

MINIMAL APPEAL

Benedict Vanheems visits a garden sanctuary in southeast London where less is definitely more. Photography by *Marianne Majerus*



There are some plots that have garden photographers tripping over their lens cases in a scramble to snap them; this garden by Ann Pearce is no exception. You can see why — its clean, mean and brooding lines have definitely got that seductive charm that the camera loves. But there's a reason for its winning simplicity that, beneath the York stone paving and great slabs of monoculture plantings, gives it integrity.

The garden belongs to a new development of ultra-modern German Huf houses, tucked away up a side street off Dulwich village in southeast London and backing onto Dulwich Park. Turn off from the main road and you are transported to a world of calm and order as nine spotless post and beam houses greet you with their wide, brooding forms and floor to ceiling windows. The architecture is uncluttered and offers an unparalleled experience, drawing the outside in. Such pure architecture associates comfortably with a thoughtfully restrained garden design, something Pearce's client, Terry Jones, appreciated from the outset.

Meeting the client

Pearce was actively sought out by Jones after she had been working on another garden in the same development and had left her portfolio with the show home. Using adjectives such as 'genuine' and 'lovely' to describe her client hints at the way Pearce prefers to work — meeting over a cup of tea and getting to know the client in conversation, building up a picture of that person's character and passions. Pearce and Jones immediately got on and shared a vision for this space as an antidote to the crazy world outside — somewhere with a tranquil stillness and an almost spiritual quality.

The garden certainly has a calmness about it and can best be described as possessing the atmosphere of a traditional Japanese garden but with a contemporary interpretation. There is plenty of room to breathe and the utter restraint exercised by Pearce makes the whole thing terribly easy-on-the-eye. The finesse in the finish is partly down to the client's unwillingness to compromise and his understanding that a quality garden requires a realistic budget — the stuff of pipe dreams for many designers.

Pearce's design splits the garden up into distinct zones: a York stone terrace leads out from the back of the house and is headed by a long pool. Next is a wide band of planting, commencing with *Leucojum aestivum* 'Gravetye Giant' in spring, then globes of *Allium* 'Mount Everest' and the slightly shorter *A. nigrum* in early summer, culminating in a great haze of *Calamagrostis x auctiflora* 'Overdam' seedheads from early autumn onwards. Beyond this the garden

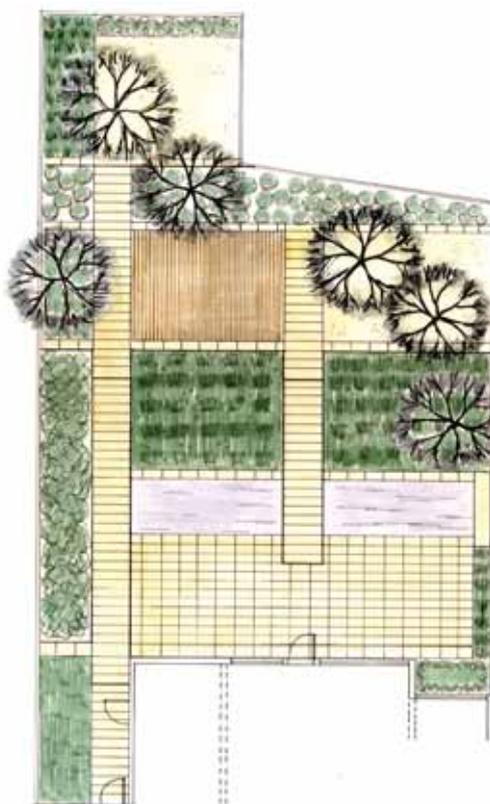
is cleaved into two by the path that runs the length of the garden — to the left is a deck in ipe and to the right a space laid to gravel and broken up by two multi-stemmed *Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis*. This area is backed by a rolling bank of box balls which have been allowed to merge but not lose their individual globe forms, thereby reflecting the allium flowerheads in the main border.

Each section of the garden is framed in the same York stone as the terrace, giving a direct correlation to the distinct framing of the Huf house backdrop. The stone's pale colour sits easily with the white walls of the house, while the white and green palette of the planting ensures a tranquil ambience conducive to the brief.

Opposite: Looking back over the garden towards the Huf house. The clean pale York stone paving complements the white walls of the building.

Below: View down the long pool to the York stone wall, which took craftsmen a week to construct.

Bottom: Plan of the garden by Ann Pearce



Exhaustive specification

Detail has been paid to a painstaking degree in this garden. Every stone slab, which is sealed for ease of cleaning, was precision cut on site, allowing for a thin but accurate line of pointed mortar to prevent weed establishment. To create an illusion of floating weightlessness, the stone is laid to overhang the pool and where there is a change in level, is set to cast a shadow. It is a popular technique that works well here, helping to contribute to the serenity of the space. Within the terrace itself an almost imperceptible 5mm-wide cleft feeds into a drainage channel beneath the paving, proving a subtle tool to solve the problem of rain runoff creeping downhill towards the back of the house.

To the right-hand side of the terrace is a drystone wall of the same York stone, but this time cut rough to give a pleasing change in texture. The wall is overlooked by the office where a chunky desk repeats the solidity of this wall, tying together the interior landscape with that outside.

