



SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED

All gardens demand a clear and concise approach to their layout, and designers need to be versatile to deal with a wide range of spaces, large and small, while budgets and the desires of the client all need to be agreed early on. These are some of the givens and designers choose different ways to achieve good outcomes. **Barbara Segall** speaks to seven garden designers, who share some of their design notes



Adolfo Harrison MSGD

Designing for very small spaces is something that Adolfo Harrison MSGD particularly enjoys, especially if the sites are smaller than the typical rectangular terraced house garden.

People respond better to a courtyard space, he says, and his approach is to treat the confined space rather like a stage. His designs aim to create a circular movement, with multiple focal points and a narrative that leads the owner or visitor around the space.

'We try to use reclaimed materials as much as possible, and we try to keep existing features – an old wall, for instance – something that offers a story and links to the past of the garden.'

Plants are used rather like characters in the theatrical setting and there must, says Adolfo, be a very good reason for every inclusion or exclusion; everything must have a purpose.

'In most small spaces there is likely to be quite a bit of shade so, while the plant palette can be repetitive, the aim is to give plants the best opportunity to thrive and shine in the context.'

In his 2020 SGD Judges' Award and Garden Jewel award-winning courtyard garden, Bamboo & Mirror (pictured), Adolfo used mirrors and living walls, sedum roofs and decking to enlarge the small triangular shape. 'Even though the space is small,' he adds, 'it was important to create a sense of enclosure using climbers on the pergola.'

adolfoharrison.com →

FROM ADOLFO'S ADDRESS BOOK

- Off-site reclamation materials, Norfolk Antique & Reclamation Centre, norfolkreclamation.co.uk
- Plants, Palmstead Nursery, palmstead.co.uk

Adolfo has used shapely coloured-stemmed Golden Chinese bamboo in groups, combined with York stone, to lead eyes and feet through the open space, while *Trachelospermum jasminoides* covers the upright RSJs and monkey-bar pergola and creates a sense of enclosure.

Photograph (Bamboo and mirror garden by Adolfo Harrison), Richard Bloom



Photographs (Twickenham garden), Alister Thorpe



Tom Massey MSGD

In 2022, the Society of Garden Designers (SGD) awarded Tom Massey the accolade of Best Small Residential Landscape & Garden for his design for this small outside space in Twickenham (pictured). Looking at it today, the designer comments: 'There is nowhere to hide in a small garden. You need to get the details right and make use of every inch of the space, even the awkward corners.'

At the start of every project, Tom aims to have a clear and defined brief from the client, which he refines to be sure nothing will be wasted or gratuitous.

He plans in as much planting as possible as he feels that in a small space, too much hard landscaping can look cold and hard. 'I find including trees works very well as they give life and vibrancy to smaller gardens, as well as dappled light.' *Amelanchier lamarckii*, *Crataegus monogyna* and the characterful old orchard pear, *Pyrus communis* 'Conference', are among his choices for this winning design.

The designer also suggests that larger shrubs, including witchhazel and *Viburnum x bodnantense*, can work well in a smaller setting since shrubs can be pruned up to reveal the lower stems, creating attractive forms akin to multi-stem trees.

Instead of having to look at a hard bank of steps, the owners of the Twickenham garden asked Tom to explore more visually appealing ways of getting from



'Trees and dense planting with plenty of movement give life and vibrancy to small gardens', says Tom, who included an *Amelanchier lamarckii* and a *Pyrus communis* 'Conference' in this London garden.



the lower level of their modern basement extension to the garden up above, and to make it soft and richly planted. The designer explains that he and the owners share a love for Cornwall, with its cliff paths that traverse steep slopes and babbling streams, so he offered a Cubist representation of a cliff path journey, with concrete stepping-stones that were cast on site and which can also double as seating. A shallow Corten steel water feature adds a touch of fun and authenticity to the coastal path journey, where a slip of the foot might lead to wet feet. tommassey.co.uk

