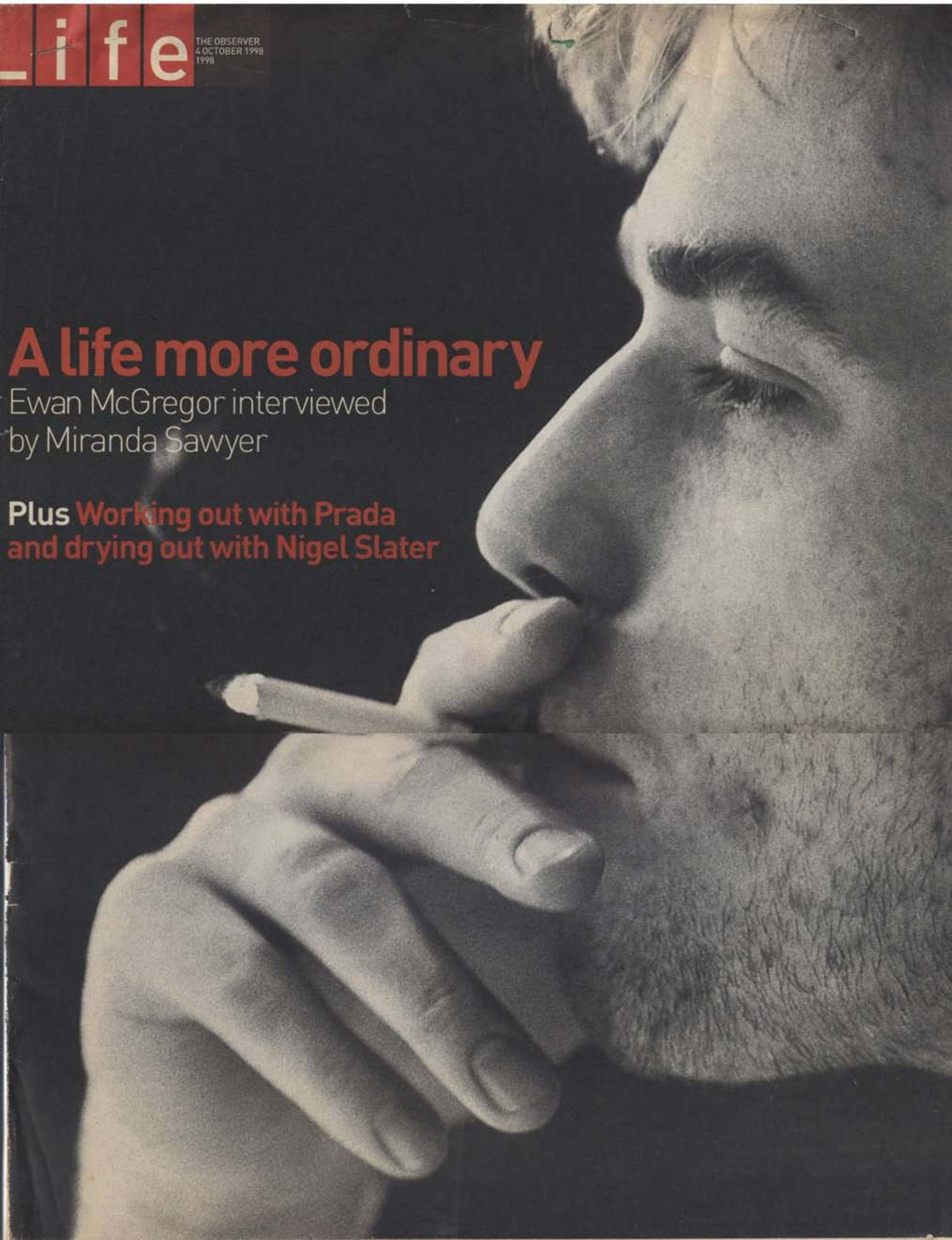


A life more ordinary

Ewan McGregor interviewed
by Miranda Sawyer

Plus Working out with Prada
and drying out with Nigel Slater



Tales from the city

It's crowded, noisy, polluted – but the urban garden has its upside. Figs ripen properly, trees keep their leaves for longer... and there are even shrubs you can plant to keep the neighbours at bay

If you live in the gritty, overpopulated world of urban gardening, there is a whole set of challenges to overcome. To begin with, the chances are you don't have a totally peaceful garden. General noise is hard to control but more specific irritations can be contained. A railway cutting or main road makes a racket but you can filter it with planting.

