

The Chelsea winner Andy Sturgeon has turned his Brighton garden into an exotic jungle that's ideal for bonding with his sons.

By Barbara Baker

I waited several months before I was able to see Andy Sturgeon's garden. The weather, his dog, his other commitments and his three boys combined to make it imperfect, even though this is part of its charm. And when I finally did enter the 1870s five-bedroom terraced house, where Sturgeon has lived since 2001, I found his son Cameron, 10, cooking pasta in a rather chaotic kitchen. Sturgeon juggles single parenthood of three boys (their mother, Sarah Didinal, died suddenly in 2010, aged 37), with a landscape design practice that has commissions around the world, writing books and articles and presenting for television. But despite these undertakings, he has also won six gold medals at Chelsea and is one of Britain's leading garden designers. His schemes fuse strong, contemporary styling with natural materials and innovative planting, and he is celebrated for creating bold, architectural and timeless landscapes.

Though he sometimes designs large, classical country gardens and public gardens, Sturgeon is best known for his contemporary urban gardens (a niche market, he maintains, as most rich people want traditional). He has been quoted as saying that he is a modernist, but not a minimalist. As he says, though, "I change my style to suit the project — it might be a garden for a new-build house, or a period one — and each is different. But the key elements are that they are quite architectural and sculptural: whether that is walls, or blocks of yew, or an actual sculpture that I have designed."

Sturgeon, 48, got into gardening through a love of nature and the outdoors. He nearly joined the army, which he maintains "in a bizarre way was for the same reason as I became a gardener: being outside a lot and being in touch with nature". Instead of the forces, he worked with his elder brother, Neil, a landscape constructor. "I started out mixing concrete and the plants came a bit later."

He trained at the Welsh College of Horticulture, studied tropical plants, worked at RHS Wisley, then for a garden designer, and later set up a garden-maintenance business, before becoming a designer himself and setting up on his own. Now, his ingenious schemes are often inspired by modern architecture, paintings, bars, film sets or shop windows. He also aims to reflect his clients' personality — noticing, for example, how they dress and the car they drive.

Sturgeon is strong-featured and dynamic, but also whimsical. His gardens are not dissimilar, his personal plot in particular. Measuring 150ft by 16ft, it is powerfully structured and dramatically textured, yet has the enchanting atmosphere of a forest glade. He bought his house because of the size of the garden: in the heart of Brighton most are tiny.

At that time there was grass, a pear tree and a birch, crazy paving, a few sheds, lots of bindweed and a pond. He had a plan, which he drew up, though he did the work in stages. He wanted to hide boundaries, so he planted shrubs and climbers, and to create the feeling of a visual and physical journey, he divided the garden into different areas. In front

# A boys' own adventure



Sturgeon with his sons, from left, Tom, Luke and Cameron. The boys make weapons out of bamboo in the densely planted garden



of the raised ground-floor kitchen is a decked balcony with steel railings and wooden steps down to the entrance of the garden, where phlomis and *Hakonechloa macra* grass grows on one side of a gravel path, with a yew cube on the other. This part is, as Sturgeon points out, "arranged like a picture, or a shop window, to be looked at". A living arch conceals what lies beyond, adding mystery and surprise as one anticipates the next part of the garden.

A serpentine, steel-edged boardwalk leads through ferns (*Polystichum setiferum* and *P polyblepharum*), grasses and Solomon's seal. On either side and above is a tunnel of bamboo, dense arching shrubs and silver birch, ending in a clearing. Here tree ferns slant upwards, framing views and providing a luxurious canopy, while, below, two round cushions from Chelsea 2008 covered in yachting rope (so they are mould-resistant and suitable for outdoors) sit on top of a curvaceous area of small, black granite setts.

Further on is a lawn edged by a stainless-steel rill (in which Cameron and his brothers Luke, 14, and Tom, 9, used to sail small boats) with box, *Olearia macrodonta*, pittosporum, euphorbia, nandina and acanthus on either side. At the end of the garden is a shed, compost heap and some climbing frames that, now the children are older, Sturgeon will remove, gaining a new space, which, he says, "will be quite liberating. I will have a seating area, made from 2012 Chelsea's paving." The boys now use the garden less, but his dog, Bassey, a mongrel, never stops using, and destroying, it.

There are many aspects of this garden that work brilliantly. First, the planting is surprising and clever, in spite of the fact that the garden is north-facing with dry, chalky soil and, according to Sturgeon, "a massive snail problem, so that things that thrive are quite limited".

The overall impression is almost of an English woodland, but the addition of three large tree ferns and just a few subtropical plants makes a great impact and creates an exotic atmosphere.

