

# TO NEW HEIGHTS

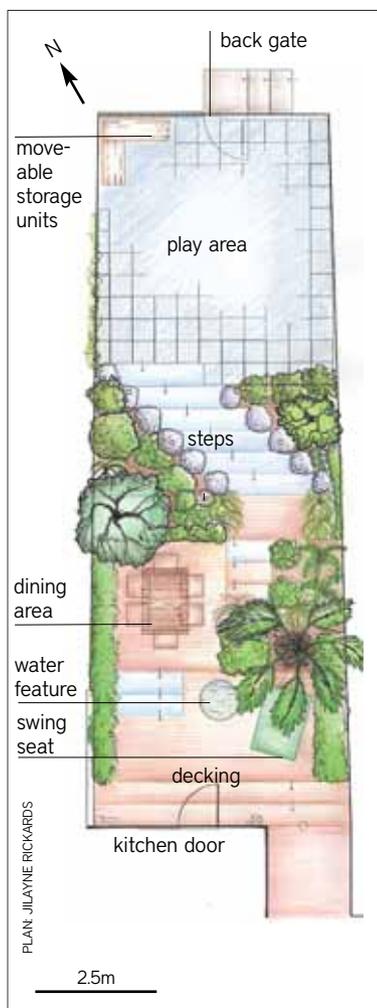
Creating a garden on a one-in-five slope is a challenge that would put some designers off – but not in the case of this north London garden. **Chris Young** met the garden designer who stepped up to the task. Photography by Marianne Majerus

**PROFESSIONALISM IS AN** odd word. It has become one of those nouns so often bandied about that its true essence – of undertaking a task studiously and in accordance with the higher standards of your chosen profession – has become lost. Historically it has not often been used when discussing garden design, but in recent times that has changed. This garden demonstrates why.

Even though it is a popular career for an increasing number of people, garden design is a role that is taking time to be appreciated. A minority, it is true, may not meet the standard expected, but there can be no doubt that at last the profession is maturing. This garden, in north London, within peeping distance of Alexandra Palace, is a prime example of that – and how garden creation should be done.

## Getting acquainted

The client, Janice Campbell, is a busy mother of two (aged 10 and 12), and former chartered accountant who is now training to be a psychotherapist. She has a general interest in gardening thanks to her green-fingered mum. 'I moved into the house six years ago,' she says, 'and really had no idea what to do with the garden. But I knew I wanted something to happen.' A mutual contact recommended that she should meet ▶



## ALEXANDRA PARK RD, LONDON

**Owner** Janice Campbell, an interested amateur gardener, and her two secondary-school children

**Occupation** Janice is a trainee psychotherapist

**Property** Semi-detached Edwardian house, with large front garden (parking for two cars) and sloping rear garden

**Perceptions of the area** House is sited in the Muswell Hill area of north London, near to Alexandra Palace



**Brief for garden designer** Low-maintenance outside space for adults and children, safe route from top to bottom of garden  
**Garden designer** Jilayne Rickards  
**Total garden area** 95sq m  
**Soil** Heavy clay  
**Aspect** Northerly  
**Timescale** Design started April 2005; construction started July 2005; project completed beginning September 2005  
**Total cost** £25,000 including design, construction and materials



**ROOM FOR THE FAMILY** Garden designer Jilayne Rickards (left, seated left) with client Janice Campbell and her two children.

The brief required a space for seating close to the house and a play area, as well as overcoming the large slope in the site: steps, landings and retaining walls (above) have been used to bold visual effect, softened by pockets of planting

## Dealing with the slope

Looking up towards the house from the bottom of the garden, the site's gradient is apparent

