



INSIDE OUT

FOR DESIGN COMPANY ACRES WILD, HOUSE AND GARDEN ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED, AS DUNCAN HAYES DISCOVERS WHEN HE VISITS THIS WEST LONDON PROPERTY. PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN SMITH AND DEBBIE ROBERTS

Stepping out of the basement living space and into the garden of this west London terrace, it is immediately clear that the house and garden are at peace with one another. The Regency exterior has been immaculately restored and is complemented by a cool, contemporary interior. Steel, plate glass and wood all feature in the interior design, particularly

in the basement extension into the garden, where wall-to-wall glass opens out on to the terrace.

“The house and garden were viewed as part of a single project,” says Ian Smith, who runs landscape and garden design company Acres Wild along with Debbie Roberts. “We were involved in the project at quite an early stage, before any building work had started, and this

meant that we could work closely with the architect and the client to come up with a design that flowed seamlessly from house to garden.”

To achieve this continuity, Ian and Debbie picked up on elements of the interior design and took them into the garden. Consequently, the same iroko wood used on the doors of the small studio at the bottom of the garden was used for decking,



ABOVE, FROM LEFT: VIEW TOWARDS THE HOUSE. *PITTSPOSIUM TOBIRA 'NANUM'* AND *SOLEIROLIA SOLEIROLII*. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *NANDINA DOMESTICA*. BLINDS 'FRAME' THE GARDEN. *ZANTEDESCHIA AETHIOPICA*. *DICKSONIA ANTARCTICA* AND *ASTELIA CHATHAMICA*. SHADOW PLAY. GEOMETRIC PATTERNS. IROKO BENCH. *PHORMIUM 'MAORI MAIDEN'*. *PITTSPOSIUM TOBIRA 'NANUM'*.

the retaining walls around the rendered steps were painted to match the rendering at the rear of the house, and grey Cumbrian Kirkstone slate – echoing the sophisticated, modern colours of the interior – was used for paving. “We always try to achieve this sense of synergy in our designs,” says Ian, “picking up on what the architecture of the house has to offer and playing with it in the context of the exterior.”

On their first visit, the Acres Wild team realised that the space would be quite a challenge as the garden had suffered from years of neglect. Also, it was overlooked on

three sides and was a relatively small space. “Once the basement extension and studio had eaten into the garden and the terrace had been marked out, we were left with a workable garden of only ten metres by 5.5 metres,” says Ian. As there was nothing worth salvaging in the garden Debbie and Ian were left with a blank canvas and some surprisingly good loam soil, enriched by years of leaf mould.

Because the space was so small it had to be extremely hardworking, as well as an antidote to its central London location. It needed to have year-round interest, both day and

night, and to serve as a setting for entertaining friends, a place of contemplation and relaxation, and also provide a ‘green’ view from the house, which has windows on four storeys looking on to it.

The garden is quite unusual in that you enter it from the basement, so your first view of the plants is at eye level. From inside, you have a framed view of the garden – a living picture effectively – and the wide, central steps beckon you out.

Once in the garden you start to see the repeating patterns that are integral to the design. “Patterns and geometric shapes feature a lot in our



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *NANDINA DOMESTICA* AND *ACER PALMATUM* ‘FIREGLOW’, COBBLES AROUND KIRKSTONE SLATE. VIEW FROM TOP TERRACE. BASALT FOUNTAIN. *DICKSONIA ANTARCTICA*, *PHYLLOSTACHYS NIGRA* AND *STIPA GIGANTEA* FORM THE BACKBONE OF THE PLANTING. ABOVE, FROM LEFT: SLATE CONTINUES THE INTERIOR’S COLOUR SCHEME. *DICKSONIA*, *PITTOSPORUM* AND *SOLEIROLIA*.

work,” says Ian, “and in this garden cubes and balls of box make shapes that look different depending on which level you see them from.” Geometric shapes are repeated again with a chessboard effect of squares of slate alternating with squares of *Soleirolia soleirolii*. A fountain made of a cube of black basalt with a circular recess pours water into a square of loose pebbles at its base, again continuing the playful theme.

At night, pinhole lights illuminate the steps and deck, while wall lights create atmosphere. Specimen plants such as *Phyllostachys nigra* are lit from below, creating dramatic plays of shadow and light that flicker in the breeze.

The backbone of the planting scheme comprises *Dicksonia antarctica*, *Stipa gigantea* and *Phyllostachys*

nigra, supported by plants in shades of silver, blue and grey. The frosty blades of *Astelia chathamica*, grasses such as *Festuca glauca*, *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Morning Light’ and arching phormiums provide vertical interest. This is echoed by the bamboos that embrace the iroko wood bench, creating a sense of bower-like seclusion. The feathery fronds of *Dicksonia antarctica* and smaller ferns such as *Dryopteris filix-mas* and *Athyrium niponicum* var.

pictum are the perfect foil to these dramatic uprights, and work well with the glossy leaves of *Fatsia japonica* and the exotic-looking *Zantedeschia aethiopica*. Unusual signature plants such as *Pittosporum tobira* ‘Nanum’ and *Nandina domestica* (heavenly or sacred bamboo) inject notes of interest, while burgundy and pink plants such as *Acer palmatum* ‘Fireglow’ and *Phormium* ‘Maori Maiden’ provide colourful contrast.

While this garden may be small, it sits well in its space, and succeeds in its role as an urban oasis – one that is in harmony with the old house with its slick, modern finish. As Ian rightly concludes: “The garden provides the naturalness outside that is a counterpoint to the minimalist finish inside.” ■

CONTACT DETAILS

Acres Wild, 110 High Street, Billingshurst, West Sussex RH14 9QS. Call 01403 785385, visit www.acreswild.co.uk. See their company profile in issue 69.