

the guardian

# WEEKEND

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**OLD SOUL,  
NEW CLOTHES  
THE STORY  
OF THE  
MODERN  
BRITISH CITY**

**PLUS  
BILL MURRAY  
JENNY SAVILLE  
LADS' MAGS**





# Learning CURVES

Garden designer Andy Sturgeon faced an extreme makeover project when he decided to convert his long, thin strip of garden into a meandering outdoor space. But could he keep all the family happy, too? Photographs by Sue O'Brien

**D**esigning my own garden is one of the hardest things I've ever done. I find it easy to distil ideas for other people, editing their requests into a cohesive design, but I wanted everything and my garden just isn't big enough. Add to the mix my partner Sarah with her own wish list (chickens and a veg patch, mainly), plus three young boys, Luke (five), Cameron (two) and Tom (10 months), and a thousand ideas were swimming around in my head.

To make matters worse, the garden of our Brighton town house is a shady, north-facing ribbon barely 5.5m (18ft) wide and nearly 45m (150ft) long. It all felt like some cruel exam from garden design school.

As a modern designer, I really wanted to do something bold and



**Narrow minded:** The snaking boardwalk (left) gives the illusion of greater width, with its curves practically touching the boundary walls under the tree ferns (above)

avant garde, but this was, above all, to be a family garden, so I fell back on a few tried and tested design tricks for long, thin spaces. Hide the boundaries with shrubs and climbers – check. Add mystery and surprise so you can't see the whole garden at once – yes. Divide it up into rooms – I've got at least four. Create changes in level to add interest – done. Don't cram too much in – hmm, I might have failed that one.

The lower ground floor of the house faced on to a depressing, slimy green wall. I decided to dig out the entire thing and the earth behind it, and put in some steps leading up to the garden, to let more light into the house and so people can sit on them when we are entertaining.

Four skip-loads later, plus £1,000 worth of materials, it's done and the pale grey honed Indian sandstone »



paving and chalky white painted walls really do bounce more light into the basement. One wall is painted a vibrant red to inject year-round colour and because it is an excellent foil for a row of creamy terrazzo pots.

I completely neglected the garden during the crucial month of May and, although this is horticultural heresy, I do have a horticultural excuse: I was building a garden at the Chelsea Flower Show. Unfortunately for me, the slugs and snails did not take any time off. They are particularly rampant in my garden – a hosta wouldn't last the night – and I just can't stop them destroying young asters, echinacea, rudbeckia and more. It's a war I'm losing badly.

A curved boardwalk leads from the killing fields through my compact woodland garden under

**In step:** Chelsea gold medallist **Andy Sturgeon** replaced an old wall with wide stairs that double as summer seating – the change has the added bonus of letting more light reach the lower part of the house



the canopy of a silver birch, a pear and a few large shrubs. This is one battle I have won: nursing lady ferns, the snowy woodrush *Luzula nivea* and carpets of *Geranium nodosum* slowly to colonise this frustratingly dry shady spot. Cyclamen, snowdrops and dog's tooth violet have taken a while to get going, but *Astelia nervosa*, with its sword-shaped leaves, is a major success and doesn't even seem to have noticed that the soil is 50% birch roots.

The timber boardwalk is a lazy S snaking from one side of the garden to the other, practically kissing the boundary walls on the apex of the curves. This makes the garden feel wider by using its full width and it creates large areas for planting. And, if I can blow my own trumpet for just a few toots, it works brilliantly.

I know it sounds pretentious –

and one of my friends actually laughed at me when I explained this to him – but I wanted the space to be a bit of an adventure, so that when you go “down the garden”, it feels as if you're going on a journey.

The trunks of three large tree ferns frame enticing glimpses of the garden beyond, and these views change as you walk along the path, with the huge fronds forming a canopy above. They're the most expensive plants in the garden by far but are worth every penny because they have such a strong presence and immediately change its mood.

A single palm tree can make a garden feel tropical – a glade of tree ferns is *Land Of The Giants*, *Lord Of The Rings* and that film with Raquel Welch all rolled into one. Instant atmosphere delivered on the back of a lorry.

This green canopy adds to the »