

Fits the hill

A garden designer has made every centimetre count in her small but perfectly planted north London garden ►

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS WORDS SUE BRADLEY

Three distinct levels, each with its own purpose, have replaced the sloping garden that Jilayne Rickards first tackled.



ABOVE LEFT Towering foxgloves, a reminder of Jilayne Rickards' Cornish childhood, together with *Ceanothus griseus* var. *horizontalis* 'Yankee Point', *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation', *Geum* 'Mrs J. Bradshaw', *Centranthus ruber* and *Persicaria microcephala* 'Red Dragon' create a vibrant mix in a border. **ABOVE RIGHT** Acers, prized for the changing colours of their decorative leaves, soften the sharp edges and modern lines of the small patio.

Today, Jilayne Rickards' small city plot is full of colour, texture and interest, and provides an ideal setting for relaxing and entertaining. It couldn't be more different from the previous steeply sloping grassy area strewn with rubble and dominated by a rampant grapevine, which she took on when she moved into her Edwardian terraced property in Muswell Hill 12 years ago.

Embarking on a career in garden design after training at Capel Manor College, however, it was actually a perfect early project to show prospective clients just what she was capable of achieving. 'It was just a slope when I arrived,' Jilayne recalls. 'Muswell Hill has hill in its name for a good reason. The level here changes by about 1.2m, which in a small space can be a little bit challenging. The garden we inherited was a jumble of nothing - the previous owners had made their own wine, but the vine was a rampant thing with a huge trunk.'

Introducing hard landscaping that would create three distinct levels, but not look imposing, was Jilayne's first step towards creating harmony. A flat terrace area large enough to accommodate a six-seater table was created next

to the kitchen. This is enclosed by a short retaining wall, with steps leading up to a middle level of grass and richly planted herbaceous borders. Stepping stones that complement rather than diminish the size of the lawn lead to steps that climb to the highest level, a more secluded and secretive section with an arch of the chocolate-scented climber *Akebia quinata*, and shrubs such as cornus. Shaded by neighbours' mature trees, this area accommodates two seats as well as a carefully screened shed. 'This is where I come to hide,' says Jilayne.

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Despite its diminutive size, the garden is planted so that it packs a punch all year, with each specimen carefully positioned for certain impact in its chosen season. Evergreens provide year-round structure, while versatile performers such as acers bring texture and seasonal colour changes. Snowdrops and hellebores splash the top level with colour during early spring, before a towering horse chestnut grows leaves and casts this part of the garden in shade. The terrace is planted with bamboo, grasses and acers to give a contemporary touch. Meanwhile, herbaceous borders are packed with a succession of purples,

whites, splashes of blue and occasional dashes of reds against a backdrop of greens, with each plant chosen to complement its neighbours and, if necessary, graciously hide any imperfections as flowering seasons come to an end.

'I am a great follower of Beth Chatto and her right plant, right place motto,' she says. 'I play with planting all the time. With so little space, this garden has to be planted millimetre by millimetre, and I have to think very carefully about what goes in, as every centimetre counts. It is important to think

about the times of year that different plants will be flowering. I love alliums, but while the

seedheads look attractive long after the flower has faded, the leaves and stems do not look so good,' Jilayne says. 'I plant things such as geraniums close by to mask these less attractive parts. I cannot afford to have any scrappy leaves on show in a garden where the borders are just 70cm wide.'

Jilayne's garden is also a textbook example of making the most of light. Childhood hours spent watching changes along the Cornish coast have made her aware of how the sun moves around her house throughout the day, something she picks up with the carefully



ABOVE LEFT The multi-textured and multi-height planting has been carefully designed so that it can be enjoyed both inside and out. **ABOVE RIGHT** Striking black bamboo *Phyllostachys nigra* stands out against its background, providing interest and movement in Jilayne's outdoor eating area. **BELOW** Stepping stones have been chosen instead of a solid path through the lawn to avoid diminishing the garden's already small proportions.

placed acers, grasses, bamboos and a eucalyptus that casts dappled shade on the lawn.

