

at Home

SCOTLAND on SUNDAY

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CHILD'S PLAY

A garden the children
will love that works
for grown-ups too

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Best of both

Carolyn Grohmann wanted her garden to work as a play area for her young daughter as well as providing a space for adults to enjoy too

WHEN CAROLYN and Alexis Grohmann moved to their house in Edinburgh's Craiglockhart, the rectangular back garden fascinated Carolyn. She was also intrigued by the long, south-facing space at the front and found that all she wanted to do was draw up plans to make the design her own.

"At the time I was studying for a PhD in history, but I started planning the garden right away," she says. "I always said to everyone, 'If the garden is going well, the PhD isn't!'"

With one daughter, Cristina, now four, the aim was to create a child-friendly garden that would work just as well for adults as it did for children.

She craved plenty of grass for Cristina to play on, and she also wanted her daughter to learn to love plants and wildlife as she had learned from her own parents.



Above: a pretty blue birdhouse is both decorative and practical. Cover: the willow wigwag is available from English Hurdle

As the sketches piled high on her desk, she decided to put this passion into practice and a new business, Secret Garden Design, was born. Meanwhile, her own garden remained the best place to try out her ideas.

Built in the 1890s, the front of the house is planted with evergreen shrubs and grasses for winter and summer interest. A rose rambles round the door, giving the house the romantic look of a country cottage. It is only once you open the front door and look straight through the house, which expands into a spacious open-plan living area, that you realize something unusual is going on.

The principals of classical garden design have been rigorously applied - even though the space measures just 30m x 10m at the back and is only as deep at the front - and the interpretation is practical. Instead of culminating, as tradition would demand, in a Greek temple presiding over a pond, this axis is defined by a perfectly proportioned modern sandpit surrounded by decking and backed by a comfortable bench designed to accommodate watching parents. "This was once a pond," says Carolyn, "but I converted it into a sandpit. It will become a pond again once my daughter is a bit older."

She explains how the design works: "One of the most important things to look at when you are designing a garden is *vistas*," she says. "I like being able to stand at the front door and see straight through the house, with a focal point at the bottom of the garden. I also like to use a degree of asymmetry in the garden, without expecting Nature to apply the same principles."

So the herbaceous borders were sculpted into soft curves, with plants left to drop over the grass and soften the effect. The result is simple elegance that suits everyone, even the insects hovering over the plants.

The same elegant treatment has been given to the deck that extends from the living space. Reached through three doors, the deck curves gently on the right-hand side to accommodate a table and chairs. "In the summer we open all three doors, so in the evening we can eat and sit inside or out, depending on the weather," she explains.

There are a few quirky touches: below the deck →



Clockwise from above: the former pond is now a sandpit in this child-friendly space; *Kaibelia arabis*, also known as the beauty bush, adds elegance to the borders; Carolyn incorporated plenty grassy areas in her design for her daughter to play on

Plant sense

By seeing your garden through half-closed eyes, Ray Grohmann that popped out in a focal point. A focal point can be any plant with distinctive flower, foliage, fruit or shape, something that makes it stand out from the crowd and create a sense of drama. Focal points are a great way of directing the viewer's eye. I used a cluster of beds magnifica to direct viewers away from my compost heap. You may also wish to use a focal point to draw attention to an area to define it, such as urns placed either side of a doorway.

Focal points can be architectural - one stone with an unusual leaf shape. After plant size, shape is the next most important consideration. Which plant you choose will depend on the effect you are trying to create, the style of your garden and the season. This is particularly relevant for herbaceous focal plants. Make sure not to use the many as they will detract from one another and look messy.

A good benchmark is to refrain from using more than three focal points from any viewing position. Having three in the right place, so they are all visible is a simple but, it's not easy - most mistakes can be avoided.

Architectural statements:

- *Acanthus spinosus* (deer's breath) - perennial with big, jagged leaves and seemingly aggressive but attractive flower spikes.
- *Angelica gigas* - biennial/perennial with handsome bright green leaves and beautiful purple umbels.
- *Eryngium planum* (sea holly) - perennial with silvery green holly-like leaves and foliage.
- *Fatsia japonica* (plant cactus) - evergreen shrub with long leaf stalks and large palmate leaves.
- *Isola magnifica* - perennial with upright habit, mid-green leaves and scruffy, attractive daisy-like flowers.
- *Phytolacca americana* (American) - biennial with yellow berries, ground green and elegant lanceolate leaves.
- *Scindapsus verticillata* (Japanese umbrella plant) - evergreen with smooth and waxy looking needles arranged in circular clusters.
- *Yucca glauca* (Yucca) - evergreen palm with large, fan-like leaves.
- *Yucca filamentosa* (Bright Edge) (Adam's needle) - ideal shrub for a low-maintenance container display, with dramatic, long, spicing leaves.

Rebecca Glover, Green Edge Garden Design (0208) 750 5572, A.grohmann.net

'I like being able to stand at the front door and see straight through the house, with a focal point at the bottom of the garden. I also like to use a degree of symmetry'

← a cast-iron bath has been filled with plants and partially hidden among shrubs in the border. "When I saw it, I knew I had to have it," Carolyn laughs. "I had no idea where I was going to put it or how I was going to get it home."

Behind the sandpit is a willow wigwam, the perfect hiding place for small children. "A willow wigwam is ideal as it looks attractive and so is pleasing to adults, children and the environment," Carolyn says. Having been such a success in her own garden, she now recommends them to many of her clients.

The shrubs and grasses that make up the basic planting are chosen for their texture and foliage, but every year she chooses two types of bedding plants for their colour and places them all around the garden, in containers or hanging baskets.

"This year it is begonias because I love red," she says. "They are also quite forgiving if you forget to water them and they flower prolifically. I don't have a lot of time, which is why I do understand professional people who say they don't want a lot of maintenance," she says. "I try to give people a realistic plan of attack for their garden." *

Secret Gardens can be contacted at secretgardensdesign@yahoo.co.uk; willow wigwams from English Hurdle (www.hurdle.co.uk)



Above: Carolyn and her daughter Cristina. Carolyn's designs for the garden prompted her to start her own business



Clockwise from top: the partially hidden, quirky cast-iron bath has been filled with plants; hanging baskets of red begonias; a rose climbs around the front door; a splash of colour from Ceanothus



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