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GARDEN CITY

Waste not, nice plot

Designer Miria Harris gave herself the challenge of a no-skip, zero-waste project, giving away, recycling or reusing everything in this back garden before transforming it into a space her client could love

WORDS ZIA ALLAWAY PHOTOGRAPHS RACHEL WARNE



IN BRIEF

What Sustainably designed and built small city garden.

Where London.

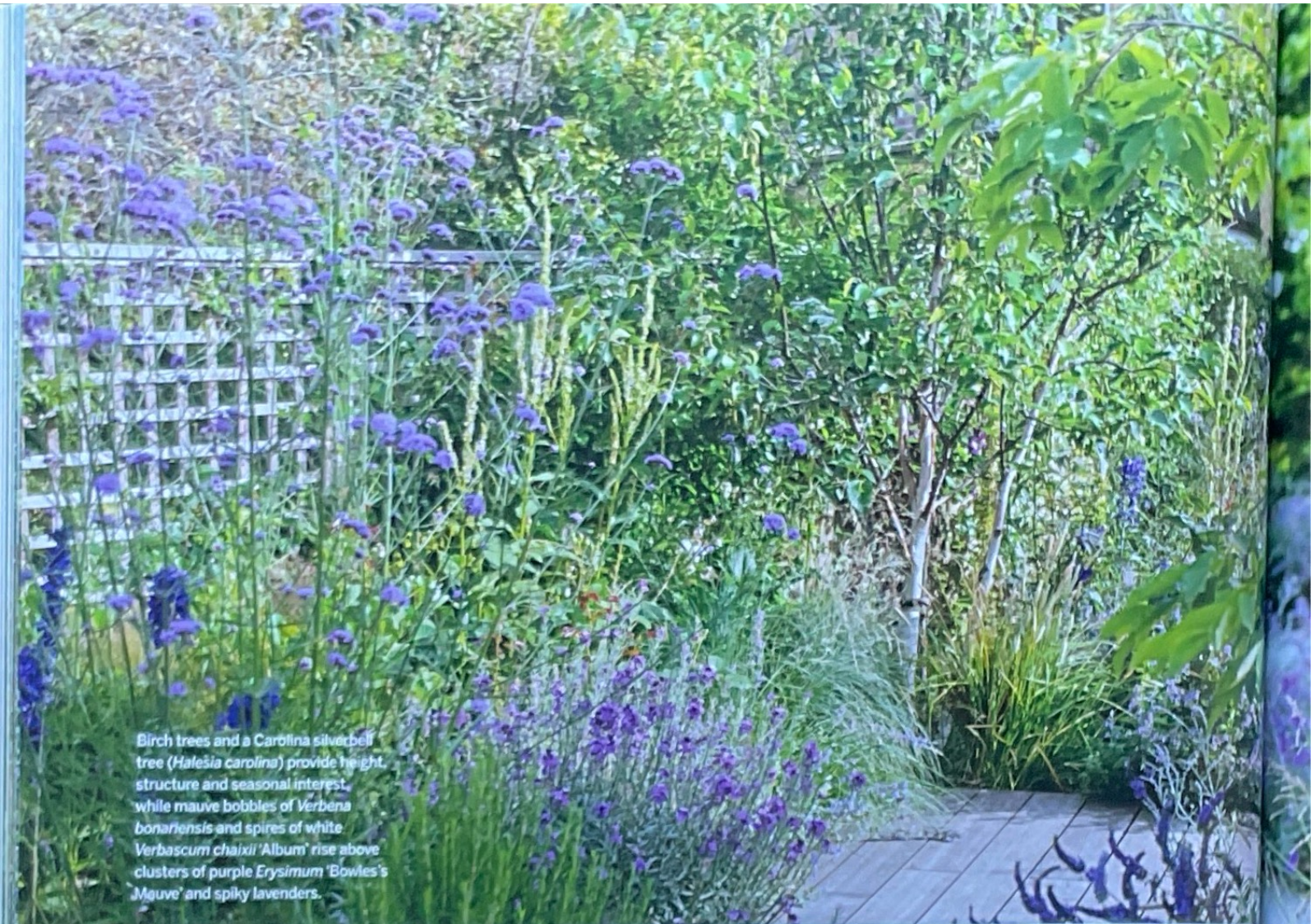
Size 15m x 6m.