Other elements to the garden have been carefully chosen to link to the house or the key features of the space itself. Black-painted fences recede and allow the mind to concentrate on the garden within; further cornus trees give shade to the deck area where a patio set made of horizontal bands of teak picks up the lines within the paving; and a bench in iroko and stainless steel in the gravel area mimics the decking opposite.

Below: Overview of the garden from the first floor of the house.

Opposite: Globes of *Allium* 'Mount Everest' are repeated in the background box balls.

Many hands

Pearce is something of a perfectionist, which in practice meant a presence on site every single day during construction to supervise and work closely with the contractors, of which she employs only "very experienced guys who work with beautiful materials." In this case there were separate specialist contractors to lay the York stone paving, the decking area and the drystone wall, which was constructed by a father and son team from Scotland. It is the client's insistence on the best that has allowed such a well-targeted employment of craftsmen to ensure each element is finished to the highest standard.

Of course no project is without its challenges: in this case the individually selected cornus trees brought over from a German nursery. Faced with a typical London clay soil, adequate drainage was required to guarantee the survival of these far from inexpensive specimens. Four-foot square trenches were dug to incorporate the drainage system, and inspection holes integrated to allow the system to be pumped clear should it ever become blocked. Rather than stake the trees and break the clean visual lines of the garden, Pearce has applied the subterranean Platypus tree anchor system, which secures the rootball in place. With the early application of an economical drip-feed irrigation setup the trees appear to have successfully established.







Comment from garden designer Ann Pearce

From the first moment Terry contacted me there was a connection between us. We had both been leading very hectic lives and there was a deep need in both of us for a calm, tranquil haven where we could just be. That desire for serenity was to become the main focus of the design, both aesthetically and emotionally. I was trusted implicitly and given complete freedom to create something truly special, which gave me the chance to design a garden sanctuary I'd only ever dreamed of.

The site was perfect — a blank canvas with a stunning Huf house as its centrepiece. Facing east and backing onto Dulwich Park, the light was wonderful and I immediately knew I wanted to use a large area of reflective water within the garden to capture the striking lines of the house and the open skies. I also wanted to create an urban meadow as we'd both remembered running through cornfields as children. This has worked beautifully, bringing subtle movement and sound into a very calm, contemplative space. The *Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis* are breathtaking, particularly when in flower, and add yet another dimension to the garden (see *contents* page).

The garden has far exceeded our expectations. The way it changes throughout the seasons is magical and most importantly of all, it makes Terry happy, which is what I hoped to do from the outset. I couldn't have done any of this without the contractors that I worked with over four very enjoyable months. Their attention to detail and their care and commitment to the project matched my own and it shows in the finished result.

Above right: View across the main allium/grass border in early summer (top) and the same view in winter (bottom) as the seedheads of *Calamagrostis* x *auctiflora* 'Overdam' dominate.

One area that does not need irrigation, even during the heat of midsummer, is the main allium and clamagrostis bed. Here, the tiny nitrogen-fixing clover *Trifolium repens* 'William' does a good job at being both invisible and ensuring a steady supply of foliage-promoting nutrients, while a generous mulch sees to it that soil moisture is locked in for longer.



Wild visitors

It surprised me to learn that in an urban garden dominated by its hard landscape wildlife has stamped its mark. The fibreglass-lined 450mm-deep pool has attracted the toad fraternity. A thoughtfully placed rock installed each spring allows them to escape the pond and take shelter in the allium/grass border or the wide bank of *Pittosporum tobira* to the left. The water is kept clear by a UV filter housed beneath the gravel area but filamentous algae in the pebble layer to the bottom is still visible. Pearce is considering introducing grass-eating black carp to control the algae, but I wonder if these might also see off the tadpoles.

Season ticket

Pearce returns at regular intervals throughout the year to maintain the garden and ensure her vision is realised, though she admits it is equal measures work and meditation — an opportunity to collect her thoughts in this peaceful space. The garden is low-maintenance in the true sense of the word: grasses are cut back in late winter when the first shoots of leucosium appear, the box cloud trimmed, the odd weed seedling in the gravel plucked out and the terrace and paths occasionally jet washed.

With a busy career, Jones has little time for gardening, but has plenty of desire to enjoy the garden. This design is the tailored solution and both client and designer appear to extract equal pleasure from it. The garden is a fusion of kindred spirits, which gives it an integrity like few others.

Benedict Vanheems is editor of *Garden Design Journal*. Email: gardens@landscape.co.uk

Garden fact file

Location: Dulwich, southeast London

Size: 250m²

Aspect: east

Soil: London clay

Weather: mild/city microclimate

Garden Designer: Ann Pearce

Owners: Terry Jones

Design started: December 2003

Construction started on site; finished on site: April 2004; July 2004

Total cost: not given

Design fees: 8 per cent

Hard landscape budget: 75 per cent (inclusive of lighting, drainage and irrigation)

Soft landscape budget: 17 per cent

Contractors: Plant Room Landscapes (main contractors); Steve Swatton Landscapes (drystone wall)

Outstanding features: reflections and the attention to detail

Public access: by invitation only

Further information: Ann Pearce. Email: ann@metamorphosisdesign.co.uk

Website: www.metamorphosisdesign.co.uk