

The Sunday Express magazine

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HUT FAVOURITES

When bliss
is a box on
the beach

INNER JOURNEYS

Holidays
that
changed
lives

DUCKING AND DIVING

The day
Leonardo
DiCaprio
fought a
shark

Julie Delpy

French, talented and clever...
so what's she doing in Hollywood?

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PLANT LIFE

BY ANDY STURGEON

It's a jungle out there



You wouldn't think it's difficult to find an overgrown garden. After all, the country must be teeming with them. Or so I thought when Carlon TV commissioned me for a new

gardening series called *Planted* and we looked for a suitable location to work some magic on.

Of course, as soon as the word got round that I was working on a TV show, the offers flooded in. People I'd only just met came forward shamelessly with, "Oh well, if you need a garden in Streatham you can use ours..."

So it looked like it was going to be a breeze. But the problem was that we needed a particular type of overgrown garden. It had to be in London and it had to be at least 80ft long. I wanted somewhere with mature shrubs and trees so that, after some major hacking back and reshaping of lawns, we had the bones of a really good, established garden. This wasn't going to be a make-over show: we had 12 weeks to transform the garden, and we weren't going to paint fences purple or claim to do the whole lot for £500 while someone's husband was out shopping. I needed somewhere to do some real gardening.

And so began the quest. First, the production team asked their mates and their mates' mates. Then e-mails were

circulated around the buildings of large firms including newspapers, magazines and, rather cheekily, rival television companies. Our ideal garden was described as "South or south-west facing, about 80ft long with some mature trees and shrubs but overgrown and neglected in a Miss Havisham sort of way".

The response was underwhelming. Not because we lacked replies, but because of the total unsuitability of the gardens. A hopeful owner would claim his garden was ideal, but it would turn out to be 20ft long, entirely concreted and actually in Kent. Or it would have one of the most meticulously manicured lawns you'd ever seen, clearly not owned by someone familiar with the works of Dickens.

Time was ticking by and the first programme in the series was due to be aired in about four weeks. Various television executive types were getting visibly twitchy about the whole thing and, after wasted visits to a miniature sycamore forest in Shepherds Bush and a shrine to bindweed in West Ham, I too was becoming worried.

Our new friend pressed his face to mine and asked: "Can you smell it? Can you smell garlic?"

So we changed tack and got on to the councils. A nice man came up with a seemingly endless list of neglected council properties in south London, and, quietly confident, I set off with Charlotte, the researcher, to investigate.

Rather naively, we assumed that anyone we approached would be delighted by the idea of a television crew turning up and entirely landscaping their back garden. How wrong we were. Our first mistake was that we didn't have contact numbers for the residents, so we just had to turn up on their doorsteps, ring on the bell wearing our most friendly smiles and slip into charm overdrive.

Our patter would begin with: "Hello, sorry to bother you, but we got your name from the council." To which we received various angry and aggressive responses including, "Council? What do you want? I told you I'll pay the rent

next month, you can't come and hassle me."

"No, it's OK, we're not from the council - we're making a television programme, and we want to fix up your garden."

"But I told them last week, I'll pay when I get the money."

"We don't want any money. We want to give you a new garden."

"Go away!"

"It's free..."

Our next approach was greeted with, "Garden? I'll show you garden." We were led through the flat of a man who had clearly

never heard of Ikea, past a solitary armchair and blaring television and into the "garden". He charged through the brambles, urging us to follow, and angrily waved his stick nowhere in particular, yelling, "See!"

Charlotte and I eyed each other nervously. They never told us telly would be like this. We'd imagined doing lunch and having meetings in trendy bars. Our new friend then rounded on me, pressed his face up to mine and asked: "Can you smell it? Can you smell garlic?" As it happened, there was something invading my nostrils, but it wasn't garlic. I think it was Johnny Walker.

The rest of our day included a visit to two of the most frightening women I've ever met, who owned the biggest Rottweilers and the filthiest garden I've ever seen. Somehow this just wasn't working out. I'm sure Alan and Charlie don't have this much trouble.

And so we returned despondently to the office, only to discover that a garden belonging to a friend of the producer had been found in Clapham. It was perfect in every way. In every way, that is, apart from the four puppies who ate everything we planted. But that's another story.

*Andy Sturgeon's column appears fortnightly. To order Andy's book, *Planted*, (rrp £20) at the special price of £15 plus 99p UK p&p, send a cheque/PO for £15.99 to Express Bookshop, 250 Western Avenue, London W3 6EE, or call 0870 9019050.*



Tendrils trap: *Convolvulus arvensis*, aka bindweed