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the times magazine

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jane birkin, robbie williams, ian dury,
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PLUS



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report by
elspeth thompson

photographs by
jan baldwin

Andy Sturgeon in front of his outdoor "summer office" (below); a view through the garden to the stone-flagged patio and peacock-blue conservatory (right); a carved wooden head of a woman from Sri Lanka adds a global flavour to the garden (far right)



horticultural revolution

Andy Sturgeon's energetic approach to gardening is cultivating interest among a



ounger generation used to more extreme outdoor pursuits

Not many gardening books have grainy black-and-white pictures of old welly boots, arms covered in tattoos, and flowers in such close focus that they look like abstract paintings. And few are written by young men just into their thirties who count snowboarding and modern art among their other interests. "I guess you could call it gardening for *Elle Decoration* readers," says Andy Sturgeon, garden designer and author of *planted*. "When I started out 15 years ago, gardening was definitely for the *Songs of Praise* brigade. In recent years it's become much more popular with young people, but there still aren't many books that would appeal to them. *planted* is for people who want to bring the same modern outlook to their gardens as they have in their homes, and don't want to buy something old-fashioned to tell them how to do it."

Andy is talking from a deckchair in his own back garden, a tiny, leafy patch about 12ft by 40ft behind a row of cottages in Claygate, Surrey. "In shape and size it's exactly the sort of garden that many young people inherit when they buy their first house," he says. "I still haven't done as much to it as I'd like, but I've tried to show how, even in a conventional garden, you can get way beyond the 'lawn-and-a-few-shrubs' approach."

His garden is reached through a lean-to conservatory which he has painted bright, peacock blue and hung with hessian blinds. Outside, an irregular-shaped area paved in large, stone flags is dotted with cricket chairs, a Lloyd Loom wicker seat and an old wooden packing chest — Andy's "summer office", where he draws up garden plans and plant orders. The view from ▶



◀ here is, by Surrey standards, unusually exotic. On the left, the leaves of a large banana palm are shot brightest lime by the sun, while a spiky *Cordyline* sprouts from the border like a miniature palm tree. Bamboo and eucalyptus leaves rustle in the light wind. On the right, rising from a necklace of spidery black grasses, is a carved wooden head of a woman, bought by Andy in Sri Lanka on a three-year trip around the world.

"I bought the house before I went, and planted the eucalyptus and birch trees and most of the bushes," Andy explains. "Non-gardeners lived here in my absence, so I returned to find a jungle." It did mean he had a framework of mature shrubs to play with — and the subtle interplay of colours and



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textures confirm his wise choices. The reddish bark and leaf-stalks of the eucalyptus — now 30ft high — are played off by the purple-red leaves of the smoke bush *Cotinus coggygria* and various pittosporums, whose glossy, crinkly evergreen leaves glitter in the light. Covering the fence, the purple vine *Vitis purpurea* scrambles among jasmine, different clematis and the feathery, grey-blue leaves of the Chinese fir *Cunninghamia lanceolata*.

There is evidence of the current fashion for spiky plants and grasses — a 6ft thistle (*Eryngium agavifolium*) stands sentinel by the back door, while clumps of bamboo and the "giant rhubarb" *Gunnera manicata* mark the passage from the main, open area of the garden to a shady, secluded area at the back. "Even in a garden this size, you can still have secret places," says Andy. A modern, makeshift summerhouse, thatched in heather and painted the same peacock blue as the conservatory, stands in the far corner. "I knocked it up in a few evenings," he says, rearranging the candles, stones and opium weights from Burma on the shelf along the

Clockwise from left: Andy Sturgeon's arbour; a coneflower *Rudbeckia*; a pear; toad lily *Tricyrtis communis*; sea holly; *Gunnera manicata*



back. "It looks a bit like a shrine, but it's a lovely place to sit at night."

Andy began gardening at school where he "grew vegetables very badly" with a friend. He admits to drifting into horticultural college as he "couldn't think of anything else to say during the careers interview", yet it was obviously the right choice. He has achieved a lot in just over a decade, building up a busy design practice, creating award-winning gardens for the Hampton Court Flower Show, and installing garden effects for films such as *The Avengers* and *Tom's Midnight Garden*. And he clearly loves it. "It's great having a job that involves being outside and growing things," he says. "Gardening is creative and relaxing and endlessly satisfying."

Andy hopes that *planted* will pass on his enthusiasm. "Gardening should be a pleasure and never a chore. Pottering, tweaking, making mental notes for next year and getting your knees dirty — these are the real pleasures." ●

Andy Sturgeon, garden design: (01372 469643); *planted* is published by Hodder & Stoughton (£20)