Soil London clay augmented with organic matter.

Climate Temperate.

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

Reclaimed timber boards and a confection of pastel blue, pink and white perennials and grasses replaced the tropical-style planting and composite deck that Miria and her client Nicky were able to give away after posting on social media.



Birch trees and a Carolina silverbell tree (*Halesia carolina*) provide height, structure and seasonal interest, while mauve bobbles of *Verbena bonariensis* and spires of white *Verbascum chaixii* 'Album' rise above clusters of purple *Erysimum* 'Bowles' Mauve' and spiky lavenders.

When planning a new garden, top of the list for many owners is a sustainable, plant-rich sanctuary that both they and the local wildlife can enjoy. This was the brief given to designer Miria Harris by her client Nicky, who had recently moved to a Victorian town house in east London with a small, north-facing garden. However, upon visiting the site, Miria was faced with a dilemma she knew would be difficult to resolve.

"I had designed a naturalistic garden for Nicky a few years earlier, filled with roses and perennials in soft, pastel shades, which she loved. She asked me to recreate this aesthetic in her new place, and while that was feasible, there was a problem," explains Miria. "The previous owners had obviously spent a considerable amount on the existing mature garden, so while the tropical-style planting, composite deck and raised concrete terrace were not to Nicky's taste, it would have been incredibly wasteful to put them all in a skip."

Miria says that this is the challenge designers often face when installing a new garden, and one she always struggles with. "The horticultural industry is surprisingly unsustainable at times, and it can be frustrating watching the skips mount up. So, for this garden, I wanted a different strategy." After talking to Nicky about how they could remove the old garden, they came up with a plan to give it away. The existing plants, which included *Tetrapanax papyrifer*, bananas (*Musa basjoo*), bamboos and ornamental grasses, many of which have a high retail value, were removed by a team of landscapers and bagged up into biodegradable sacks. The deck was also carefully dismantled so that it could be reused, while the concrete terrace would form part of the new design. Miria then posted a free plant and material giveaway on social media and

set out a stall in front of the house. "Within 48 hours, everything had gone. Community gardens and private owners were the main beneficiaries, and the deck went to a handyman Nicky knows who installed it at his home, together with the pergola we didn't want."

The next challenge was to future-proof the new garden, using materials from the existing plot that Miria was unable to give away, and sourcing reclaimed timber for the decks and walkway she had designed. "I wanted to ensure that we were not buying more unsustainable materials that could be trashed by future owners in years to come," she says. "I looked around for timber and found just what we wanted at Ashwells, which specialises in reclaimed wood. We chose ekki, a highly durable African hardwood made from a slow-growing rainforest tree. It's not sustainable and is no longer sold in the UK, but this particular timber had been removed from an old roof terrace on a high-rise apartment block because it posed a fire risk." She also secured some reclaimed yellow balau for the fencing from the same supplier.

Broken bricks and old slate chippings were specified as a sub-base to secure the timber walkway, and the concrete platform, which would have been difficult and costly to remove, was hidden beneath the deck at the back of the garden. Miria was determined not to introduce any plastic or additional concrete into the garden and used long, galvanised-metal ground screws to support the deck.

Water is another precious commodity that Miria strives to conserve. "I often incorporate ways of recycling rainwater into my designs, sometimes by harvesting it, or, as we did here, by redirecting the runoff from the downpipes into the garden, instead of the mains water drain. This has consequences, of course, and the area close to the outlet is much wetter than the beds further away, which I've reflected in the choice of plants for the different spaces. We also retained the original land drain under the deck next to the house to make the garden flood resistant." ▸

Recycling the garden really wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be. I would definitely encourage more people to do this and reduce the waste going to landfill

Dark-leaved *Heuchera* 'Mocha', purple *Geranium Rozanne* (= 'Gerwat'), and the New Zealand blue grass *Poa labillardierei* spill from the beds, creating a ruffle of colour and texture alongside the timber walkway.