FROM TOM'S ADDRESS BOOK

- Landscaper, Landscape Associates, landscapeassociates.co.uk
- Concrete floors, Lazenby Ltd, lazenby.co.uk
- Metalwork and welding, Surrey Ironcraft, surreyironcraft.com
- Water features, Water Artisans, waterartisans.com
- Planting, Deepdale Trees, deepdale-trees.co.uk; The Palm Centre, palmcentre.co.uk



Mandy Buckland MSGD

Taking the time to think after a site visit is a vital part of Norfolk-based Mandy Buckland MSGD's work process. Many of her clients are in the south-east of Britain and she likes to arrange two days of site visits, back-to-back, before

returning to her base.

'My reward for the site visit is to go for a long walk of about two hours, which is when I think about the site and the conversation with the client.' The walk clears her head and allows her to mull her ideas more effectively. 'Then I go old-fashioned,' she says, 'and I draw the design, layering it onto the survey before I go anywhere near a computer design. I also send material boards to the client, as well as my videos of their space.'

Prior to that, however, Mandy asks the owners for their own photographs and then, using the digital mapping website Promap, she downloads the boundaries from which she can work out the size of the space and can give a ballpark figure of the costs. The site visit follows.

'We start the process with our own survey for small gardens and make further analysis before drafting up a footprint of the property,' she explains. 'We take photos of everything, right down to the last manhole cover, gates, outdoor taps, fences, walls and so on.'

Lighting plans, perspective plans and the videos – 'the landscapers and the owners love these,' says Mandy – follow and much later, once the design has

been signed off by the owner, it is put out to tender.

In a small garden such as her Small City Garden (pictured), for which Mandy won the SGD award for Big Ideas, Small Budget in 2022, Mandy likes to provide storage solutions that double as benches and makes repeated use of materials, to give the design a sense of rhythm and cohesion.

Sustainable materials, especially wood, are her first choice and she particularly likes to use larch, western red cedar, or thermo ash cladding. The latter is a sustainable softwood that is baked to give it the qualities and durability of a hardwood.

Large plants are another preference for small sites. 'Plants are my remit and shapely tree ferns, foliage-rich *Fatsias* and clipped, sculptural plants such as bay, *Pittosporum* and *Teuchrium*, are among my choices that provide great structure.'

She is mindful too about keeping any existing large and useful plants in situ. 'I never rip the guts out of a garden. I work with the owners to assess what can stay and I sometimes do remedial work to crown-lift trees and shrubs. I tie ribbons on plants or elements that we want kept so they don't disappear when the landscapers come in.' greencubedesign.co.uk →

FROM MANDY'S ADDRESS BOOK

- Photographs, from the garden owner
- Digital mapping service, Promap, promap.co.uk
- Modified ash decking, Thermory, thermory.com/benchmark-thermo-ash-decking



Mandy uses large, shapely plants to give small spaces a sense of structure. Repeated use of hard materials, especially wood, create rhythm and cohesion.





Finding the boundaries of this small garden becomes an adventurous journey through Stefano's urban forest of tree ferns, aralia and maples underplanted with hydrangeas, geraniums and astrantia.



Stefano Marinaz MSGD

Stefano approaches small garden design with 'minimalism' in mind, especially as far as the layout (which needs to be simple and clear) and hard landscaping materials are concerned. 'Too

many changes of material could overcomplicate the space,' he comments.

He also likens the design process to choosing particular clothes. 'Dressing a garden is a matter of combining all the elements so that it looks at its best in all seasons.'

As many small gardens are in cities that are generally noisy, crowded, and stressful, Stefano aims to introduce a sense of peace and calm.

When it comes to the planting palette, however, particularly the bulb, perennial and grass layer, this can be complex and dense, to contribute colour and texture to the different seasons.

Pleached or clipped trees usually help provide screening and offer privacy from adjacent properties.



