

STAGE SET

With bold theatrical flourishes and loose, informal planting, John Wilmot's north London garden invites both exploration and relaxation

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The waterfall is the centrepiece of John's garden. Tufts of grass soften the scheme, while *Vitis cognata* (crimson glory vine) on the grey-painted trellis will soon turn an autumnal red.



THIS PICTURE An urn-shaped water feature in green slate by Ivel Stoneware Designs, 01767 220737, ivelstoneware.co.uk, is reflected in the mirror, adding further depth. **BELOW** Seen from above the waterfall reservoir, this view of the garden includes the avenue of pleached pears.



Behind an imposing stucco-fronted Victorian house in a leafy neighbourhood of north-west London, John Wilmot has been revelling in his new garden. Before its completion last year, it was a forlorn and derelict patch of ground. Today, its transformation has had quite an effect on his lifestyle, with more of his time spent outside in the garden than ever before.

Having decided to embark on the overhaul that was required to create the garden he really wanted, John enlisted the help of Sara Jane Rothwell, a designer who had been recommended to him. His brief was fairly open but there were certain elements he required, such as a waterfall, an arch and mirror in the back wall, and a feature wall of mounted plaques.

From the start, John requested something a bit different. "I knew I didn't want what everyone else had," he says. "I wanted something contemporary, in the manner of my own invention rather than from a catalogue." He also hoped to create a sense of theatre, so it was fitting that Sara Jane had a background in theatre design.

John's choice of bold features has led to the creation of an interesting and dramatic garden, with much to discover in a small area. The slate waterfall in the centre gives rise to a change in level, incorporating what was once an air-raid shelter into the design. A built-in barbecue enables John to entertain comfortably, while eating areas around the garden provide different vantage points from which to admire the scene as well as encourage exploration and movement. Drawing on her theatrical design knowledge, Sara Jane also installed various lighting schemes so that the garden can be an ever-present night view from the house or a place in which to relax in the evenings.

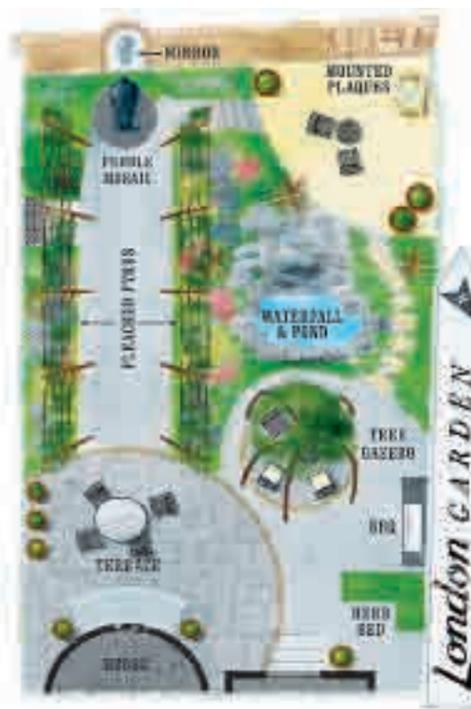
At weekends, John enjoys lingering over a morning coffee on the raised terrace behind the waterfall, where the dappled shade of overhanging trees provides a cool and relaxing spot. Inspiration for the wall of mounted terracotta plaques in this corner came from collections in the Soane Museum.

For the soft landscaping, John relied on Sara Jane's plant knowledge. "I tried to convey the feel I was after and let her interpret it into a visual thing," says John. The planting is informal with selections based on colour and texture. John wanted a limited palette focusing on purples, blacks, greys and silvers, so plants such as *Artemisia* 'Powis Castle' and *Convolvulus cneorum* mix with the purples of *Heuchera* 'Obsidian' and *Eupatorium rugosum* 'Chocolate'. John's personal favourites include *Cotinus* 'Grace', with its translucent purple foliage that catches the

early evening sun, and the luminous Japanese painted fern, *Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum* 'Silver Falls', lighting up the darker corners.

Two of the most striking plantings include an avenue of pleached pears (*Pyrus calleryana* 'Chanticleer') and a tree gazebo trained from *Sorbus aria* (whitebeam). Both add height and drama as well as help to balance and soften the large, hard areas of slate. The avenue leads to an arch with a recessed mirror in the boundary wall, giving the illusion of space beyond.

The design was a true collaboration, with John intimately involved in the process. The result has been a garden that is both highly individual and personal. A year on from its completion, John clearly takes great delight in his new space. The garden has provided the perfect stage set for his new outdoor lifestyle designed for pleasure and entertaining. ■



GARDEN GUIDE

- ORIENTATION** South-west.
- SOIL TYPE** London clay.
- SPECIAL FEATURES** Avenue of pleached pears; tree gazebo; waterfall and pond; arch and mirror; feature wall of mounted plaques.
- GARDEN DESIGN** Sara Jane Rothwell, 07976 155282, londongardendesigner.com.

ILLUSTRATION SCOTT JESSOP



THIS PICTURE *Sedum matrona* punctuates the bed with daubs of dusty pink, with the bronzed spikes of *Phormium* 'Sundowner' behind. **ABOVE LEFT** Terracotta plaques from Italian Terrace, 01284 789666, italianterrace.co.uk, lend a classical note. **ABOVE** The tree gazebo offers an enchanting place to sit.