### Mixing the style

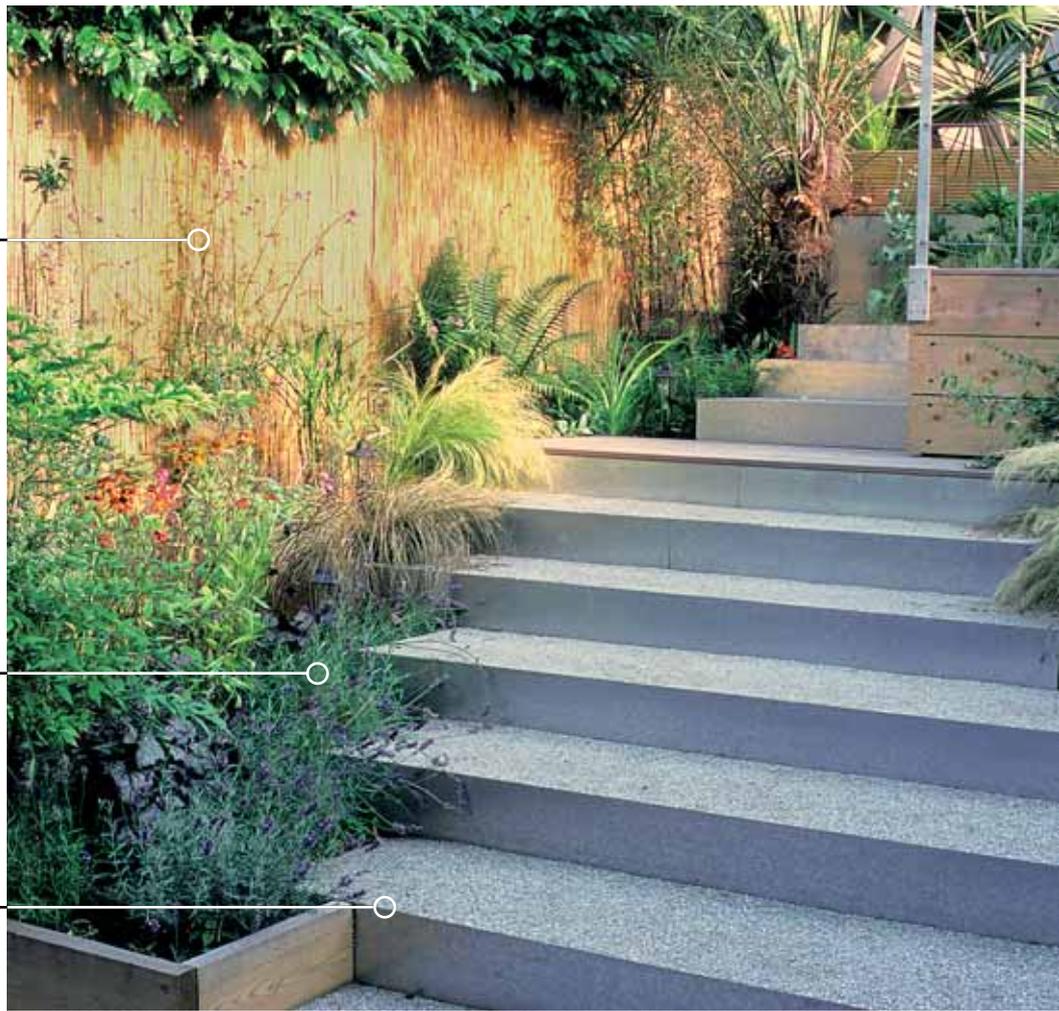
This garden fuses contemporary clean lines of steel and ipe hardwood with a more jungle-like feel, including a large palm and bamboo-cane fencing panels

### Planting palette

The textures of grass *Stipa tenuissima*, fern *Dryopteris wallichiana*, tall *Verbena bonariensis* and fragrant *Lavandula angustifolia* soften the lines of the beds and steps

### Stepping up to the challenge

Interesting materials have been used, including these steps, made from recycled CDs set in resin bonding; the front risers are clad in galvanized steel



**USING THE OUTSIDE ROOM** One of the owner's key requirements was for space to eat outside. A wooden table and chairs, screened on one side by densely-planted black bamboo, is just a few steps away from the kitchen. Yacht-style steel cables supported by metal stanchions have been used to preserve views while maintaining safety

garden designer Jilayne Rickards and shortly afterwards she asked Jilayne to undertake the design. Janice wanted it to be contemporary in feeling, providing an outdoor seating area, surrounded by a planting colour palette of yellow, reds and lavender, and to be as useable for the children as for adults.