Photographs (Sense of Discovery garden), Alister Thorpe

'I keep the shrub and tree layer simple and to a minimum, though. I opt for trees that can be used in clipped form or have see-through, multi-stem silhouettes and in winter, scent is most important,' he says.

His Sense of Discovery garden (pictured), which won the SGD's awards for Planting Design and Garden Jewel in 2022, epitomises his process. A simple gravel path leads through an upper canopy of tree ferns, aralia and maples with a generously planted understorey of hydrangeas, geraniums and astrantia, all contributing to the feeling of an urban forest. 'Because the planting is so full, it's hard to tell when you reach the boundaries,' says Stefano. stefanomarinaz.com

FROM STEFANO'S ADDRESS BOOK

- Pots, water features and firepits, [Atelier Vierkant](http://AtelierVierkant.com),
- Trees, [How Green Nursery](http://HowGreenNursery.co.uk),
- Plants, [Arvensis](http://Arvensisperennials.co.uk),

'I KEEP THE SHRUB AND TREE LAYER SIMPLE AND TO A MINIMUM. I OPT FOR TREES THAT CAN BE USED IN CLIPPED FORM OR HAVE SEE-THROUGH, MULTI-STEM SILHOUETTES.'



Kristina Clode, pre-registered SGD member

'I try to be as environmental as possible in all my designs and aim to use more plants and less hard-landscaping,' says Kristina Clode, whose Wildlife-friendly Eco-house Garden (pictured) at Winchelsea Beach won the SGD Design for the Environment award in 2022.

'In all gardens, but particularly small ones,' she continues, 'I make the borders as large as the space allows so I can layer planting to give varied height, seasonality and opportunities for wildlife.'

The brief for this particular design was to create a sustainable and varied habitat which would be especially suitable for wildlife. The owners also wanted the garden to have a minimal care regime and as low a carbon footprint as possible.

Kristina has used a combination of drought-tolerant Mediterranean shrubs and perennials for the front garden and created a wildflower meadow and plant-rich borders in the back garden.

In general, the designer explains, she prefers to steer clients away from having a large open space at the centre of a garden as she feels the result can be formulaic and unexciting. Instead, she shapes borders towards and into the central space, creating more varied views and interesting pathways, and giving the whole garden a sense of destination.

Clothing the edges of the garden with plants helps to mask the boundaries, making the garden



Kristina had raised vegetable beds made from sleepers and lined the paths of this small coastal garden with brick pavers sourced from the local Bexhill brickworks. The damp clay soil at the far end is planted as a bog garden and ornamented with sculptural reclaimed sea timbers while offcuts of York stone capping from the landscaper's yard were used to line the existing pond nearby.

seem larger but, she adds, 'I aim to balance the mass and voids in a design. Spaces can get over-crowded and some open space is welcome as a balance, and for seating areas and paths.' kristinaclodegardendesign.co.uk ➔

FROM KRISTINA'S ADDRESS BOOK

- Plants, [How Green Nursery](http://HowGreenNursery.co.uk),
- Trees, [English Woodlands](http://EnglishWoodlands.co.uk),
- Unusual plants, [Great Dixter](http://GreatDixter.co.uk/the-nursery);
- Beth Chatto, bethchatto.co.uk; [Madrona Nursery](http://MadronaNursery.co.uk),
- Marchants Gardens and Nursery, marchantshardyplants.co.uk;
- Plant Base, plantbase.co.uk
- Landscape contractors, [Michell's Construction](http://MichellsConstruction.co.uk),
- [SR Avard](http://SRAvard.com),





Mike Harvey, pre-registered SGD member
In his design for a small private garden (pictured) in Richmond, for which he was a shortlisted finalist in the SGD Awards 2021,

pre-registered SGD member Mike Harvey made the most of the large picture windows of the house by bringing the garden all the way up to the glass, so the owners would feel surrounded by it at all times. He also created a space for them to sit outside that is situated deep in among the planting.