Texture and movement are also skillfully achieved. Thin, straight, black bamboo sways above the light-green, lacy leaves of lady ferns and the fine, deep-green, grasslike clumps of *Luzula nivea*. *Astelia nervosa*, with its sword-shaped, woolly topped leaves, thrives under a silver birch. Yet Sturgeon claims to have grown several plants for their historical or ethnobotanical interest, rather than their appearance, and to have chosen robust plants that withstand damage from the children and dog. Tough plants and materials can also be useful in clients' gardens, he says, where longevity is important so that the vision does not disappear after the designer has left.

What advice would Sturgeon give to gardeners without the services of a designer? "Don't use too many different plants, even in a big garden. It is a mistake very often made — I made it for years — but it is all about what you leave out with plants, materials and objects.



Sturgeon has filled the garden with sculpture and texture. Right: his gold medal entry at the 2012 Chelsea Flower Show

## Child-friendly and dog-proof

■ The dog excavates big holes among the roots of my yew squares, yet they survive.

■ Pheasant's tail grass, *Anemanthele lessoniana*, edges everything and fills gaps. Dogs push through it and balls batter it, yet it thrives.

■ The leaves of acanthus are relatively fragile, but it throws out new ones even into winter, so any damage is quickly hidden.

■ In her digging phase, the dog dumped piles of mud onto the ferns' crowns. They need a bit of occasional unearthing, but bounce back, even after several

subterranean weeks. The fronds are totally ball-proof.

■ I'm not a huge fan of the unsightly yellow flowers of the *Phlomis fruticosa*, below, but it sits in the heart of the danger zone next to the slide and swing. The branches are very pliable and difficult to snap, even when a small child falls onto them from a considerable height.

■ The black bamboo, *Phyllostachys nigra*, is brilliant, as it is so tough that the kids can play in it and cut the canes to make things from — usually weapons.

■ On the whole, things with flowers are not great. One can get emotionally attached to flowers very quickly, but buds can be detached from stems even faster by the switch of a recently harvested bamboo cane. **AS**



Also, you should always remember that you are creating a place; somewhere that has atmosphere and hopefully, some heart and soul. That's more important than exactly what it looks like and where you put the furniture." Sturgeon's garden is peaceful as well as exciting: the tunnel at the start creates a feeling of escapism, as if you are entering another world. As he explains, "It is something that I do quite a lot; going from one space to another by going through some sort of doorway."

This is also a device used since the Arts and Crafts movement to create different garden rooms. Sturgeon continues: "You know, as you get older, you go to get something from a room and when you get there you can't remember why you went — well, apparently, something happens psychologically when you walk through a doorway, triggering your brain. And something I like about garden design generally is tapping into deep-rooted things in your psyche. Another basic example is that people tend to sit against something where they feel protected and won't get attacked by other people or animals. It is the same in the garden. It is safe and it is green, which is calming."

There is a strong backbone to this garden, with the cubes of yew echoed by ones of wood, typical of Sturgeon gardens. This one is different, however. In addition to the slightly unkempt



Andrew Hasson; Ian Thwaites/Alamy

## CUTTINGS

### Garden expert

How can I make my hanging baskets more cheery in winter?  
Clare Thomson, London NW10

There's no excuse not to have autumn, winter and spring colour when you use pansies and violas. They love the chilly weather, and flower their hearts out, with a gentle fragrance too.

Michael Perry, new product development manager, Thompson & Morgan (thompson-morgan.com)

What should I keep in mind when growing herbs on a south-facing balcony, and can you recommend a space-maximising planter?  
Robert Green, by email

Herbs are perfect for sunny balconies as many enjoy hot, dry conditions. Use clay rather than plastic pots, which may blow off in the wind. Thyme, bay, rosemary and sage are evergreen, and will look good year round. You can add tender herbs such as tarragon, basil and coriander in summer. For getting the most out of the space, Harrod Horticultural has a three-tiered lean-to ladder garden (£35; harrodhorticultural.com) that has three planting trays, so you can grow lots in a small space.

Caroline Donald, gardening editor

garden.expert@sundaytimes.co.uk



The clocks have gone back and dusk will fall ever earlier. Keep an eye on the time and the possibility of frost with this wall-mounted garden clock/thermometer, designed to be seen from a distance. £30 (plus p&p), gardenbeet.com

### News and views

■ A lovely thing to celebrate: 150 years of the redwood avenue at Benmore Gardens, Dunoon, Argyll, on Friday and Saturday evenings, with music, giant puppets, an aerial performance and illuminations. £7, rbge.org.uk

■ Bob along to celebrate Apple Day with lots to taste and buy at the Cambridge Botanic Gardens today, 10am-4pm. £3, plus garden entry. www.botanic.cam.ac.uk

cuttings@sunday-times.co.uk

✦ Taken from *Contemporary Designers' Own Gardens* by Barbara Baker (Garden Art Press £35). Buy it for £31.50, inc p&p, on 0845 271 2135 or at thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop