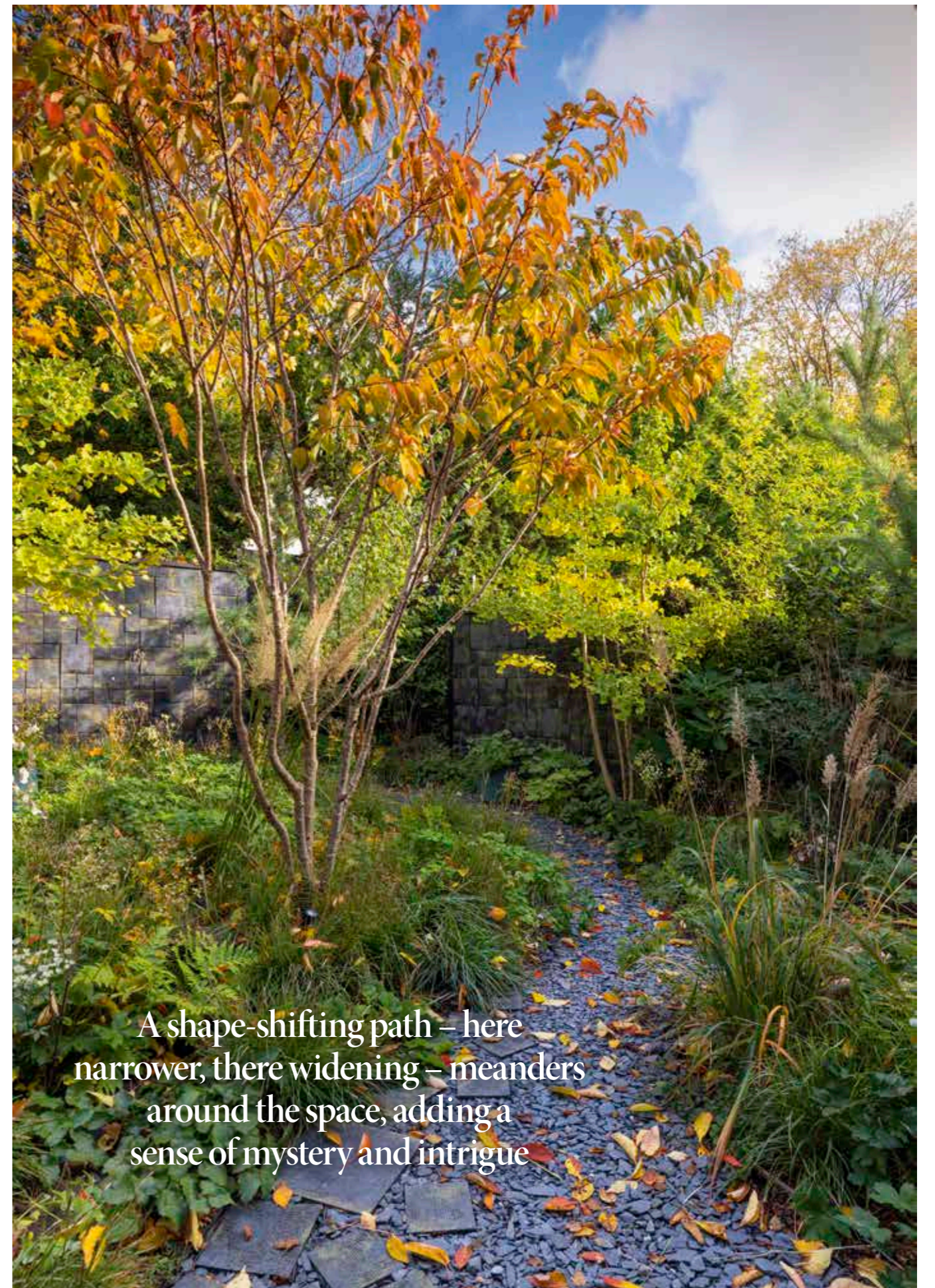
Right Although only 10m x 10m, the garden includes nine trees – three *Ginkgo biloba*, three flowering cherries (*Prunus* 'Kanzan') and three *Pinus sylvestris* 'Watereri'. Together, they ensure the garden has a flow of seasonal interest.

Our friends call it the secret garden," says the owner of this south London garden recently transformed by designer Stefano Marinaz. "You sit here and feel that there's no one else around, which is such a contrast to how it was before." When Stefano first saw the 10m x 10m plot three years ago, it was, as the owner says, "a complete desert": a patch of yellowing lawn and nothing else at all – not even a flower bed or a tree – save the mismatched fencing that surrounded it on all sides, making the space feel even smaller and more hemmed in.

Now, it couldn't be more different. Painted black, the boundaries seem to have all but disappeared. Instead, one's eye is drawn upwards and outwards by the canopy of the nine newly planted trees, in glorious shades of yellow, ochre and russet at this time of year. Three offset feature walls, each individually designed by Stefano in conjunction with Belgian ceramics company Atelier Vierkant, act more like art installations than perimeter markers. And a shape-shifting path – here narrower, there widening – meanders around the space, sometimes visible from the house and at others obscured by the planting, adding a sense of mystery and intrigue. The garden feels organic, natural; and everywhere you look, there is something to catch the eye – the shadows of the needles of the pine trees (*Pinus sylvestris* 'Watereri') against a feature wall; the plumes of Korean feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis brachytricha*) shimmering in the light; and the papery seedheads of honesty (*Lunaria annua* 'Chedglow') dancing in the breeze.

The project got off to a good start right from the very first meeting. The client, who is an architect, invited Stefano over to look at the garden. "The sketch he drew there and then was so fantastic, I knew I didn't have to look for anyone else," she says. She had been clear that she didn't want a 'traditional' garden with a lawn fringed by flower beds, but other than this, a space to eat outside and a firepit, the brief was very open.

A keen proponent of the cooling properties of trees in cities, Stefano used the only real sign of life – a band of mature, densely planted woodland just beyond ▷

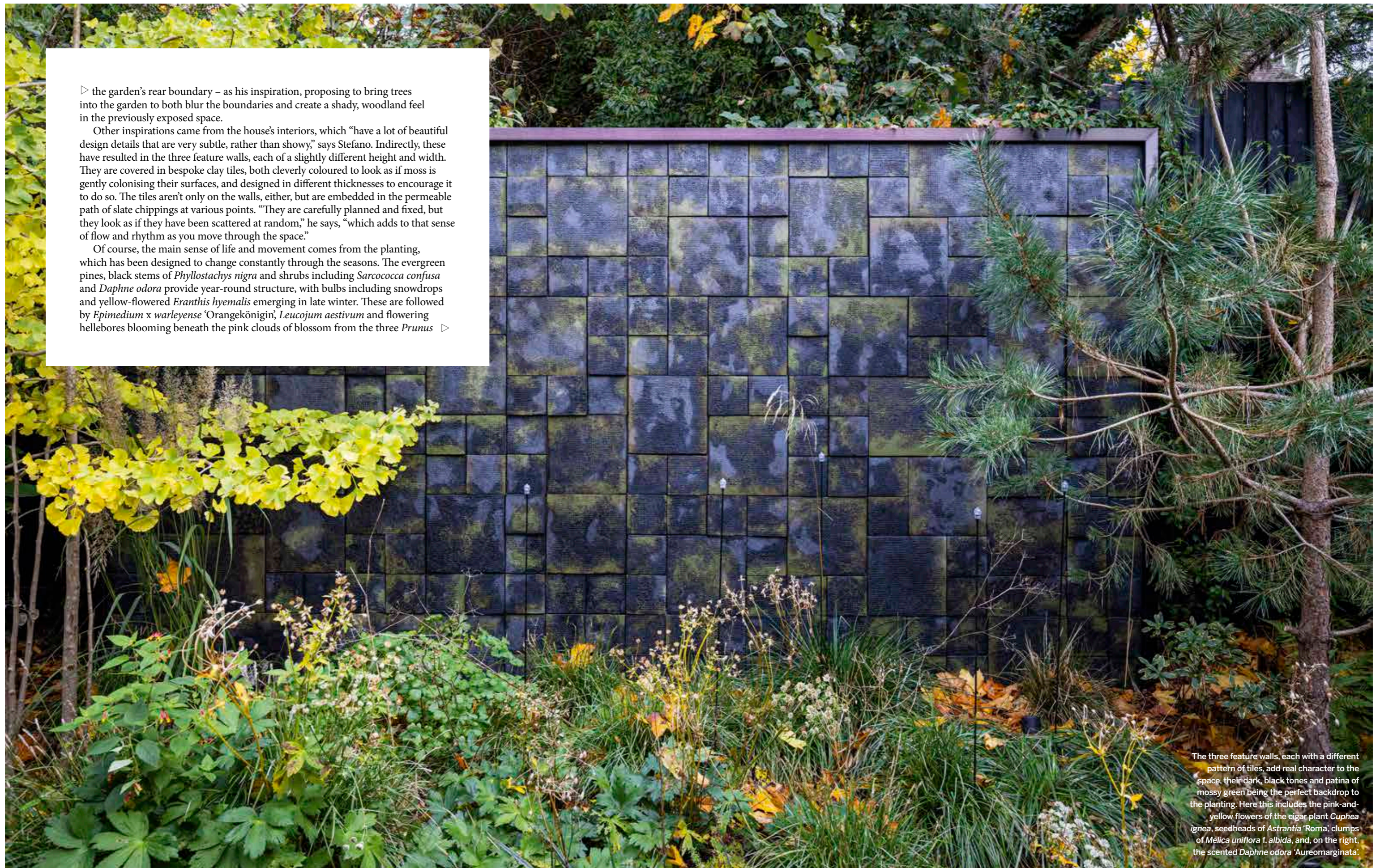


A shape-shifting path – here narrower, there widening – meanders around the space, adding a sense of mystery and intrigue

▷ the garden's rear boundary – as his inspiration, proposing to bring trees into the garden to both blur the boundaries and create a shady, woodland feel in the previously exposed space.

Other inspirations came from the house's interiors, which “have a lot of beautiful design details that are very subtle, rather than showy,” says Stefano. Indirectly, these have resulted in the three feature walls, each of a slightly different height and width. They are covered in bespoke clay tiles, both cleverly coloured to look as if moss is gently colonising their surfaces, and designed in different thicknesses to encourage it to do so. The tiles aren't only on the walls, either, but are embedded in the permeable path of slate chippings at various points. “They are carefully planned and fixed, but they look as if they have been scattered at random,” he says, “which adds to that sense of flow and rhythm as you move through the space.”

Of course, the main sense of life and movement comes from the planting, which has been designed to change constantly through the seasons. The evergreen pines, black stems of *Phyllostachys nigra* and shrubs including *Sarcococca confusa* and *Daphne odora* provide year-round structure, with bulbs including snowdrops and yellow-flowered *Eranthis hyemalis* emerging in late winter. These are followed by *Epimedium x warleyense* 'Orangekönigin', *Leucojum aestivum* and flowering hellebores blooming beneath the pink clouds of blossom from the three *Prunus* ▷



The three feature walls, each with a different pattern of tiles, add real character to the space, their dark, black tones and patina of mossy green being the perfect backdrop to the planting. Here this includes the pink-and-yellow flowers of the cigar plant *Cuphea ignea*, seedheads of *Astrantia* 'Roma', clumps of *Melica uniflora* f. *albida*, and, on the right, the scented *Daphne odora* 'Aureomarginata'.



