

Throwing away the lawn mower

With a bit of help and three years of hard work, **Nadine Harrison** turned her tangled up Edinburgh garden into an unusual, beautifully planned space



THE BEST place to view Nadine Harrison's narrow Edinburgh garden is from the platform that leads out of her newly installed French kitchen windows.

From this first-floor vantage point, there is a bird's eye view over the long narrow site laid out with a crisp framework of gravel paths backed with shrubs. At this time of year the trees and shrubs are bright with autumn foliage.

This mix of red, yellow, orange and green is the result of three years of hard work and plenty of imagination. In 2005 Nadine's 100m x 25m plot, which is sandwiched in a row of similar gardens, was filled with a mat of dense weeds and overgrown shrubs that threatened to obscure the paths that once ran down the garden. Wild strawberries were ripening everywhere, and the beds were filled with ground elder and couch grass. Half way down the garden was a crumbling rockery and an old greenhouse, while a compost bin sat outside the back door occupying a sunny spot best kept for a patio or sitting area.

Worse, the garden could only be reached down a set of steep, narrow internal stairs and through the basement. Since buying the house, Nadine's busy professional schedule had prevented her from doing anything to the garden so in desperation she called on the help of Carolyn Grohmann of Secret Gardens.

"The temptation had been to lay out borders down both sides of the garden, but Carolyn took time to talk

'It's been great fun to challenge my original concept of a garden laid out in straight lines with rows of plants'

to me about my needs and over time gently persuaded me it was all right to try things out." Carolyn admits that when she first inspected the site her heart sank. But after consultation with Nadine, a plan began to take shape for a low-maintenance garden that would develop slowly with an eye on the budget. With the help of contractors Elspeth and Ian Pratt of Garden Rescue the project took three years to complete.

Nadine had already made plans for an exterior staircase to lead from a new set of French windows opening from the kitchen. Because the stairs were on the north-facing side of the house it was agreed that the proposed timber steps were an unsuitable choice: lack of sun meant the steps would have become wet and slippery during the winter. The idea of using metal steps was discarded amid fears that they would look too much like a fire escape and eventually Western Red Cedar was used and each step was painted with non-slip paint.

The garden work progressed in measured stages as

Carolyn explains: "Some of the overgrown shrubs were earmarked for removal, but as each one came out the next one looked shabby and eventually all the plants in the garden were either removed or severely pruned back." Once the winding parallel paths were laid out and edged, Ian and Elspeth embarked on the lengthy task of hand-weeding the borders rather than spraying the whole garden with weed killer. A thick mulch of reshredded mushroom compost was applied to the soil in readiness for planting and an awkward patch of lawn was removed, much to Nadine's delight: "Throwing away the lawn mower was seriously liberating," she says, adding that to keep costs down she bought the smallest of every type of plant and waited for it to grow.

Once the beds were ready the pair worked on a planting scheme based on shrubs that would create structure and also provide interest during the year. "We worked to a policy of seasonal shopping," Carolyn recalls. "We took several trips out to Binny Plants to select unusual plants that appealed to Nadine's sense of humour and taste." As a result, they ended up with "the most expensive plant in the garden", a 10ft tall cardioertrums, which reigns over the bog garden in spring. This damp area, at the foot of the garden, is all that is left of the burn that once ran at the foot of the row of plots and is now channelled underground. The shady and moist soil is suitable for a range of plants including *Aruncus dioicus* →



Clockwise from top right: the wooden arbour behind purple *cotinus* and *Euonymus europaeus*; *Euonymus alatus*, asters and various shrubs; a bench near *bergenia*, *Iris laevigata* *Variegata* and *Cornus Mas Variegata*; *Euonymus alatus*; *crocosmia*; *Malus Golden Hornet*. Opposite page, left to right: *Rhus typhina* *Dissecta*; *cotinus*

← 'Goat's Beard', the Ostrich Fern *Matteuccia Struthiopteris* and *Iris laevigata* 'Variegata'.

Shrubs that take centre stage at this time of the year include *Rhus Typhina Lacinata*, *Amelanchier Canadensis*, acers and black-stemmed *Hydrangea Macrophylla Nigra* and varieties of *Acer palmatum*. In the spring, *Magnolia stellata* and scented *Philadelphus coronaries* have proved reliable performers, while wands of *Buddleia Globosa* attract butterflies at the end of the summer. Here, the main feature is a wooden arbour that Nadine found at a garden centre in the Borders, painted lavender and surrounded with late-flowering purple asters and grasses, later adding a bird bath.

The last part of the garden to be completed was the

patio at the foot of the cedar steps, now a feature in their own right. By this point Nadine was so enthused by her garden that she wanted to grow her own decorative vegetables. Carolyn designed a series of raised beds around the patio, where tomatoes, salads, runner beans, onions, leeks, peas, potatoes, carrots, broad beans, spinach and purple sprouting broccoli mix with sweet peas, nasturtiums and sunflowers. "I've enjoyed doing something unconventional," Nadine says. "It's been great fun to challenge my original concept of a garden laid out in straight lines with rows of plants." ❀

Carolyn Grohmann, *Secret Gardens* (0131-443 5818, www.secretgardensdesign.co.uk)
Garden Rescue (01875 615 319)



Left to right: *humulus lupulus Aureus* (golden hop) on the wooden arbour; geraniums on the terrace; asters (*Michaelmas daisies*)

Vegetable patch

JUST BECAUSE it is getting colder, it does not mean that there is nothing to do in the garden. Christopher Lloyd, the famous gardener and writer, said winter was a time to settle down in the cosiness of the indoors with a seed catalogue and plan what to grow next season.

There is a lot to be said for this. The experiences of this year should colour one's planning for the following year. Perhaps there is something you have an idea about, a new planting scheme, for example, that you can start to research now. However, before you do that, there is some work to be done.

It is always a good idea to leave things tidy for winter. Clear away the remains of any plants that have finished cropping, taking down frames and canes and any other supports. Pick any squashes, courgettes and pumpkins that might be left, before the first frosts creep in, and pick any parsnips, potatoes left underground and leafy vegetables, such as kale, or cabbages above ground. Continue to dig, and dig in any green manure or compost that will rot down and add to the richness of

the soil over the winter. Remember to maintain compost heaps over winter.

Then start ordering seed catalogues and scouring the internet, planning for next year. Don't order whatever you fancy. Remember you have to rotate your vegetables to prevent disease and to add vigour to your plants. Think about what you are going to put where, and when you have a plan, look through last year's seeds. These should last at least one year if stored in a cool, dry place. Store in a tin, and date and label any kept in envelopes and paper bags. You can also collect seeds from your own and other gardens, and swap with friends.

You can also plant-out any cabbages sown last month, but you must cover them with enviromesh to protect them from hungry birds. You can also start sowing broad beans to plant-out at the end of the month. They will form strong roots ready for spring flowering. Things are slowing down, but the cycle of growth goes on.

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