

Words **Antoinette Galbraith** Photographs **Ray Cox**

Where there's a hill...

When Anne and David Dyer set about creating a country garden in the city, one thing stood in their way: the steep slopes threatening to engulf their house



ANNE DYER'S garden combines the charm of the countryside - curved herbaceous borders packed with plants, an open lawn and a vegetable plot - with the advantages of being a bus ride from Edinburgh's Princes Street. The scene is set by the panoramic views. Built in 1930, the house perches on a hillside with vistas over Edinburgh Castle, the Firth of Forth and as far as Berwick Law on a clear day.

Despite this wonderful setting, the site presented Anne and her husband David with many difficulties when they moved here from Norfolk three years ago. The terraces that rose steeply from behind the house were prevented from collapsing into it by a "bulging dry-stone wall" and the network of paths that led round the garden were slippery and treacherous, especially in the winter. There was nowhere for the couples' two daughters to play ball games.

Worse, an enormous, but brand new Swiss chalet dominated the garden.

Anne was clear about what she wanted and this included incorporating some of the things she had learnt in her previous two-acre garden in Norfolk, scaling them down to suit city living. "I wanted to be able to grow plants and vegetables, and also have a greenhouse," she says, "and David wanted somewhere for ball games. A decent retaining wall behind the house was a necessity."

Realising she needed help, she contacted Carolyn Grohmann of Secret Garden Design, whose first job was to measure the space. "The terrace was almost too steep and too frightening to measure for height," she says. Her plan involved lining the steps up the terrace, with the back door creating a central axis that has opened up a view through the house and up the hill to the back of the garden. Here, a spacious lawn sets off a series of curved herbaceous borders.

On the west side of the site, Carolyn laid out a second, circular lawn also backed with herbaceous borders. This almost secret garden is entered under an arch and the focal point is another rose-covered arch that rises above a white bench. Despite the wet and muddy conditions, the landscaping was completed in record time thanks to the generosity of the neighbours who were building a house and kindly allowed access to a JCB.



The slippery paths were replaced on the west by flagstones edged with cobbles, reflecting the curves of the borders and defining the beds in a soft, fluid movement. The chalet was sold and replaced with an elegant octagonal summerhouse painted a soft green and the lawns were sown. "After the lawn was laid we were left with a vast expanse of brown desert," recalls Anne. "I found it quite overwhelming. But Carolyn really helped with the planting plan."

At Carolyn's suggestion, trees and shrubs were used to create structure and shelter. The garden was once the orchard of a larger neighbouring house so Anne was keen to retain some of the original atmosphere. She started with apple and plum trees before adding contorted hazel, acers, willow and Amelanchier to an existing weeping pear, *Pyrus salicifolia* and, surprisingly, a cordyline - the latter appears to benefit from the good drainage. "I had doubts about the cordyline because of the wind," she recalls, "but it seems happy." Next came shrubs including *fatsia*, *choisya*, *mahonia*, red tipped *photinia* and *Berberis 'Rose Glow'* combined with a collection of Anne's favourite spring-flowering *wigelea*.

Herbaceous plants in a palette of purples, pinks and blues on the west side of the garden came next. These include hardy geraniums, dianthus and lavender backed by drifts of *Stachys lantana* and run into warmer *crocsmia*, *rudbeckia* and deep red



'Wicker teepees and curled metal supports are smothered in mange tout and sugarsnap peas'

Clockwise from above: a curved flagstone path is edged with cobbles; a mixture of shrubs grows on a bed sloping towards the house; heuchera in a pot; orange foliage of *Spiraea Gold Flame*

helenium. Having just "discovered grasses", they are now packed in empty spaces and are allowed to self-seed with the occasional poppy. "Things will always be different in the garden - next year there is always a surprise."

The high point is the vegetable plot, laid out in a symmetrical design featuring four wood-edged beds separated by gravel paths. Height comes from wicker teepees and curled metal supports smothered in mange tout and sugarsnap peas, eaten raw by Anne's daughters. One bed is devoted to King Edward potatoes, and there are beetroot with courgettes and strawberries overflowing into the top of the main herbaceous border. Bright orange marigolds ensure that when Anne grows carrots she never has carrot fly. The compact greenhouse is packed with tomatoes and cucumber and there are plenty of sweet peas to pick for the house.

