



## IN BRIEF

What Californian-inspired wildlife garden, surrounding a modern house.

Where London.

Soil Clay.

Size 580 square metres.

Climate Temperate, southwest-facing garden.

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

In this large city garden, designer Barbara Samitier has used layering to great effect. Here this is evident in both the physical layers of the garden and also in the planting where *Hakonechloa macra*, *Luzula nivea* and *Carex* 'Ice Dance' form an understorey, with aspleniums, polystichums, tree ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) and *Euphorbia amygdaloides* var. *robbiae* as the mid layer, and trees towering above.

# Call of the wild

Designer Barbara Samitier has transformed an urban orchard into a stylish, wildlife-friendly garden for a couple who love mid-century design as much as they love nature

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**D**esigners are regularly asked for wildlife gardens, and for spaces that complement the house. What was different here is that the house is an architect-designed, mid-century building, constructed from engineering bricks, concrete and copper, and that the clients loved California and wanted a West Coast vibe.

The task of marshalling these demands into a cohesive whole fell to designer Barbara Samitier, who had been recommended to owners Lizzie O'Grady and John Cunningham. "A couple of years after we'd bought the house I set about trying to knock the garden into shape," says Lizzie. "I realised I needed professional help. I'd been doing superficial planting but nothing like the statement we felt the house deserved. We needed someone who could have an overview of the space, and help us with that vision."

Having conducted a thorough site analysis, noting the position of the trees, where and when the light hit, and which areas might benefit from screening, for example, Barbara drew up a plan. Her response was to allow the materials and proportions of the house to dictate the feel of the areas closest to it, with a gradual loosening of control further away.

Clay pavers – the same as those used on the floors inside – form the terrace immediately outside the sliding doors, as well as the pond terrace, which runs at a right angle to it. To one side is a small hidden garden, surrounded by yew and totally invisible from neighbouring houses, while to the other is a slick seating area of board-formed concrete around a firepit. Concrete steps, lit with LED lights, lead up past a floating timber deck into the wilder area beyond, where a Breedon gravel path prescribes a circular route around the gently undulating site. The planting too relaxes as you go deeper into the garden. Around the house, borders burst with irises, geraniums, nepetas and amsonias ▷

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**Facing page** The red stems and succulent-like *Euphorbia amygdaloides* 'Purpurea'. Evergreen and with acid-yellow flowers in spring, it is a good foil to the concrete wall behind. Tall-growing *Salvia* 'Amistad' adds interest in late summer and autumn, while clever lighting (under the seating area and below feature trees as well as under the steps) encourages use of the garden in the evenings too.

**Above** Owner Lizzie O'Grady on the wooden deck. Behind her is one of several apple trees, along with a fine *Pyrus calleryana*, that were in the garden when the couple bought it. Barbara has added several other trees and shrubs including *Prunus serrula*, which has attractive peeling bark, and massed *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire' for winter interest.

**Right** The pond is planted with pygmy water lilies and *Equisetum hyemale*, and surrounded by the same clay pavers that are used inside the house. Beyond it is a large existing holly, which Barbara shaped, lifting the canopy to make it less of a thicket. It is underplanted with a circle of lime-green *Hakonechloa macra* of the same circumference as the canopy.





A photograph of a garden with a wooden deck, tall grasses, and a large tree with fruit. The deck is made of light-colored wood and is surrounded by tall, feathery grasses. A large tree with green leaves and yellow fruit stands on the right side of the deck. A hanging lantern is visible near the tree. The overall scene is a mix of natural elements and man-made structures.

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## Contrast and harmony

Part of the success in this garden lies in the contrast between the geometric hard landscaping and the soft, tactile planting. Here, a floating timber deck, constructed to avoid the expense of having to level the uneven ground below, is surrounded by billowing stands of *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' and *C. brachytricha*. The grasses both hide the edge of the decking and their height creates a pleasing sense of privacy while still allowing for glimpses of the garden beyond.

On the terraces closer to the house, board-formed concrete has been used to great effect, taking inspiration from the way the material was used in the Brutalist buildings of London's Southbank Centre (the architect of the house, AET Gerry Matthews, was also known for his Brutalist designs). "We used scaffolding boards to form a mould in the shape we wanted, and poured concrete into this on site," says Barbara. "In this way, the concrete takes on the grain of the wood used for the shuttering, creating a lovely contrast between the natural and the man-made."

This technique was used to form the seating area, the steps up to and across the pond, and the steps leading into the wilder area of the garden. Through this repetition Barbara has not only created a sense of continuity and harmony, she has also created a clever visual link to the boards in the timber deck beyond.





▷ in spring, giving way to sedums, lavenders and salvias as the year progresses. This is also where the design makes a nod to California – or at least to warmer climes and their plants – with lush, architectural tree ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*), various species of euphorbia and even a palm tree (*Trachycarpus fortunei*) in a particularly sheltered spot outside the bedroom window. Beyond the steps, great swathes of grasses (*Sesleria autumnalis*, *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’ and *Calamagrostis brachytricha*) have been used to striking effect, creating a sense of softness against the concrete and screening parts of the garden from view, meaning every twist in the path brings with it a new discovery. “When my mum first visited she was standing under the trees at the back and she said ‘whose house is that over there?’” says Lizzie. “It was ours.”

Such seclusion also brings benefits in terms of longed-for wildlife. It’s not unknown for a family of five foxes to laze at one end while Lizzie potters at the other, and the garden is alive with bees, butterflies, birds, field mice and rare stag beetles, much to her delight. The real game-changer, though, has been the pond – which Barbara fought hard for, despite Lizzie’s concerns about its upkeep.

“It makes the house,” says Lizzie. “Visitors always say ‘wow’ and the creatures love it too. Newts arrived after just two weeks; we’ve seen dragonflies hatching, we have toads... It’s been a real eye opener.” Her goldfish have also attracted slightly less welcome visitors in the form of herons. “I can’t resent them totally even though I’m a bit peeved they’ve taken my fish,” she laughs. “They’re like dinosaurs – you feel honoured when they come into your garden. The way Barbara has created the different zones we feel like we have four gardens for the price of one. It’s been wonderful – I wouldn’t change a thing.” □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Barbara’s work at [barbarasamitiegardens.co.uk](http://barbarasamitiegardens.co.uk)

**Facing page** The area that leads to the ‘hidden garden’ has a Mediterranean feel with plants that work well on clay including *Hylotelephium telephium* ‘Karfunkelstein’, *Ajuga reptans*, *Nepeta x faassenii*, *Salvia yangii* ‘Blue Spire’ and *Euphorbia mellifera*. Across the pond, the seating area is backed with pleached Portuguese laurels (*Prunus lusitanica*) for privacy.

**Above** A pathway of Breedon gravel leads through the wilder area of the garden, where many grasses have been used to keep maintenance to a minimum. Along the path are smaller, more delicate plants, such as *Tiarella* ‘Spring Symphony’, hellebores and sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), to catch interest and slow pace.

**Right** The master bedroom looks out on to the hidden garden, which will become even more secluded over time as the yew hedges grow. A palm tree – a nod to California – can just be seen on the left, while grasses including *Stipa tenuissima* and fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) create a soft, hazy effect.

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