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# A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Tucked away in the heart of busy west London is a tiny but enchanting garden full of hidden corners, playful elements and unusual woodland plants

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## ZONES OF INTEREST

Different areas of the garden are separated by winding slate pathways. *Amelanchier lamarckii* brings early spring colour

**WOODLAND SANCTUARY**

Alister wanted to add a rich mix of planting to encourage wildlife. Below *Helleborus orientalis*. Opposite Osmanthus hedges ensure the garden feels secluded but not too enclosed and contribute to the woodland feel.



Although Alister Thorpe's mother was a keen gardener, he never really understood her passion until he visited Great Dixter – the iconic garden and horticulture centre in East Sussex – where he was lucky enough to attend a lecture by head gardener Fergus Garrett. As a professional photographer, Alister found Fergus's discussion of form, colour and experimentation utterly captivating, and from that moment on he was converted to the joys of gardening.

Formerly a specialist car photographer, Alister switched to photographing gardens after the Covid-19 pandemic. It meant that by 2023, when he decided to tackle his own garden in Acton, west London, he had developed a keen eye for design. Having worked closely on several projects with garden designer Stefano Marinaz, Alister felt it made sense to enlist his help with the transformation. 'I was familiar with Stefano's restrained, naturalistic style,' says Alister, 'and knew it would work in this garden. Our thinking was quite joined up.'

**THE CHALLENGES**

Wrapped around three sides of Alister's corner house, the garden has large London plane trees on the perimeter, creating deep shade and reducing the options for including sun-loving plants. But this challenge was also an opportunity to seek out more unfamiliar plants that thrive in shade. The path that leads from

the garden gate to the front door runs through the longest part of the garden, which is no more than three metres wide. Prior to the redesign, it cut the garden in two and offered little enticement for visitors to wander and explore.

**THE SOLUTIONS**

Stefano kept in mind the fact that he was designing a garden for a photographer interested in structure and planting detail as well as intriguing vistas and settings for photo shoots. Both he and Alister felt the towering plane trees set the tone for a woodland garden, which they accentuated

by placing low log piles unobtrusively among the deep green planting. An existing osmanthus hedge on one side has been joined with another further round to create a boundary. Contributing to the garden's woodland feel, the hedge is kept at 1.8m high, so the space is secluded but not too enclosed. To make a welcoming entrance for visitors, a path of grey and sandy cobbles leads the way up to the front door and three sandstone doorsteps. The cobblestone path is linked on either side with the slate paths that meander through the garden, with cobbles dropped into them at irregular intervals.

**THE NEW DESIGN**

Thanks to the redesign, this corner plot no longer feels fragmented. From the moment you walk through the gate, you're amid dense planting, while the transition between the



**'You only really know plants once you've grown them'**



#### A QUIET CORNER

Thanks to the redesign, the corner plot no longer feels fragmented and has two separate spaces to sit and relax. Opposite, from top: The emerging fronds of the fern *Dryopteris erythrosora*; *Beesia calthifolia*



#### HOW TO USE GRASSES TO CREATE SPRING INTEREST

- \* Ornamental grasses provide texture, movement and a foil for other spring planting. Aim to include around 15 to 20 per cent of grasses that start growing early in the season. *Melica uniflora* f. *albida* (pictured left), with its fresh green foliage and dainty rice-like flowers, is a great choice.
- \* In smaller gardens, plant grasses in groups of three to five, dotted across beds for balance.
- \* Evergreen perennial grasses offer interest in winter, then continue on to complement early-flowering bulbs. Good examples are *Sesleria* 'Greenlee' hybrid for sunny areas and *Luzula nivea* for shady spots.

\* The densely tufted bluish-grey leaves of *Sesleria nitida* provide subtle colour as well as structure.

\* Many ornamental grasses, including those above, produce attractive flowers in spring or later in the year.

cobbles and the slate draws you onwards in a choice of directions. There are three distinct zones – the entrance and two seating areas. One has a sofa, chair and coffee table set-up, and the other, in the sunniest part of the garden by the kitchen, has a bistro table and chairs. Mature specimen trees mark turning points, while empty pots add another element to the design. 'I love unfilled pots as accents among the planting,' Alister says.

#### THE PLANTING

The immediate impact of the garden is one of variety and scale, with tiny treasures tucked away amid larger, bolder plants, some almost outsized for such a small space. 'I'm very keen on unusual plants that contribute to the overall effect,' explains Alister, who felt that the plants he chose should be sculptural, have a good form and be 'do-ers' in terms of structure and character.

Structural trees and shrubs include acers and a prunus, which give two seasons of interest, *Rubus lineatus*, *Styrax japonicus* (which Alister grew from seed) and several early spring flowering *Amelanchier lamarckii*. An *Edgeworthia chrysantha* 'Red Dragon' is tucked into a corner by the house and underplanted with hellebores and a spiky low-growing, winter-flowering *Mahonia* 'Soft Caress'. Oak-leaved hydrangeas, *H. quercifolia* 'Snow Queen' and 'Snowflake', and the dwarf California grass *Sesleria* 'Greenlee' add foliage texture. The purple

stems of *Lunaria annua* 'Chedglow' and the early orange fronds of the fern *Dryopteris erythrosora* create contrast amid the sea of green, while a large *Helleborus argutifolius* is treated more like a shrub than a perennial. Jewel-like detail is provided by the golden-leaved

*Epimedium* x *warleyense* 'Orankekönigin', leucojum, muscari, fritillaries and silver-leaved *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Jack Frost'. Wall climbers, including budding *Akebia quinata*, help to connect the house with the garden.

#### THE RESULT

Despite the garden's modest size, Alister admits that his wife Lucy was 'mildly traumatised by the amount I spent!' He splashed out on installing an irrigation system and planting mature trees, and didn't skimp on other planting to create a rich woodland tapestry that encourages wildlife. The joy for Alister is that he now constantly interacts with the space, whether he is pushing his bike to the shed at one end or settling down for a drink in the opposite sunlit corner. As well as providing a constant subject for photography, his garden has undoubtedly helped him to better understand plants. As he concludes: 'You only really know them once you've grown them.'

Find out more at [alisterthorpe.co.uk](http://alisterthorpe.co.uk) and [stefanomarinaz.com](http://stefanomarinaz.com). The garden will be open under the National Garden Scheme on 7 June 2026. See Acton Gardens, London W3 group at [ngs.org.uk](http://ngs.org.uk)