

You can be too thin

If your long, narrow London plot feels more like a corridor than a garden, a host of clever tricks can 'fatten it up'

Alex Mitchell



LONG, thin gardens might be the norm in London, but that doesn't stop them being a bit of a design headache. If you don't treat them in the right way, they can feel more like a corridor than a garden. Luckily there are some easy design tricks anyone can try to make a thin space feel right.

This narrow back garden in Barnsbury, north London, is an uplifting example. Constrained by a large bicycle store on one side, it had the potential to feel hemmed-in and skinny. But London garden designer **Stuart Craine** let it breathe with a meandering path and staggered planting of softly textured plants in white, pink and chartreuse green. It feels wide and spacious, a romantic refuge in which to relax. So how has he worked this optical illusion?

ZONE IT

A mistake people make with thin gardens is to have all their planting around the edges, a straight path that catapults you to the end and a lawn in the middle, in the hope this will make it feel spacious. But that accentuates the narrow shape. Instead, divide a long garden up into "rooms". In larger gardens this is often done with hedges but that would clutter up a small city garden. So split it into different zones instead. Here, Craine has created an airy dining area near the house with potted lavenders, a winding path in the middle and a separate relaxation spot at the back. The bicycle store with its sedum roof and a step up halfway down the garden break up the space, too.

PRACTICE TO DECEIVE

If there's a strong line, your eye will travel along it. Avoid using fencing with horizontal slats unless you can disguise it with plants — otherwise your eye will just zoom along those strong lines right to the end of the garden in a nanosecond, accentuating the narrowness of the space.

DISGUISE YOUR BOUNDARIES

If you are looking at your boundaries, your garden will feel smaller. Here, Craine has broken up the lovely old brick wall with blocks of plants and covered all the other sides with evergreen star jasmine, ivy and other climbers so you can't see them. This makes the space feel mysterious and bigger. At the end of the garden he planted laurel bushes and deliberately left them quite natural in

shape. A neatly trimmed top would have screamed "boundary" but leaving them shaggy blends them into the landscape beyond. From the house you see a dark green area, nothing more, which means you're not sure where the garden ends.

A WINDING PATH

Craine created a meandering path through deep borders which does a great job of making the garden feel wider. The path appears to bend but is actually made of concrete sleepers of different lengths cast in situ and infilled with Scottish beach pebbles. It's the best of both worlds since the strong lines the sleepers make across the garden accentuate its width, and the curve slows down your journey.

"A meandering path allows you to make the borders deeper in certain areas," says Craine, so you can plant generously and create more of a feeling of softness. Lovely evergreens creep over the edges of the sleepers. In the shadier part of the garden, mind-your-own-business and groundcover ivy *Hibernica* do the job, while in the sunnier part nearest the house, Craine uses Mexican fleabane (*Erigeron karvinskianus*).

ZIGZAG PLANTS

Another easy way to make a garden feel wider is to repeat really eye-catching plants in a staggered pattern so that your eye is drawn from side to side, even when you are seeing the garden from the house. Three bold clumps of oversize box balls — or use *ilex crenata* Dark Green if you are worried about box caterpillar — zigzag down this garden.

They are matched for impact by the fulsome white flowerheads of *Hydrangea arborescens* Annabelle, underplanted with generous clumps of *astrantia* Buckland. "The idea was to create a very soft feel," says Craine. The striking shaggy shield fern (*dryopteris atrata*) is another strong year-round presence. Glossy-leaved camellias, *liriope muscari* and Japanese anemones *Honorine Jobert* fill out this beautiful tapestry. Halfway down one side, a tall cherry tree, *prunus Accolade*, provides a cloud of soft pink blossom and useful height.

