

THE ENGLISH GARDEN

SPRING
2026

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PLANT-PACKED SMALL GARDENS

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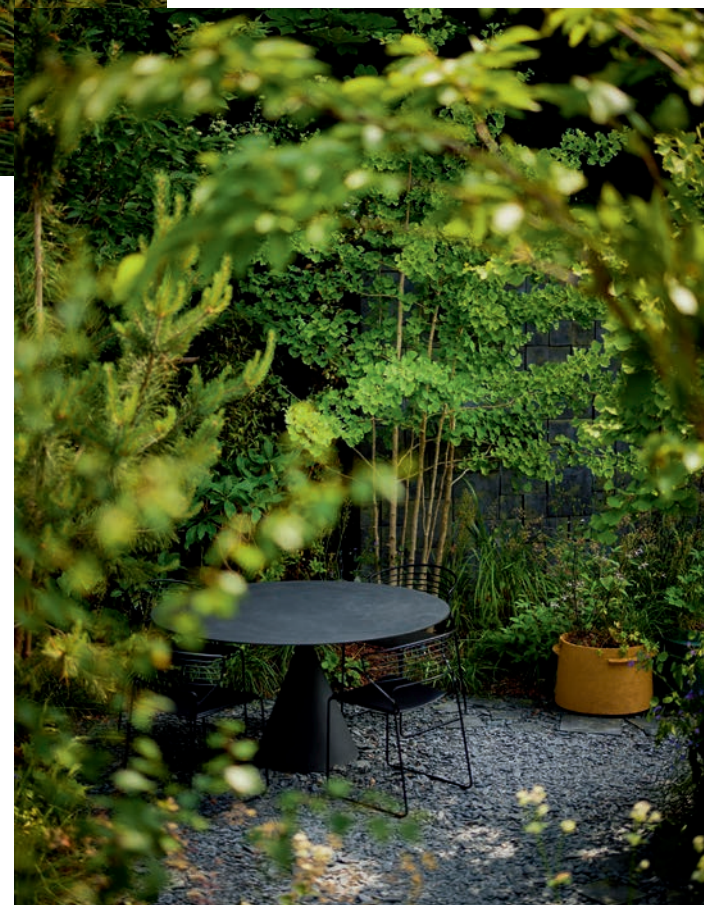
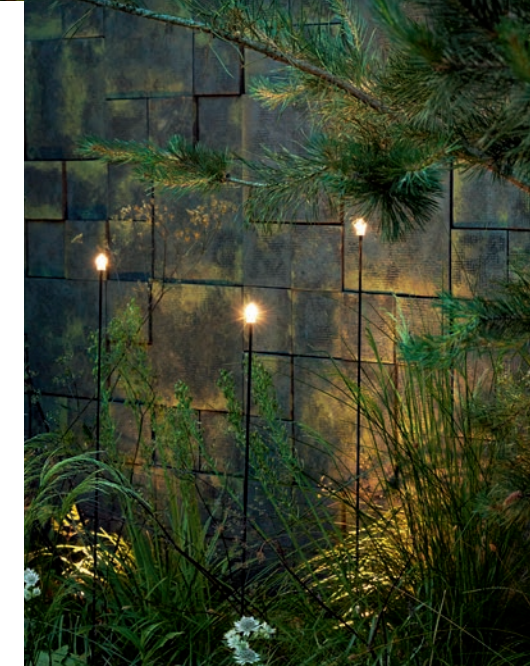
Art of Darkness

In the small, sterile, grassed outdoor space of a new-build property in London, designer Stefano Marinaz introduced a sumptuously moody atmosphere with dark-toned landscaping providing an entrancing backdrop against which plentiful specimen trees and lush green planting really pops

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This image A small water bowl with miniature waterlily, *Nymphaea* 'Pygmaea Helvola'.
Opposite Meandering through beds of dense planting is a slate path.



The words ‘blank canvas’ are often used to describe near-empty and totally undeveloped gardens, but never have they been better applied than to the space that greeted designer Stefano Marinaz when he visited his client’s London home for the first time. A 10m x 10m square, it was entirely laid to grass, a slide and swing used by the client’s daughters the only items diverting the eye from the mismatched fencing on all three sides.

“The house is part of a new development,” explains Stefano, “but the developer hadn’t even put a tree in. It was very sterile.” For the first few years after moving in, Stefano’s client, an architect, concentrated on what she wanted to do inside the house. Only later did she turn her attention to the garden, calling Stefano in. “She liked our design and she gave us full freedom,” he recalls. “She wanted her daughters to enjoy the space, but during our conversation I was encouraged to hear that the

Above Sawn log stepping stones let the client’s daughters get right into the planting and up to the water bowl where toads and dragonflies have made themselves at home.