‘When you put the garden centre-stage and on full view like this,’ Mike says, ‘you know it has to look good night and day as well as all year round and if you have room for only one seating area, make sure it is comfortable, and possibly doubles in some way as space-saving storage.’

His choice of tree for this or any small setting was equally important since dense shade in such a site needs to be avoided. Many people see trees as problematic in a small garden, suggesting that their inclusion will make the garden look smaller. For Mike, the placing is crucial. ‘If you can look through a multi-stem tree, or round an attractively shaped one such as an olive, it makes the garden feel larger and it fulfils the role of sculpture.’

In this small garden in particular, the positioning of the olive trees is doubly important as they act as a light screen from neighbouring properties. Mike also adds: ‘If you light a tree from below, you increase

THIS PAGE: possibly a bit bigger than the average ‘small garden’, Mike’s design for this site shows his thinking: interesting trees that look good all year round and act as focal points; seating areas away from the house; lots of planting; and a great view from the kitchen.

its ornamental and sculptural value considerably, as it becomes highly visible, day and night.’
mikeharveygardens.com

FROM MIKE’S ADDRESS BOOK

- Plants, Allgreen, allgreen.uk; North Hill Nurseries, northhillnurseries.co.uk; Griffin Nurseries, griffinnurseries.co.uk
- Grasses, Knoll Gardens, knollgardens.co.uk
- Hard materials, London Stone, londonstone.co.uk; CD Bricks and Stone, cdbands.co.uk
- Lighting, Lighting for Gardens, lightingforgardens.com



Tony Woods MSGD
‘Once we have the brief from the client, I take myself off-site and play with scale, shape and flow,’ says Tony Woods MSGD, whose Garden Club London studio has extensive experience

in designing small gardens.

‘Considering most of our gardens are urban ones, boundaries are probably the most important elements. We look at privacy issues, overlooking windows and ugly sites in the background. Shrubs such as *Garrya elliptica* and *pyracantha*, as well as roses trained against walls, are excellent for training as wall shrubs or espaliers, to create interest on boundaries.’

However, it is a mistake to push everything around the edge of the space, he says, as that reduces the flow of movement that plants provide.

In his design for a Borough City Sanctuary garden, which was a finalist in the SGD’s Peoples’ Award category for 2022, he retained existing old roses that were growing against the walls and elsewhere, left the brickwork exposed to enhance the narrative of the garden.

As well as considering the view of a small garden from inside the house, how it links to that inside space is also important. The trend for all- or mostly glass rear extensions developed in part to remove the boundary between inside and out. While Tony and his team understand this desire, they would suggest avoiding replication of materials that are linked to the interior.

Instead, they prefer to come up with a palette of hard landscape materials that adds intricate detail and interest to the outside space. ‘I like to use patterns on fabric or prints as inspiration for layouts,’ he says. ‘You can move the shapes and sizes around. That can help you bring out shapes and flows.’



Photographs (Borough city sanctuary), GAP Photos(Jo Kossak



‘I really like geometric patterns and shapes of the fabric on the seating of the London Underground. If you look at a small section, [you can see] interesting shapes and these provide me with ideas for integrating borders and hard landscaping.’

The choice of tree, or a shrub that can be worked up to a tree size, is crucial. ‘We prefer to use deciduous trees to evergreens as they offer such individual shapes in autumn and winter,’ says Tony.

‘We also favour multi-stem magnolias and parasol- or table-top-shaped trees, or crab apples which can be espaliered, as they are light and airy, creating divisions but not lowering light levels in the garden.’
gardenclublondon.co.uk

FROM TONY’S ADDRESS BOOK

- Specialist nurseries, edrom-nurseries.co.uk

‘WE LOOK AT PRIVACY ISSUES, OVERLOOKING WINDOWS AND UGLY SITES IN THE BACKGROUND.’

The view of a small garden from inside the house is just as important as that outside but as they did for this small London site, Tony and his team prefer to use a palette of hard landscape materials that is separate from that used in the house.