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Garden NEWS

THE UK'S **NO.1** GARDENING WEEKLY

WE SOLVE YOUR PROBLEMS

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- ✓ Carol Klein on her love of dahlias
- ✓ Grow spires of sunny salvias
- ✓ Quick-fix plants for instant wow



Meet our experts!

Rob Smith is looking ahead to next season



Naomi Slade is enticing bees to her small plot



Martin Fish: "Get more strawberry plants for free!"



SAVE THOSE SEEDS!

Plus other jobs to tackle this weekend



A garden of dreams and reflection

Scrubby grass and bare paving stones have been transformed into a garden with real 'wow' factor



Gardeners: John Lear and Anthony Rafferty, with occasional help
Location: Leigh-on-Sea, Essex
Size: 4.5m wide by 15m long
Soil: Clayey
Aspect: South-west
Been in garden: Since 2011



The garden is a versatile and highly habitable space and, wherever you choose to sit, the vista is vibrant

Words Naomi Slade
Photos Anna Omiotek-Tott

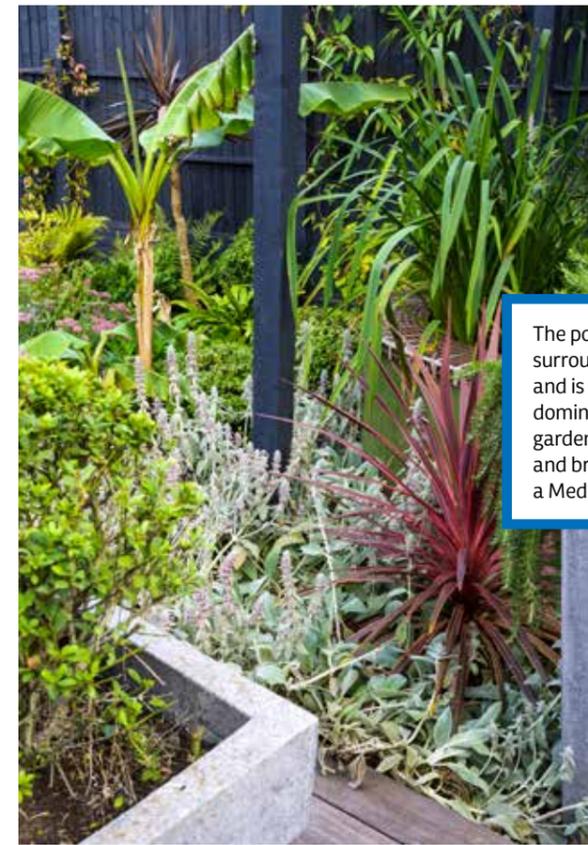
A mismatch between a glorious dream and the mundane reality isn't at all uncommon with gardens, and when John Lear moved into his new home a decade ago, he was underwhelmed but optimistic. "The garden was very plain when I arrived. There was thin, patchy grass with a few stepping stones made out of paving slabs. There were borders on either side and a dilapidated breeze block shed at the end," he recalls. "But I wanted colour and sharp design, things that would make a statement and add a bit of a wow factor."

Knowing what you want is the first step in achieving it and John's vision was clear. So, he contacted local designer Katrina Kieffer-Wells at Earth Designs, who had designed his previous garden, and a plan was soon coming together. "When Anthony and I got married we asked for contributions to our garden fund, which really helped to get things underway," says John. "He had no interest in gardening when he moved in with me. When we discussed it, he just wanted some grass and a few pots! But I wanted something tropical and neither of us are born gardeners, so it had to be easy to care for. Earth Designs helped us to realise that." There were other areas up for debate as well. While both NHS manager Anthony and designer Katrina wanted to get rid of the large

pond, John is fond of his fish and finds the sound of trickling water soothing, so they had to come up with an alternative solution. "The pond did dominate the garden but I wanted to keep it, so Katrina put larger plants in front of it. These act as a

partial screen so that it's revealed as you go down the garden," explains a clearly delighted John. "It's disguised with layers of planting and she also put a decorative corten steel panel over the top."

