



When Matt Evans moved into his terraced house in Bath in 2020, he was confronted with what many of us face in a new garden – a lawn, some tired hard landscaping and a motley selection of structures. Matt is a chartered landscape architect, garden designer and plantsman, but instead of coming up with a completely new design for the long, narrow garden, he decided to make minimal hard landscaping changes and concentrate instead on filling it with rare and unusual plants. “I decided to create a new atmosphere through the planting. I wanted to create a garden full of treasures,” he says.

Matt dug up most of the old lawn to accommodate as many plants as possible. He kept the concrete pavers near the house and the deck at the top, as well as the main path down the left-hand side. “It does the job and gets you from A to B,” says Matt. “This is a long, thin garden, and the linear nature of the path keeps it feeling long and thin. If I had the opportunity again, I’d like to introduce a more sinuous element. But as the planting fills out over the season and the garden becomes more immersive, the linear nature of the garden is lost.” Matt did introduce some curves by breaking up concrete pavers from the patio and building a winding crazy-paving path through the planting.

There are two main sections to the garden. The area around the breakfast terrace by the house is in the shade of an existing, mature *Prunus lusitanica*. “It’s the only large evergreen element in the garden. It drops a lot of leaves and I wouldn’t recommend it, but it’s useful as a mature specimen that holds the space, and its raised canopy and beautiful multi-stems frame the garden beyond”. In this area, Matt has installed a Japanese Tetsu Bachi water feature and surrounded it with lush planting. “This section of the garden ▷

IN BRIEF

What Small city garden filled with a mix of familiar garden favourites and many unusual (often edible) plants.

Where Bath.

Size 4m x 30m.

Soil Clay (but free draining).

Aspect Southwest-facing.

Designed by Matt Evans (mattevanslandscapes.com).

This image In his own small, skinny garden, landscape architect Matt Evans (above right) chose not to change the existing layout but instead to take up the lawn so he could pack in as many plants as possible.

Treasure trail

Landscape architect Matt Evans has turned his typically long, narrow, town garden in Bath into a plantsman’s paradise

WORDS VERONICA PEERLESS PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM

▷ is all about texture and foliage over flowers. Any flowers that I do have are interspersed with lots of green, as I want this part of the garden to feel calming and restorative.”

The upper area of the garden is sunnier and receives much of the heat at the end of the day. To hold the space here, Matt has planted a foxglove tree, *Paulownia tomentosa*. “I wanted something quick growing. I can be patient, but some things you don’t want to be patient for.” He pollards the tree every year to keep it within bounds and to promote its large leaves, which get bigger as the season progresses. The tree is underplanted with sun-loving grasses and perennials, which catch the last of the evening light and form a contrast to the tree’s dramatic foliage.

At the end of the garden, Matt replaced the old shed with a custom-built one from Heritage Fencing, then insulated it – a much cheaper option than a garden room. It is used as a studio by Matt’s partner Sarah, who is a watercolour artist and calligrapher. Matt built a raised bed in front and filled it with plants, including a multi-stemmed wintersweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*) from Deepdale Trees. “I prune it every year to give it a bit more juice. It has the most amazing scent in winter.”

For the past few years, Matt has been experimenting with the planting. “I’ve used a restrained colour palette that allows me to maximise the number of plants I have, while ensuring that everything still ties together. The more plants I can grow, the more opportunities I have to experiment.”

As well as the garden, Matt has two allotment plots. The one close to his house has been turned into an edible gravel garden, while the other, a woodland garden in nearby Keynsham, is full of interesting shade-loving specimens. “I use my allotments as mini nurseries,” he says. He also grows lots of plants in pots. “When something comes into flower, you can move it around and try it next to different things.”

Rare and unusual plants sourced from specialist nurseries mingle with more familiar garden stalwarts, and contrasting textures and leaf shapes abound. Key anchor evergreens are dotted throughout, including strappy-leaved *Iris lazica*, which has lavender-blue flowers in February; *Heuchera villosa* ‘Autumn Bride’; and various sedges such as *Carex rosea* and *C. sprengelii*. The grass *Hakonechloa macra* is also widely used. “I grow it for its foliage, but the autumn colour is amazing. I know everyone uses it, but it’s popular for a reason.”

The shadier areas are home to *Geranium aristatum*, various species and cultivars of Solomon’s seal (*Polygonatum*), ferns including *Polypodium glycyrrhiza* x *P. scolieri*, *Polystichum x dycei* and *Dryopteris kuratae*, and epimediums, such as *Epimedium x perralchicum* ‘Fröhnleiten’, which Matt ▷



I wanted to create a garden full of treasures... Rare and unusual plants sourced from specialist nurseries



The Japanese Tetsu Bachi water feature is surrounded by textural planting that includes the rich purple flowers of *Geranium sanguineum*, the bronze spikes *Digitalis parviflora*, the tall white flowers of *Valeriana alliarifolia* and the delicate white flowers of *Astrantia major* subsp. *involuta* ‘Shaggy’.

