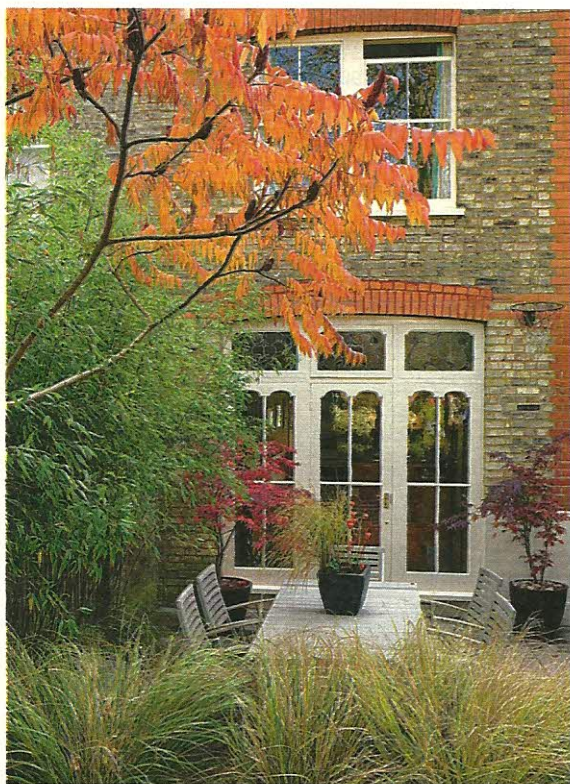


# The late show

A garden designer with an artist's eye proves that nature's autumn/winter palette has the richest colours

REPORT LYDIA SLATER PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS



Clockwise from left: garden designer Jilayne Rickards; *Rhus typhina* overhangs the seating area, with *Stipa arundinacea* in the foreground; the garden in full autumnal glory

When Jilayne Rickards was a child, she spent hours sitting at her bedroom window, sketching the entrancing landscape around her family's Cornish farm. "I was desperate to become an artist," she says, "but my father had other ideas. He thought I ought to get a proper job, so he sent me to secretarial college."

Having given up a career in IT after the birth of her third child, she finally came up with a way of fulfilling her artistic inclinations and her appreciation of nature simultaneously, by setting up her own contemporary garden-design business.

It is not easy to bring a wild, Cornish aesthetic to suburban North London, but wherever it's possible, Rickards has done it. "I like plants that curve over," she says. "They remind me of waves and the shapes trees grow into when they're blown by strong winds. And I'm drawn to those that swish like the sea – I find it relaxing."

In eight years of garden design, she has been faced with some hair-raising commissions. One involved transforming a precipitous garden with a ten feet drop into a family-friendly space, which also had to reflect the owner's homeland of Jamaica. Another client wanted a tropical vibe – not easy in Muswell Hill, but Rickards managed, despite the guinea pigs that had free run of the lawn. But her own garden was to prove one of her biggest challenges.

North-facing, small, overlooked by neighbours on three sides and shaded by a giant horse chestnut tree, it had a muddy, uneven lawn, a concrete patio and a level change of more than three feet. As for the soil, it was such heavy clay, she says, "You could have made pots with it. And it was particularly miserable in the winter."

In fact, Rickards admits that it looked so unpromising that she left it untouched for years while she worked out what to do with it. Eventually, once again, she turned for inspiration to Cornwall.

Now, the garden has become not only the most spectacular feature of her home, but also a powerful advertisement for her business. During the summer months, the herbaceous borders are alive with colour and scent. But it's in the autumn that the space really comes into its own. Even on the soggy, grey day that I visit, it glows with scarlet, crimson, purple and orange foliage, seeming almost to throw out warmth, like a good log fire.

