

North Ashleetha Galbraith Photographs Ray Cox

# Sunken treasure

A low-level lawn has been transformed into a focal point in Fiona Butler's child-friendly garden in south Edinburgh

**F**OUR YEARS ago, when Fiona Butler moved to a Victorian house with a large garden on the south side of Edinburgh, she knew she would eventually have to tackle the back garden, which consisted of a sunken lawn on the west with a tennis-court running across the back. "It was horrible," she says. "The tennis-court was a massive lump of cement. I was quite frightened by it all. It looked so cold, but I knew I would have to do something about it."

The first thing she did was to replace a collection of old buildings at the back of the house with a new kitchen extension leading to a large rectangular terrace with steps to the garden. Unusually, the surface of the terrace was covered in polished concrete, while the same surface, albeit with a softer finish, was used in the kitchen. "That was absolutely key," explains Fiona. "I wanted the same surface in the kitchen as on the terrace, so I could unify the two spaces, open up the doors and live outside. In the summer I live on the terrace."

Diversity in front of the terrace is a sunken lawn where her children - Rory, 8, and 10-month-old Cormac - play. "In the end, I decided to lay the lawn," says Fiona. "I toyed with the idea of filling it, but I found I enjoyed sitting on the edge and watching the children play. Several of my friends urged me to keep it." The lawn has since been given a focus by moving a wooden summerhouse to a different position, across the lawn from the kitchen. It is painted in the same pale grey as the kitchen cabinets.

A wide flight of steps leads from the terrace down to a contrasting flagstone path, which runs the length of the house. The terrace is flanked on two sides by a border backed with bamboo, which will eventually be allowed to grow two or three feet above the level of the stone to provide extra screening and further soften the potentially sharp-edges of the concrete. The bed is edged with laurel and contains a mixture of perennials and grasses to create there a plenty of interest all year round. Three eucalyptus trees have been set in a mound gravel bed on a corner of the terrace. They draw the eye towards an intriguing dry-stone serpentine wall, which rises and falls its way across the garden - in place of the tennis-court - while winding its way around two grass circles. These circles are outlined in cobbles and framed by herbaceous borders about a metre wide.

Fiona, a former teacher whose previous experience of gardening was limited to wooding a small patio area, explains that the wall and its surrounding



garden were designed by Carolyn Grohmann of Secret Gardens and built by Nick Bengt of Water Gems. "The ground was so flat, and we wanted to bring some height into the garden after we got rid of the tennis-court, but we didn't know how to achieve it," says Fiona. It was Carolyn's idea to build a serpentine wall, which would retain its interest even after the children had stopped using it, she says.

Built of trachyte, a stone that comes from an East Lothian quarry, the wall incorporates two oak seats set in alcoves. There is a small area of paved stone in front of them and a bog garden, which Nick Bengt explains how it works: "This damp garden is kept moist by means of a water feature incorporated into the centre of the design, at the point where a gap in the walls allows a path to run through. The pump sits below one of the stepping-stones that cross the bog garden through the opening in the wall. It pumps water via two hoses to a pair of sandstone spouts on either side of the wall. From there the water spills into two



**Clockwise from main: a dry stone serpentine wall winds around two grass circles; Fiona Butler; the wall incorporates two oak seats set in alcoves; the wooden summerhouse is painted pale grey**

small ponds, before travelling back across the bog garden to be recirculated." This method ensures the area is kept moist all summer for a selection of plants, including purple Iris laevigata, yellow marsh marigold, evergreen Veronica beccabunga, water mint and purple Joncastris, threaded with a plump buttercup-shaped ranunculus.

"I feel that the garden has a bit of mystery to it now," says Fiona, as she sits at the kitchen table looking out onto it. "You can't see behind the wall, and the children love hiding behind it and running along the top. When I entertain friends, we sit on the grass and the children hop across the stepping stones through the bog garden."

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Carolyn Grohmann, Secret Gardens (0131-442 5888, e-mail: secretgardensdesign@yahoo.co.uk) The patio bench is by Little Lujens Company (www.littlelujens.com)

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## Design solutions

**T**HANK you to Doree who replied to my request for gardens for my diploma students. I had many offers and will contact a few soon.

It has been an interesting year for me, as I lectured on a variety of courses and had to consider the effect that garden design has on other professions. For example, there are students who are professionally interested in plants, gardening and botany. These subjects deal with the mass in a garden, whereas a designer first considers the space and how we move around the mass. Giving horticultural students an appreciation of a designer's approach to viewing plants, where we view them from, how we use them to control movement by selecting specimens in key places, and how we use them to restrict access in and out of the garden will help them improve their skills in creating effective planting schemes.

This subject was put to good use last week when I spent a day with a client, planting structural shrubs in her garden, advising on maintaining a new

## 'Maintenance will be reduced when grass is removed'

planting layout, discussing where she should position her existing perennials and reducing the volume of the beds. It is a reasonably small garden - seven by 23 metres - which is detached from her flat. My client is very interested in how the planting composition will build the design and give a longer lasting effect throughout the season, as she will be completing the planting exercise. We discussed the planting arrangement and considered the plant choice, whereby she selects three plants in a group that complement or contrast with each other. This way the overall design is not too daunting a task to undertake.

Although I increased the planting area, maintenance will be reduced because the grass has been removed. Gravel paths create movement around a central planter. This separates the viewer sitting area from a lower utility area, which leads through an arch to a planted walkway. I will visit again in spring to advise on maintenance and check that she has repainted her hut from bright Mediterranean blue to a subdued sage green.

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