Miria's 10 tips for creating a no-waste garden

1. Think about how to minimise waste at the design stage. If you remove something, consider how it can be repurposed or, if you have biodegradable waste, such as plants or wood, incorporate it where it can naturally decay on site.
2. Embrace lumps, bumps and level changes, and include unwanted materials and vegetation in the substrate of the garden.
3. Reusing and recycling aren't the only way to avoid waste. To start from scratch, use social media to organise a plant sale/swap or giveaway.
4. Future-proof your garden by trying to not include materials or furniture you wouldn't want someone else to throw away one day.
5. Have a plan for recycling unwanted plastic pots, either by asking if you can return them to the supplier or donating them to local community gardening projects.
6. Don't throw away broken branches or pruned tree limbs. Make a dead hedge or place them in

a quiet area of the garden where the wood can decay and garden creatures can make their homes.

7. Save water. Make your garden as permeable as possible so that excess water can percolate back into the ground.

8. If you do have hard standing, such as a terrace or path, think about angling it so that rainwater runs into a flowerbed or border to irrigate your plants, rather than overloading the drains.

9. Don't be in a rush to tidy up and throw away plant debris in the winter. Spent flowerheads, fallen leaves, berries and seeds provide essential winter habitats and vital food sources for all kinds of wildlife.

10. Take time to consider the design of a new garden, and monitor your existing plot through a whole year to see if you can reuse at least some of the plants, perhaps moving them to different areas of the garden where they may thrive. There is nothing more wasteful than a dead plant.

▷ Miria's new design is a reinvention of Nicky's old garden. The tropical garden has been replaced by a sea of colourful, pollen-rich perennials and wispy grasses, with shrubs, fruit trees, the Carolina silverbell (*Halesia carolina*) and birches providing height and structure. Complementing the soft tones of the timber walkway, which zigzags up to the sunny seating area at the top of the garden, the dense planting also masks the sight lines from the house, encouraging visitors outside to explore.

The soothing colour palette of soft pinks, purples, blues and white creates a sense of calm. Long-flowering perennials, including *Geranium Rozanne* (= 'Gerwat'), *Verbascum chaixii* 'Album', *Delphinium Blue Bird Group*, *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' and *Oenothera lindheimeri* 'Whirling Butterflies' jostle with *Rosa Desdemona* (= 'Auskindling') and colourful leafy shrubs such as *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* 'Eva' and *Cotinus coggygria* 'Young Lady'. Climbers add a vertical dimension, with *Rosa The Generous Gardener* (= 'Ausdrawn'), *Clematis* 'Étoile Violette' and *Solanum laxum* 'Album' performing through late summer and early autumn, while a succession of tulips, alliums and other spring bulbs inject colour earlier in the year.

"The holes left in the beds by the old plants we removed were filled with broken bricks and some of the existing vegetation – which will eventually rot down and release

nutrients – together with a little imported soil," explains Miria. "Many of the new plants were bareroot specimens that arrived in compostable bags, but others were delivered in plastic pots, which we needed to dispose of. The coloured types went into Nicky's domestic recycling, while some of the black pots were collected by the nursery for reuse and the rest were sent to a specialist recycling plant that can deal with black plastic."

Reflecting on her achievement in delivering this zero-waste garden, Miria says that while it is not necessarily a cheap option, since many reclaimed materials can be more expensive than new and labour costs may increase when you do things differently, it is helping to save our fragile planet. "What surprised me most was that recycling the garden really wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be, especially with the help of my wonderful contractors Urban Meadows. The fact that all the plants and many of the materials went to new homes in just two days was incredible, and I would definitely encourage more people to do this and reduce the waste going to landfill. It's a win-win, too, as the new owners come away with a bargain, and everyone is happy." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Miria Harris's work at miriaharris.com

Reclaimed wood sourced from specialist supplier Ashwell Timber was laid on a sub-base of waste materials from the existing garden, such as old bricks and slate chippings. Nicky used furniture from her old home, including the Mandisa bamboo sofa from Idyll Home, to minimise the carbon footprint.