Box punctuates the beds and has been used to edge two of them. "I brought the box with me from Norfolk," Anne says. "I'd been growing it from cuttings so I just potted it on." She was delighted, on arrival in Edinburgh, to find that the former owners had left a series of topiary olive trees in ceramic pots. These olives, which winter outside in the shelter of the →

Garden Tips

In association with Dobbies Garden Centres

Herbs for Decoration and Flavour

There's nothing like the taste of your own, home-grown supply of fresh herbs, plus they also look fantastic and are so easy to grow that every garden should have some. The foliage and flowers of herbs are beautiful and varied, providing lots of interest and colour right through the year. Even their seed heads are attractive and look fabulous in the frosts. To help you start your very own herb garden here are a few tips you should remember:

- Herbs do best in a hot, sunny spot where they'll make the highest level of the aromatic oils that give them their amazing smell and taste.
- They prefer well-drained soil, and are perfect for growing in pots near the kitchen door for ease of access, especially in bad weather.
- Select a good variety of herbs - annuals include basil, coriander, and marjoram whilst perennials include mint, fennel and thyme and woody plants such as rosemary, lavender and sage.
- Like all plants they enjoy regular feeding throughout the growing season but otherwise take very little looking after.
- Some perennial herbs, such as mint and lemon balm, can be invasive but they can be kept under control by planting them in a big pot and sinking this into the ground which helps contain the roots.
- If your space is limited, herbs work really well in containers, window boxes or even hanging baskets. Use a good multi-purpose compost, and make sure they have good drainage.
- Be sure to grow herbs based on your own personal taste, such as those you like to cook with or those you like to put into salads and other meals.





Above: Lady's Mantle flows over a stone bench built into a terrace wall; onions feature in a raised vegetable bed that is surrounded by box hedging with photinia and cordyline beyond

← house, now line the patios on both sides of the house; the patio on the west is reserved for children and is accessed from the garden by a dramatic, metal spiral staircase.

This half-acre garden is managed with four invaluable extra hours' help a week, with Anne doing "as much as I can when I have time. The garden is the perfect place to relax. No one asks anything of me when I am out here. I can just potter around and you always achieve something, even if it's just pulling up a few weeds." *

Carolyn Grohmann (0131-443 5818, www.secretgardensdesign.co.uk)

Cameron Elliott of Primo Landscaping (07946 819222) "did the back-breaking, very muddy part of the work during the continuous deluge that was February of that year"



Plant sense

AN ATTRACTIVE front garden is a great way to start your day. It is the first thing you see when you step out your front door. Walking through it every day probably means you spend more time in it than you do in the back.

But how many good front gardens do you see? Even in leafy areas, there can be a dearth of good design. That is because front gardening is particularly challenging, thanks to space restrictions such as the need for parking, areas for refuse and recycling bins, boundary and security issues. Plants tend to get forgotten or are considered less of a priority. This is a shame, as they can soften areas to make your home sit more comfortably in its surroundings.

Things to consider:

- Refuse and recycling bins can be hidden with some creative thinking.
- Choose hard landscaping materials and plants that are the same or are complementary in material or colour as your neighbours' gardens.
- Don't overdo it. Less is quite often more. In a small space, try not to use more than three types of hard

landscaping material to prevent it looking cluttered.

- Make sure your flower-beds are lower than your driveway or paths, so they benefit from water running off the hard surfaces.
- Gravel is a great low-maintenance, relatively cheap ground cover, which will suppress weeds if laid generously over a landscape fabric.
- Choose a gravel size that suits your needs. Smaller, more angular gravel is recommended for driveways and paths.
- Remember plants! There are some wonderfully hard-working low-maintenance specimens out there.
- Hedges take a while to establish, but long-term are cheaper than a fence.
- If you have an attractive front door, frame it with planters in proportion.
- If you don't like the facade of your home, consider climbers.

Here's to more people valuing their front gardens and taking longer to walk down their garden path.

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