BLACK BOOK

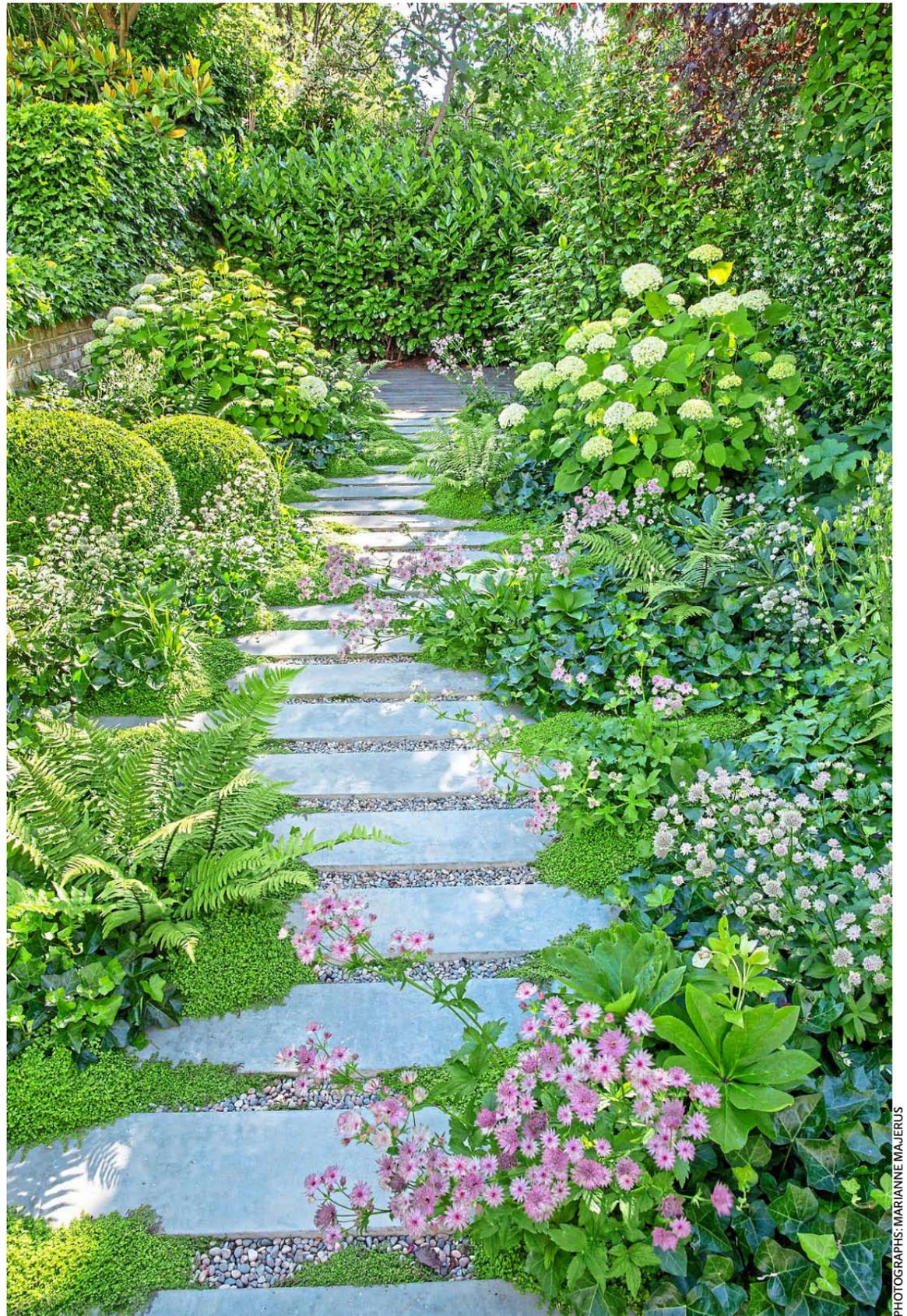
Commission Stuart Craine for design: stuartcraine.com

For garden maintenance: Craine Gardeners (crainegardeners.com)

Plants: Tendercare Nurseries (tendercare.co.uk); Architectural Plants (architecturalplants.com)

Scottish beach pebbles: CED Stone (cedstone.co.uk)

For pots: Atelier Vierkant (ateliervierkant.com)



PHOTOGRAPHS: MARIANNE MAJERUS

Above: a winding path of stepping stones and staggered, softly textured planting make this narrow Barnsbury garden feel wider, drawing the eye from side to side to take it all in

Left: opposite box balls and lavender, a sedum roof turns the bike store into a green benefit, breaking up the long space **Right:** from inside the house you can't be sure where the garden ends, thanks to untrimmed laurels at the rear blending into the landscape