Above left Two pots from Atelier Vierkant are planted with a mixture of grasses and perennials including *Sesleria* 'Greenlee', pink-and-yellow-flowered *Cuphea ignea* and *Geranium Rozanne* (= 'Gerwat'). The yellow pot was chosen to link with the buttery autumn foliage of the *Ginkgo biloba*.

Above right The tables and chairs are from Italian firm Desalto, their black, contemporary aesthetic an excellent fit for the garden. The Koki Wire chairs take up very little space visually, which is useful in such a small space.

▷ 'Kanzan', before camassias, astrantias and *Geranium Rozanne* (= 'Gerwat') lead the surge into early summer. In high summer, it's the vivid green of the *Ginkgo biloba* and the yellow bell flowers of *Kirengeshoma palmata* that take centre stage, along with developing grasses, while autumn is all about the contrast of the colours of the falling foliage with the dark walls and paths. "I specifically chose a couple of yellow pots to make a visual link with the buttery leaves of the ginkgos – a link that only reveals itself at a certain moment of the year," says Stefano.

Most plants were selected for their ability to handle dappled to deeper shade, which will intensify as the trees develop, and were planted into mounded beds, made with the soil excavated for the path. "The mounds help with water run-off, allow for different types of plants to grow, and make for a much more visually appealing space, adding volume and contours," says Stefano.

Unusually perhaps, his design eschews a dining area immediately outside the house ("When you open the doors, I want to look out not on to furniture but on to nature," he says), placing it instead at almost the furthest point from the house, which affords diners a completely different view of the garden than they have from inside. Visible from both is a small water feature, one of the best ways of attracting wildlife into any space. It is also a fun element for children, and Stefano has made a path of log stepping stones through the planting to allow the clients' daughters to get really close to it – something they love to do. "Every corner of the garden, every half metre or so, there's something different for them to explore," says the owner.

Much as the owner enjoys being in the garden and the feeling of immersion in nature that it provides, she appreciates its aesthetic qualities even more. "It's contemporary and minimalist," she says, "and, although it's so small, there's so much richness and texture." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

To find out more about Stefano Marinaz's work, visit stefanomarinaz.com



8 shady garden plants

- 1 *Calamagrostis brachytricha*** Glossy green leaves that turn yellow in autumn are topped with delicate plumes of flowers from late summer. Height and spread: 1.25m x 75cm. RHS H6, USDA 4a-9b¹.
- 2 *Epimedium x warleyense* 'Orangekönigin'** Heart-shaped foliage with dainty, orange flowers in spring. Happy in most situations as long as it has some moisture. 30cm x 80cm. RHS H6, USDA 4a-8b.
- 3 *Lunaria annua* 'Chedglow'** A beautiful purple-leaved honesty that self-seeds freely from its coin-like seedheads. Stefano buys his seed from Special Plants to ensure it comes true. 75cm x 75cm. RHS H6.
- 4 *Helleborus argutifolius*** Pale-green flowers sit above large and spiny, evergreen leaves (hence its common name of holly-leaved hellebore). 1m x 75cm. RHS H5, USDA 6a-8b.
- 5 *Ginkgo biloba*** Fan-shaped leaves turn golden yellow in autumn. Ensure you buy a male or sterile tree as female trees drop smelly fruits in autumn. 25m x 6m. RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.
- 6 *Pinus sylvestris* 'Watereri'** This dwarf Scots pine responds well to pruning – vital in such a small garden as this, where the lower branches will need to be removed as it grows. 3m x 6m. RHS H7.
- 7 *Sesleria* 'Greenlee'** Its white flowers age to brown above compact mounds of green leaves. 30 x 30cm. RHS H7, USDA 5a-8b.
- 8 *Dryopteris erythrosora*** Throws out new fronds of a beautiful shimmering pink colour, which then age to green. Easy to grow in most situations. 75cm x 75cm. AGM*. RHS H4.

^{*}Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. ¹Hardiness ratings given where available.