John always wanted a garden room and envisaged converting the concrete shed, but it soon revealed itself to be beyond redemption. "It was torn down and replaced with a summerhouse; well, it's a bar really - we call it Riff Raff's," laughs John. "The décor reflects the pink and red colours that are in the garden, and we've used wallpaper that has a strong pattern of palms and flowers." Four years on, the transformation is complete and the garden has filled out and matured. The tatty grass has gone, replaced by expansive borders filled with bright, bold planting, while the fence and garden room are painted a very dark shade of grey, which provides a modern foil for the colourful foliage and flowers. A deck outside the house steps down to a catwalk, and this runs at an angle along the garden, connecting the two living spaces together. "It looks just how I envisaged," enthuses John. "It's so full and vibrant. There's a great view along the length of the garden from both the house and the bar, and I come home every day and sit out there. It can be a place of work and also



The pond has been surrounded by planting and is no longer the dominant feature of the garden. Below right, bold and bright colours bring a Mediterranean feel



Above, pink achillea is low maintenance and matches the surrounding decor, right



Repeated forms, such as sword-like or ferny foliage, together with a colour palette of silver, pink and green mean the relatively small space is both smart and coherent



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John & Anthony's favourite plants...



Musa basjoo
Japanese hardy banana trees grow into small trees and often die back in winter. Loves regular water and feeding.



Pink cordyline
A standout specimen plant that livens up any patio. Great for matching to a colour theme. Hardy in most gardens.



Fatsia japonica
Large, handsome, tropical-looking leaves and white globe flowers in autumn. Likes part shade.



Cryptomeria japonica
An attractive conifer with soft needles that turn from creamy yellow to green and then to bronze-purple in winter.

PHOTOS: ALAMY, SHUTTERSTOCK



The pond contains 35 goldfish and koi carp



Fresh green foliage, zesty carex grasses teamed with silver senecio, agapanthus and achillea makes for the perfect palette of plants. Right, elegant echinacea



a social area, and the holiday vibe means we've had a lot of people inviting themselves round!"

The garden has also worked its magic in a number of other ways. Anthony's former disinterest in gardening has been replaced by a great enthusiasm for watering and visiting garden centres to acquire new specimens.

"It's become his baby; he's constantly tending it and looking after it. He loves finding things growing and seeing the new shoots. It's changed his whole feeling about gardening," says John, who is justifiably proud of their developing horticultural skills.

"The garden has matured extraordinarily well and it was a surprise to us how we took to it. We may not be very adept as yet, but we've discovered that we can do it, which is very rewarding."

The garden is at that sweet spot where there's little that needs to be done with any degree of urgency. It's compact, so keeping plants

and screens pristine is no great challenge, and plans for the future are limited to a desire to replace the garden furniture with something new but no less bold and add some extra lighting, together with an ambition to tackle the front garden at some nebulous point in the distant future. And John is content, for the moment, to enjoy the garden at its peaceful best.

"I'm a headteacher in a primary school, which is a pretty stressful job, so I like to potter about or sit and take it all in," he says. "The white lavender is full of bees and the sound of the pond is relaxing. Everything about it is good for wellbeing and for mental health, and sitting in front of the summerhouse looking at the planting is a good end to any day."

...and their top tips

1 It's good to be adventurous and take risks. Don't be afraid of the climate – you may be able to grow more things than you think. We planted a bougainvillea recently and some people might be concerned about experimenting with a plant that likes a Mediterranean climate, but it's actually doing extremely well.

2 Don't be afraid to overplant to create a feeling of fullness – you can always cut back later. We put in lots of white lavender; it looks so full and flourishing and the bees love it!

3 We have a gorgeous tree fern and it got scorched in its original position so it had to be moved. It was pretty sad and we wanted to rescue it so we sprayed it with a dilute solution of Vitax Tree Fern and Palm Feed and it's completely revitalised!