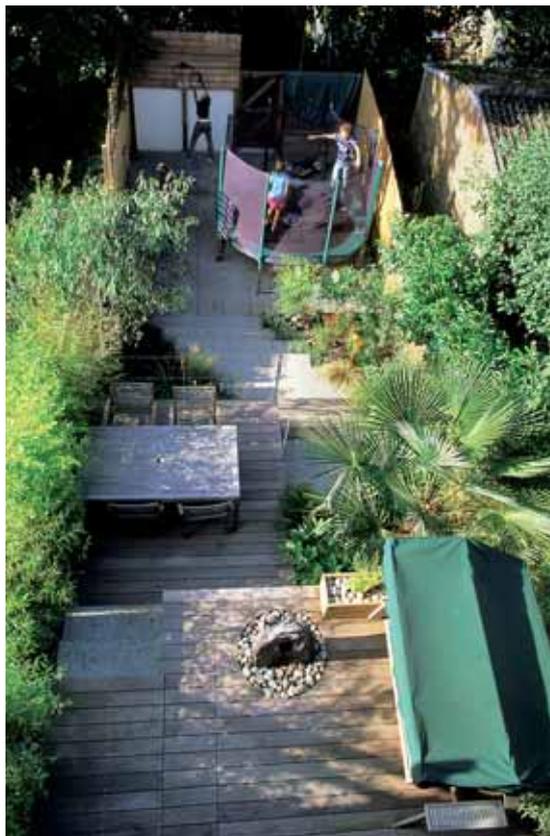
As with many gardens in that part of north London, the slope is steep – a drop of 3m from the back of the house to the bottom fence (a distance of 16m) makes a challenging site for anyone. Clearly the first task was to create terraces: at the top, outside the kitchen, a decked area holds a water feature and a swing seat; this leads on to a middle terrace with wooden table and chairs; then on to some steps down to the lowest part of the garden – the play area. If the space near the house is for the adults, then this space is for the children.

'When we first moved in, the kids never

used the garden,' says Janice. 'It was crazy that we would go to the park or a friends' garden because we didn't want to use our back yard.' Now the open space at the bottom is big enough for a trampoline and takes advantage of the maximum width of the plot. Every last piece of this garden has been used.

### Unfurling the design

As expected with a formal design contract, Jilayne's objective was to give exactly what her client wanted. Working through the scheme with Janice between April and June 2005, she showed images of gardens from books or magazines, samples of materials and textures, and made a scale model to visualise how the spaces worked for mother and children. According to both designer and client, there was little disagreement and once the final design had been agreed in June,



**LOOKING DOWN FROM THE HOUSE** Central to the success of this design was for Jilayne Rickards to terrace the space, overcoming the 3m drop from the back of the house to the bottom of the garden. The division of spaces is clearly visible: from decked seating and dining areas down to children's play space

Jilayne set about finding a contractor and starting the work. Challenges such as limited rear access (thereby having to bring materials through the house), an overhanging lime tree behind the back of the garden, and the physical slope, meant that this was never going to be a straightforward build.

The planting is a mixture of dominant evergreens (a palm, *Trachycarpus fortunei*, near the house, *Phyllostachys nigra* along a fence), more subtle evergreens such as *Abelia x grandiflora*, *Lavandula angustifolia* and a range of ferns, and summer show-stopper perennials such as *Hemerocallis* 'Holly Dancer' and *Helenium* 'Moerheim Beauty'. 'The colours have worked so well together,' says Janice, 'and I have even got to like the ferns – plants I was never sure about at first.'

The result is a planting palette that is simple, structural but also colourful – it

suits the client who, while interested in an attractive outside space, does not have time (or, as yet, the confidence) to make substantial alterations. The combination of a 'jungle-like' feel of the palm, bamboos and ferns is complemented with the more dainty and colourful day lilies, *Stipa tenuissima* grasses and, in spring, mixes of *Allium* and *Nectaroscordum* bulbs.

#### Taking a chance

Where the planting is safe, the hard landscape materials were more of a risk – but one that has paid off. Most garden designers want to find new materials to use, whether it be as focal point, paving, or to harmonise colour and tone. In this case, Jilayne bravely tried all three.

The decking in itself is uncontentious; well made from ipe (a durable timber, also used for hardwood floors), it is a standard choice. The steps, however, are

made from breeze-block and concrete faced with galvanized steel, topped off to a thickness of 5cm with recycled crushed CDs, held in place by resin. The result is one of shimmering and sparkling steps, cutting across the centre of the garden. As you move down the space, the square play area uses speckled rubber-mat tiles; soft underfoot and ideal for children, whether jumping off the trampoline or having a quick kickabout.