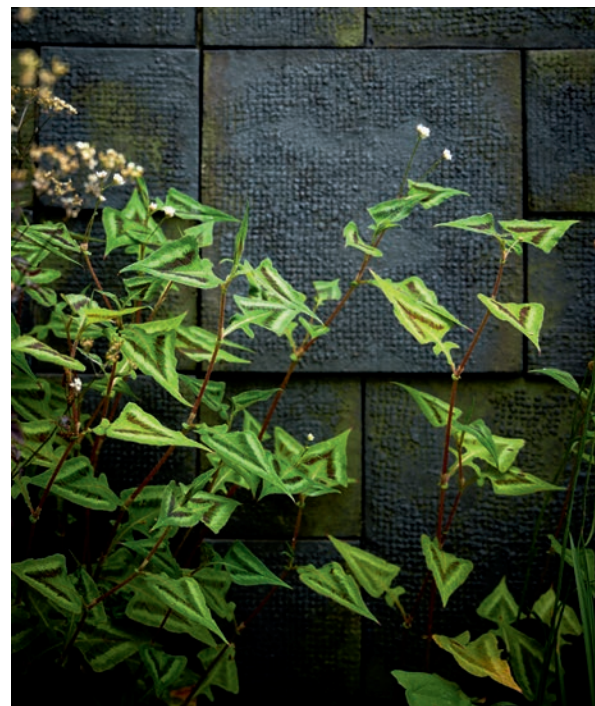
garden itself could be the playground. If the garden is an exploratory space for kids to play in, they don’t necessarily need to have playground equipment.”

And so work began on a complete transformation, turning that square of plain grass into an atmospheric and richly planted space. An area for dining was a priority, but so too was creating a beautiful view the clients could enjoy from inside the house. “It’s cold and rainy for six months of the year in England, so you’re mostly going to see the garden from inside,” says Stefano, wryly. “That’s why the furniture is pushed to the furthest point of the garden, and it’s filtered by meandering paths that make the journey through the garden longer than a straight line from A to B. When you’re inside you can see the picture. You have planting beds that are right there as you open the door.” Evergreens, including pines, daphne and sarcococca, as well as evergreen grasses such as *Sesleria* ‘Greenlee Hybrid’, ensure the view is a predominantly green one all year round.

Clockwise from top left Distinctively fan-shaped ginkgo leaves; bronze fronds of *Dryopteris erythrosora*; tiny ‘firefly’ or lucciola lights, which Stefano sources from Italy, float above the planting; a smart black dining set; the view of the garden from inside the house was carefully considered.

From having no trees at all, the garden now boasts nine: three cherries, three pines (*Pinus sylvestris*), and three *Ginkgo biloba*. “The garden is in full sun but young children need a bit of shade to be able to enjoy the garden, and rather than putting in the usual parasols and umbrellas, we used the power of nature instead. The canopy of the trees filters the light so the garden still has bright shade.” Some may balk at the idea of planting nine trees in a small garden like this, but Stefano has no regrets: “I always say we don’t have enough trees in our gardens. People always ask: ‘What if they grow too big?’ But first, you choose the right trees to put in and second, if they *do* grow too big, you can always cut them down. If a tree becomes an issue in 25 years’ time, you’ll have enjoyed benefits from it, nature will have benefited from it, then you cut it down and start again. Where is the issue? Don’t be afraid of trees!”

The other strikingly different thing about this garden is its hard landscaping in a bravely moody palette: purple-grey slate covers the winding path (chosen by Stefano for its permeability, allowing water to drain freely away rather than creating run-off that needs to be dealt with), while dark bespoke tiles now cover the three feature walls that form the garden’s backdrop. “I like the contrast



of these dark tones with the planting,” Stefano says. “Lush green jumps out much more when it has a darker background.” Come autumn, when the ginkgos’ leaves turn buttery-yellow, they stand out beautifully against the walls’ dark tones, while ochre-yellow pots echo their autumnal leaf colour. “It’s a visual connection that isn’t there all year round; you have to wait to see it,” notes Stefano.

Attention to detail is a trademark of Stefano’s practice. The tiles for the feature walls were made especially for the garden by Belgian company Atelier Vierkant, and were the last element Stefano added to the design. “With the client being an architect, I thought maybe she would welcome a feature wall. The garden could have been done without the walls, but she said “let’s do it”. We don’t like stainless steel

Top right Yellow pots echo the ginkgo trees’ golden autumn foliage.

Above right Arrow-shaped leaves of *Persicaria* ‘Purple Fantasy’ are given extra vibrancy by their dark slate-grey backdrop.

Above left *Astrantias*, *epimediums*, *Geranium* ‘Rozanne’, *kirengeshoma* and white *camassias* make up the fascinating understorey.

and mirror finishes and sparkling clean gardens,” he adds, “so I thought: ‘Why don’t we design tiles that are different sizes and thicknesses so they create a 3D effect?’” He also asked the manufacturer to put splashes of green on them, so the tiles have a slightly weathered appearance already. “Then when moss eventually establishes it will be accepted because it was part of the design intention from the beginning,” Stefano says. “To link the vertical surfaces with the horizontal surfaces, we used some of the same tiles in the paths, too. We try to be minimalistic about the use of different landscaping materials, but we go for high diversity in terms of plants.” ■

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