Standing on either side of the door that leads from the kitchen to the blue-grey sandstone patio are two Japanese maples, their fiery leaves echoing the ruby glass in the decorative windowpanes. >>



## 10 TIPS FOR CREATING A SMALL CONTEMPORARY GARDEN

- 1** Restrain yourself. Less is definitely more.
- 2** Think in threes. Group three plants together, or arrange them in a triangle, and think of laying out your space in threes (for instance, dining area, seating area, lawn).
- 3** Similarly, maintain simplicity by limiting the use of hard landscaping materials to three. In my garden, I've used just sandstone, brick and timber.
- 4** Base your design on clean lines to create a good sense of order. In this case, the design is rectilinear and related to the dimensions of the house.
- 5** Keep spaces open and uncluttered.
- 6** Select a theme (perhaps a favourite colour) and run it through the design to unify the space.
- 7** Limit the number of plant varieties and repeat them throughout the garden to provide continuity.
- 8** Ensure enough structure in the planting by using a mix of large and small evergreen plants. These create a good backdrop for herbaceous plants and provide interest through the winter.
- 9** Thread herbaceous perennials and grasses through the structural plants, incorporating something for each season and ensuring they relate to your chosen theme.
- 10** Finally, every garden should have an acer, because they are just so stunning.

JILAYNE RICKARDS

## GARDENS

<< Their pots are topped with soft grey pebbles that recall the seashore. It is an impression enhanced by the constant murmur of the black-stemmed bamboo that runs alongside one wall, and the swishing of the pheasant's tail grass (*Anemanthele lessoniana*) planted along another. Interspersed among the grasses are box balls, adding structure and solidity and, at the same time, echoing the organic shapes made by the blowing grass.

It is here that the outdoor dining table has been placed, accessorised with seats that double as storage boxes for toys and tools. Sitting here, surveying the garden, you notice several other buxus balls dotted about the flower beds. It seems counterintuitive to go in for this sort of repeat planting when space is at a premium, but Rickards insists that less is more when it comes to planning a small garden. "You need to provide continuity and coherence," she explains, "and if you have too many different plants, it feels busy rather than restful. Ideally, you wouldn't have more than five." She also believes that creating distinct "rooms" – a dining area, a play area and a thinking area, for instance – will make it seem larger.

Her approach is resolutely pared-down and contemporary. She would have liked to have dug up her own lawn entirely, replacing it with decking. "I think lawns in city gardens are only good for small children," she says. "They're high maintenance and never grow well." Her football-playing sons refused to countenance this idea, so, instead, she has expanded the flower beds to leave a lawn area "just big enough for loungers and space hoppers".



**The vibrant foliage of *Acer palmatum* 'Suminagashi' in pots topped with grey sea pebbles**

A silvery *Eucalyptus pauciflora* gives dappled shade in the summer, while ceanothus, trachelospermum and pittosporum adorn one side of the garden all year round, mirrored on the other by more ceanothus and box balls. This is the backdrop against which she experiments with herbaceous perennials. "It's my playground," she says. "I've just planted a pink lychnis against a purple-leaved cotinus. I was worried the colours might clash but, actually, it looks beautiful."

At the far end of the lawn is a winter bed that comes into its own when the rest of the garden has shut up shop. Here, the silver bark of a small Himalayan birch tree contrasts festively with the scarlet stems of red-barked dogwood. Lower down, pure white hellebores are offset by the soft grey of lavender bushes. The effect is simultaneously ethereal and cheering.

Behind this is Rickards' contemplative space, entered through an arch covered with sweet-smelling chocolate vine. Smothered in clematis (*C. montana* for the summer, *C. cirrhosa* for the winter) is a shed, surrounded by more Japanese maple, black bamboo and pheasant's tail grass. A bench is tucked round the corner, set against hawthorn bushes, their harsh silhouette softened by the dusky pink anemones, cream tellima and variegated euonymus planted beneath. On a winter's evening, Rickards likes to sit here, gazing through the dogwood stems, back towards the lights of the house. "Sometimes," she says, "I lie down, look up through the canopy and think how lovely it all is." ■

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