But it is this space that is the only slight disappointment. Even though it was a crucial part of the client's brief – a safe place for the children to play that could be watched from the kitchen window – when you look down from the house (see photograph, left), past the plants, all you see is the back wall housing a basketball net above square paving. Yes, in parts it is beautifully faced with ipe slats; and yes, when I visited, the bottom section of fence that should have been covered with *Parthenocissus henryana* had just been replaced following storm damage. Nevertheless this sunken area, taking up the full width of the garden, is stark: every ▶

## PART OF THE DESIGN SERVICE?

**All garden designers have their own fee scale, but for Jilayne Rickards, a written care plan and ongoing client contact are part of the package**

'I supplied three different costings for Janice, based on varying levels of material expense – as it transpired, she chose the highest-quality materials. Included in the fee was a maintenance and care plan of how and when to look after the plants. I find that this helps clients understand the plants we have chosen, and have a sense of looking after them in the future. I also like to keep in touch with my clients, to see how they are living with the garden and if there are any issues that need resolving.'



## Material difference

Hard and soft materials sit comfortably together to increase visual interest

### In its place

One of the few existing plants in the garden was this *Trachycarpus fortunei*

### Small details

This simple wooden planter not only adds height and structure, but is also a visual end point at the edge of the swing seat; a cobble 'mulch' smothers weeds, adds contrast and links visually to the water-feature's surround (below)

### Year-round appeal

To maintain interest throughout the year, designer Jilayne has mixed perennials with evergreens – here an establishing *Fatsia japonica* contrasts well with the dominant palm above

square centimetre is open to scrutiny. It seems a hard space, with no room for interest (plant-wise or other) and no room for tricking the eye. I can understand why Janice wanted maximum use of space, but Jilayne's designerly sensitivity to the balance of function and aesthetics could have been given full rein.

### Living the space

Like all real gardens, there are details here that, while bold in execution, have not quite worked two years on. Some of the paving is an example: the innovative, reconstituted-CD steps have lost some of their original sparkle, becoming slightly green. However (Jilayne and her supplier reassure me) this is just a matter of the correct cleaning agent being used to bring the sparkle back. The planting in parts has aged slightly, needing a little more TLC; an aspect, I am sure, of a client appointing a designer and then (understandably) not yet having the confidence to change the designer's original scheme. The wooden decking, too, has lost its overall sheen, but Janice is keen to see it weather to a lighter colour.

But what is clear, is that this wear and tear comes as a result of the mother, children and friends actually using the place. Many in the gardening world may be quick to criticise garden designers for making this type of 'instant' garden (this took three months to build), but in so doing fail to miss the fact that they show non-gardening people the joys of what a garden can bring.

In essence this garden's evolution has been incredibly simple. A client needed a garden; the designer listened to the client; the garden was built; the client was happy. Undertaken considerably by Jilayne, this project is what good garden design should be all about: responding intelligently to a person's needs, with the professionalism every client deserves. ■

*Chris Young* is Deputy Editor of *The Garden*

**i** Janice Campbell's garden is not open to the public.  
 ● Jilayne Rickards, Gardens Unlimited, London. Tel: 07801 946878; website: www.gardens-unlimited.com



**AT THE WATER'S EDGE** Designer and client visited a specialist water-feature supplier together: this stone monolith that they eventually chose sits outside the kitchen window, near the dining area and swing seat, giving a stark contrast in colour and texture to the surrounding decking and planting

# DEVELOP THE STYLE

## ALTERNATIVE DESIGN SOLUTIONS TO THOSE USED AT ALEXANDRA PARK ROAD

**RISE AND FALL** Many gardeners have to overcome a gradient of some sort in their garden: here are a few ideas



TIM SANDALL

On a small slope, a waterfall can add visual and planting interest, as well as helping to block out any surrounding noise



JANE SEBIRE

Many gardens have a sunken area – here, three steps allow the visitor to enter the space, backed by a planted, low retaining wall



JANE SEBIRE

Where significant amounts of earth need to be retained, flamboyant hard landscaping statements can reinforce the differences in height



JANE SEBIRE

Children should get as much pleasure from a garden as the adults, but designing with their demands in mind can be difficult. In this show garden at the Hampton Court Palace Flower Show 2002, a grassed amphitheatre leads to colourful, soft paving materials – themselves at the base of a skateboarding ramp



TIM SANDALL

In some gardens, emphasising the slope in specific areas can be as valid as hiding it. These bold blue steps are a dramatic visual focal point at the end of a hatched paving-and-grass lower level. Note that the planting either side of the raised area is lower than the seating deck, again reinforcing the difference in levels