



**ABOVE** A pretty, densely planted scheme with peonies, irises, foxgloves and gladioli, *Brunnera*, box, *Nassella*, catmint, alliums and heucheras

**WORDS:** Veronica Peerless **PHOTOGRAPHS:** Marianne Majerus

## CURB APPEAL

**Jilayne Rickards MSGD** used her street smarts to make the most of this front garden planting scheme

**T**his front garden in north London was in some ways a big challenge for Jilayne Rickards MSGD. It was the last part of a huge project that involved a new back garden (also designed by Rickards) and an extensive house renovation. "The site was sloping, clay, a real mess and full of rubble," she explains. But Rickards was also given free rein with the planting. "The clients didn't want a statement front garden – they wanted something beautiful to complement the front of the house, which was quite traditional." They wanted the majority planted, with a small area for growing

edibles and – unusually for the area – parking for only one car.

While the site is southeast facing, the front of the garden is sometimes shaded by a street tree that is pollarded every three years. It is also quite windy – "Rubbish and packets of crisps were being blown off the street" – and there is a lot of footfall on the pavement from a secondary school nearby. Rickards would also need to factor in a new bathroom drainage channel that would cross the garden, plus new services to the house. Once the site was cleared of its hardscape, retaining walls and a huge

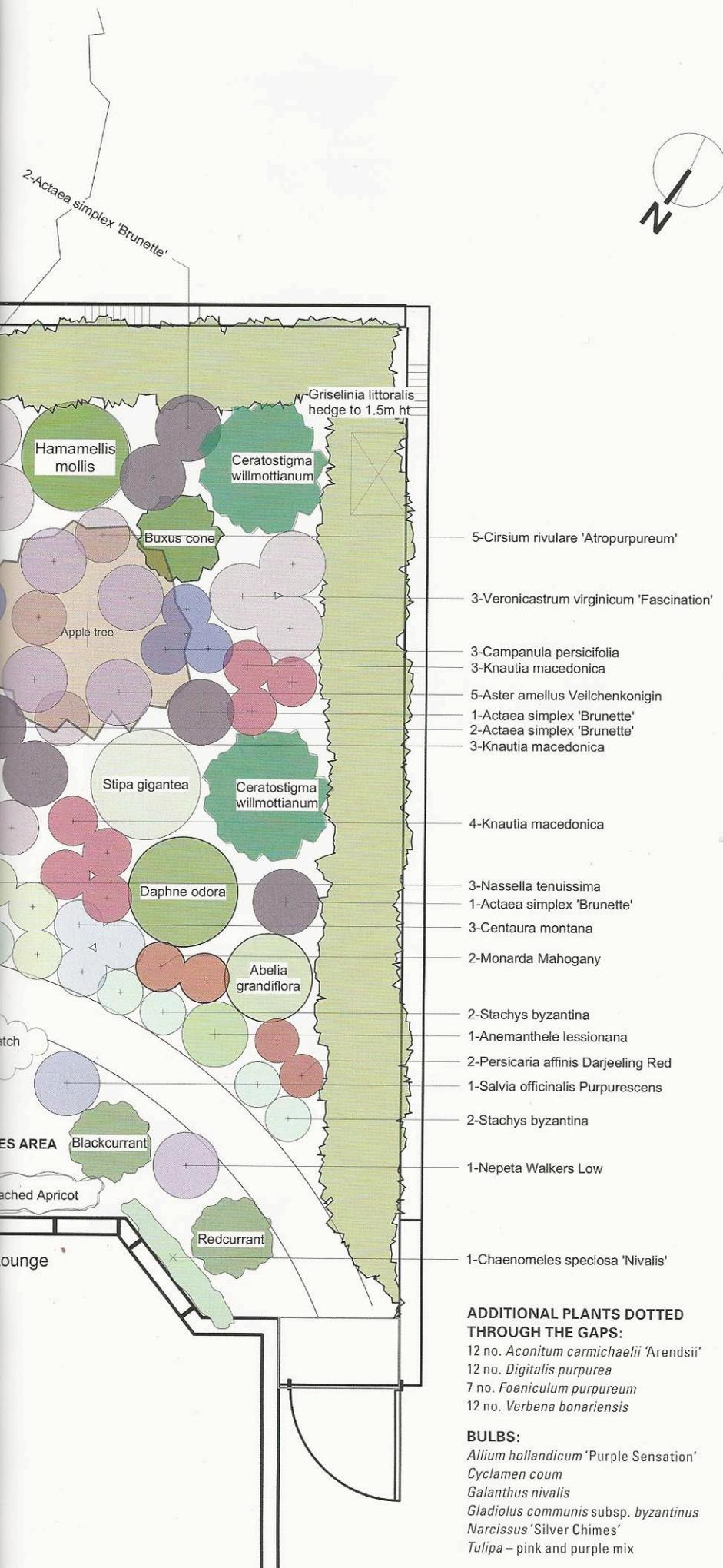
**"THE FRONT GARDEN WAS SLOPING, CLAY, FULL OF RUBBLE, SOMETIMES SHADED BY A STREET TREE AND QUITE WINDY"**