Another factor Jilayne has had to bear in mind is the garden's microclimate, influenced by its fences, tree canopies and its inner London location. 'We have dense shade at one end but this part of the garden is lovely in the winter sunshine, when the leaves have fallen. We have big changes in climate in the garden and I have learned the hard way that plants have to be able to survive where they are growing. At the same time, I'm not afraid to push the boundaries. For example, ceanothus likes full sun, but here it has only half a day and flowers quite well.'

All in all, the garden serves as a multi-functional space for Jilayne and her family, as well as a striking shop window for her thriving garden design business. 'The garden was carefully thought out, and I haven't been afraid to make changes along the way,' she says. 'I like the colour scheme - I find it quite subtle and restful. My garden is a place just to be; somewhere I go to feel quiet and peaceful.'

Jilayne will not be opening her garden in 2011. For more details of her work, see her website: www.jilaynerickards.com



Turn over for garden notebook ►

The notebook

Jilayne Rickard's garden in Muswell Hill measures just 20m x 6.5m and lies on a sloping site overshadowed by fencing and mature trees. It has improved clay soil and is northeast facing



PAINT THE TOWN GARDEN RED

A wall painted a rich shade of red adds colour to the patio area next to the kitchen, and looks particularly striking in autumn (*above*). It also acts as a link to an interior hallway, decorated with the same hue. Attractive storage boxes used for stowing garden paraphernalia double up as seats, a good example of Jilayne's careful use of space.

FOCUS THE EYE

A seat created from driftwood with three simple silver planters creates an unusual focal point within the top level of the garden (*below*). Trellis is carefully used to screen a small garden shed.



COOL AND GREEN SPACE

Golden-stemmed bamboo (*Pseudosasa japonica*) helps add a contemporary feel to a seating area in the shady top part of the garden (*left*) and screens the wooden fence behind. Ferns also thrive in this area.

JILAYNE'S TOP DESIGN TIPS

- **Try to think of an overall scheme** (such as contemporary or traditional, or a colour scheme) and relate the garden back to this as much as possible to pull it all together.
- **Make sure the layout is practical**, and if space is an issue, don't cram too much in and compromise - a patio or terrace that is too small will always feel cramped.
- **Take careful note of how the sun falls** on various parts of the garden at different times, and use plants such as purple acers, bamboos and grasses to catch the light.
- **The sayings 'less is more' and 'keep it simple'** most certainly apply. Make a list of your favourite plants that you wish to include, and then be very brave, and take half of them away - it really will look better, I promise.
- **Be aware of how a plant will look** when it is past its flowering period and then choose some neighbouring plants that will help hide any unattractive elements, such as dying leaves.



CONTACTS

RECOMMENDED GARDENS TO VISIT

- **The Beth Chatto Gardens** See where we all got the motto 'right plant, right place'. Elmstead Market, Colchester, Essex CO7 7DB. www.bethchatto.co.uk
- **The Hannah Peschar Sculpture Garden** A woodland sculpture garden. Black and White Cottage, Standon Lane, Ockley, Surrey RH5 5QR. Tel: +44 (0)1306 627269. www.hannahpescharsculpture.com
- **Judith Glover's garden** This designer and botanical illustrator's plot is open by appointment only. 46 Dukes Avenue, London N10 2PU. Tel: +44 (0)20 8444 1999. www.judithglover.com

NURSERIES NEARBY

- **Clockhouse Nursery** Shrubs and perennials mostly grown on site. Forty Hill, Enfield, Middlesex EN2 9EU. Tel: +44 (0)20 8363 1016. www.clockhousenursery.co.uk
- **Tendercare** Mature and formal hardy plants. Southlands Road, Denham, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB9 4HD. Tel: +44 (0)1895 835544. www.tendercare.co.uk