Sound

Imagine sound as waves. To reduce the amount of noise, these waves must be broken up or absorbed rather than reflected or amplified. To do this, a barrier of planting is needed to a depth of 5m at least. Non-solid fences and mixed shrub plantings are the best defence, and plants with lots of small leaves are better than those with a few large ones. Make the planting as deep as possible: otherwise noise reduction is negligible.

In towns, reflected sound is a big problem and one that is most commonly caused by buildings. Work out where the sound is coming from. Plant climbers on walls and buildings to reduce it. Boston ivy is good because it is self-clinging, goes high and its many leaves dampen sound well. But noise can only be limited by planting – not eliminated.

Neighbours

The people next door are always a problem for some reason: perhaps because we're not meant to live on top of one another. Neighbours come and go, so even if you're OK now, you've got to think 'worst-case scenario' and plan ahead. Plants take time to grow; if you want to improve your privacy or keep out unwelcome footfalls, sort it out now. And a few good thorny shrubs such as barberry and holly are good for a laugh.

Aspect

This means the direction in which your garden – or, more specifically, parts of your garden – face. It's amazing how many 'south-facing gardens' there are, according to estate agents. This is because a south-facing garden is probably the ideal, since you can grow a range of plants on the basis that shade can be created but sun can't. So, which way do you face? The sun rises in the east and sets in the west, which means it's due south at midday. You need to know this when you're deciding what to plant: what needs sun and what doesn't. Aspect will also influence which areas are dry and which boggy.

Have a look to see if trees cast shade – and, most importantly, for how much of the

day something is in partial shade or full sun. The sun is much higher in summer than in winter, so plants will generally have sun peering over fences and buildings for a much longer period each day. Perhaps you need to remove a tree, or its lower branches, to let in more light. A deciduous plant (with leaves that shed in winter) doesn't care how much shade it has if it doesn't have leaves; it only cares in the spring and summer. This is the basis on which many woodland plants survive, doing their stuff in spring before the overhanging trees get it together.

Exposure and shelter

Generally, wherever you live there is a prevailing wind. In most cases this won't bother you unless it is a cold one blowing from the north or east. In highly built-up areas, there is a funnelling effect caused by tall buildings. Shelter can be created by open fences and trellis which filter the wind, and by resilient plants. The harmful effects of wind are partially reduced in large cities by an artificially raised temperature. When siting tender plants, bear the wind in mind; several exotic species such as palms and Cape figwort suffer more from the wind than cold.

Climate and microclimate

If you live in a big city, you will benefit from the 'Urban Heat Blanket'. Tarmac and concrete absorb the heat of the sun, and the energy emitted by vehicles, homes and industry raises the temperature by 2 to 3 degrees. This can have an enormous effect: you might be able to grow tender things that your country cousins can't. Figs will ripen properly; osteospermums will last through a mild winter; and trees will keep their leaves for much longer.

By careful planning and strategic planting, we can manipulate the climate and create our own microclimate. And once your garden is established, the plants within it will have a symbiotic relationship: one will shade another from the sun, which might in turn filter the wind or trap moisture.

Extracted from 'Planted' by Andy Sturgeon, published by Hodder & Stoughton at £20. To order a copy (add 99p for p&hp), freephone 0500 500171, or send a cheque made payable to Observer Interactive to 250 Western Avenue, London W3 6EE. Order before 18 October, and receive a free copy of the 'Mitchell Beazley Pocket Guide to Garden Plants' worth £7.99

By Andy Sturgeon



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