## THE PROCESS

Rickards spends several hours on site, absorbing the space and observing the light. "By the time I get back to my studio, I've got a good idea of the layout in my head – I start with how the garden is going to be broken up and balanced. I get the layout approved by the client and then start on the planting plan in Vectorworks. I set the structural plants first and fill in from there. I've got a database of tried and tested plants that my assistant has divided into sun, shade, semi-shade and soil tolerance – it's a great resource and I'm always adding to it. There are some plants that I do not add to the planting plan, but dot in once the plants are laid out. Working on paper can be prescriptive, so it's nice to get to site and loosen it all up a bit."



amount builders' detritus, a paved driveway was installed and a new slope for the planting created using a digger. The heavy, compacted clay was rotavated and improved with grit. "The soil just swallowed it up," she says. Some topsoil was also imported. "It allowed me to add plants such as *Centaurea* that prefer more free-draining soil, but there are clumps where I had to include plants that would take the clay. Some areas needed to be hand dug as the mains cable was quite close to the surface."

Rickards added a *Griselinia* hedge on two sides to give evergreen screening and protection from wind. She then added trees: an apple, as the clients wanted to grow fruit; *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* for its attractive foliage and autumn colour; and two acers to flank the front steps. *Daphne*, *Hamamelis* and *Abelia* give additional structure and – along with *Sarcococca* – scent, to be enjoyed by anyone walking up to the house.

Rickards then finally had the room (7m x 7m) to plant a herbaceous scheme that took inspiration from a garden she'd seen at RHS Chelsea – Luciano Giubbilei MSGD's 2009 garden for Laurent-Perrier. "It had the most beautiful, sensual planting. Ordinarily I would never use peony 'Buckeye Belle' as it's over in a flash, but that sumptuous red is just so beautiful. It combines really well with the bronze fennel, grasses and irises."

Once the peonies are over, the broadly red, magenta and blue colour theme is continued by *Monarda*, *Campanula*, *Knautia*, *Cirsium*, *Nepeta* and *Centaurea*. "There's maybe a lull in the flowers in July," explains Rickards, "but there's lots



**ABOVE** Chamomile and thyme grow between the stepping stones on this path alongside *Anemanthele* grass, *Iris sibirica* 'Tropic Night' and *Stachys byzantina*

of foliage – *Brunnera* contrasts nicely with *Heuchera*.” *Persicaria*, *Veronicastrum*, *Salvia*, *Actaea*, asters, *Verbena bonariensis*, grasses and *Ceratostigma* bring a second wave of colour from late summer into autumn.

A gravel path, planted with creeping thyme and chamomile, and interspersed with reused York stone stepping stones, leads to a side gate. It borders the edible growing area by the front of the house, planted with three currants and pleached fruit. Space was left for the clients to grow herbs and vegetables.

The plants were ordered from Europlants, Tendercare, Beth Chatto Nursery and Glebe Nursery, and laid out by Rickards. “The trees

and shrubs were as big as I could get for the budget, but in March the perennials were a mix of larger plants from the previous year, and 9cm pots.” She then added vertical accent plants that she had ordered but did not include on the planting plan – *Aconitum*, foxgloves, bronze fennel and *Verbena bonariensis*. She returned in autumn to plant bulbs including alliums, *Cyclamen coum*, *Narcissus* and pink and purple tulips, and again in late winter to plant snowdrops in the green.

Now that the scheme is mature, is there anything she would change? “I think the hamamelis looks a bit odd – I wouldn’t include it again,” Rickards says. “The *Buxus* cones succumbed to box tree caterpillar (the garden was planted before this was a problem in London) and have since been replaced by the clients, who manage the garden. I don’t use box now. But looking back, the plant range is still strong. I walk past from time to time and it still looks good.” ○



**Jilayne Rickards**

**MSGD** trained in garden design at Capel Manor and has been in practice since 2002. She won Gold at RHS Chelsea 2019 as well as the People’s Choice Award for the CAMFED Garden, and received four BALI Awards in 2020 for her Urban Retreat garden design.  
[www.jilaynerickards.com](http://www.jilaynerickards.com)

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