MATT’S KEY PLANTS

1 *Ugni molinae* Ka'pow (= 'Yanpow') Known as Chilean guava, this is an attractive evergreen shrub with nodding pink flowers and edible berries. Height and spread: 1.5m x 1m. RHS H4¹.

2 *Lamium orvala* A dead nettle with attractive heart-shaped, slightly hairy leaves, here growing alongside the foliage of *Helleborus argutifolius*. Good groundcover for a shady spot. It flowers from March to July and provides early nectar for bees. 50cm x 50cm. RHS H7, USDA 7a-11.

3 *Mathiasella bupleuroides* Bears umbels of small, green flowers in summer and autumn. They are surrounded by bracts that are pink-tinted with age. Grow in full sun. 1.5m x 1m. RHS H5.

4 *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Waldenbuch' A feather reed grass with a slightly more open habit than the popular cultivar 'Karl Foerster'. Sun or part shade. 1.8m x 70cm. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

Key plants continue on page 80 ▷



▷ says is pretty much the toughest for dry shade. Matt also has three different species of the nettle-like *Boehmeria* – “they’re great plants, and so easy to look after” – and *Maianthemum tatsienense*, which was spotted on Tom Stuart-Smith’s garden at this year’s RHS Chelsea Flower Show.

The sunnier areas of the garden are home to bright and colourful blooms such as *Allium obliquum*, *Euphorbia sarawshchanica*, *Linaria purpurea* ‘Canon Went’, *Verbascum bombyciferum* ‘Polarsommer’, *Salvia* ‘Nachtvlinder’ and *Leonurus cardiaca* ‘Grobbebol’.

For groundcover, Matt uses wild strawberries. “My parents had a wild garden in Dorset, and one of my fondest childhood memories is picking and eating the little berries.” Matt sowed a pack of seeds in the shady part of the garden three years ago, and they have now spread to carpet the ground. “I don’t really have to weed the garden because of them. I think it’s an amazing plant. When it is in flower, it’s a sea of white stars everywhere. And the berries don’t seem to get eaten by birds.”

A long, thin garden also comes with a lot of fencing, so Matt has clothed this in a variety of climbers, including star jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*), honeysuckle (*Lonicera henryi* ‘Copper Beauty’) and the chocolate vine (*Akebia quinata*).

“I love the idea of plants having a use and I’ve included a lot of unusual edibles,” Matt says. He grows Himalayan honeysuckle (*Leycesteria formosa*) – “If you pick the berries late, they taste like salted caramel”; *Peltaria alliacea*, which has garlic-flavoured leaves; a Japanese pepper, *Zanthoxylum piperitum* var. *inerme*, which has lemony leaves that are great for a salad; and *Ugni molinae* Kápow (= ‘Yanpow’), known as Chilean guava, which tastes like strawberries and was reputedly Queen Victoria’s favourite fruit. Other edibles include *Citrus trifoliata*, which bears citrus-like fruits; *Cardamine bulbifera*, which has an edible leaf and root; Japanese balloon berry (*Rubus illecebrosus*); and Augustine Henry’s blackberry (*Rubus henryi*). He also grows the ornamental but invasive *Petasites japonicus* – “You can eat the leaf stems and emerging flower shoots, which are a delicacy in Japan” – in a large trough.

Matt and Sarah recently welcomed a baby boy, Benjamin, who finds the water feature very calming. Is Matt planning on making changes to the garden to accommodate him as he grows? “I hope the garden gets him exploring,” he says. “We’ve got parks nearby for him to run around in, and the garden lets me enjoy my plant addiction. I spend a lot of time in the evenings, especially now we’ve got the baby, browsing nursery catalogues online. Sarah is always saying, ‘Another delivery has come – where are you going to put it this time?’ But I can always find a place.” □

MATT’S KEY PLANTS

CONTINUED

5 *Zanthoxylum piperitum* var. *inerme* This Japanese pepper has aromatic leaves and bark. Small, yellow flowers in early summer give way to red fruits. 2.5m x 2.5m. RHS H6, USDA 6a-9b.

6 *Polypodium glycyrrhiza* x *P. scoleri* This hybrid of the licorice fern and leather-leaf fern has large, shiny, evergreen fronds. Tough and easy to grow in shade. 45cm x 45cm.

7 *Thalictrum* ‘Anne’ A tall perennial with purple stems, blue-green leaves and purple buds that open to creamy-white flowers in summer. Best in part shade. 2.5m x 50cm. RHS H7, USDA 4a-7b.

8 *Boehmeria japonica* A non-stinging member of the nettle family with a slightly exotic feel to its serrated leaf. 1.2m x 1.5m. USDA 5a-8b.

*Hardiness ratings given where available.



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The *Paulownia tomentosa* tree and giant reed *Arundo donax* create height at the sunny end of the garden. *Verbascum bombyciferum* provide spikes of yellow, complemented by lime-flowered semi-evergreen *Euphorbia seguieriana* subsp. *niciciana*. Flashes of colour come from *Linaria purpurea* ‘Canon Went’ and *Salvia* ‘Nachtvlinder’.



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