

DESIGNED TO A NEW LEVEL

Pre-registered SGD member Nilufer Danis's multi-level scheme has turned a garden with blocked views, features unfit for purpose, flooding issues and tree preservation orders into a stylish haven

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The clean lines, spacious lawn and borders filled with long-flowering blooms and grasses that form this minimalist-style garden in north London are a far cry from the scene that garden designer Nilufer Danis, a pre-registered member of the Society of Garden Designers, found on her first visit to the home in 2020.

'The owner had recently had some extension work done to the house but had been let down by a landscape design firm she'd employed to upgrade the large garden at the back,' says Nilufer.

'The site looked quite chaotic when we arrived,' she continues, 'with half-finished landscaping work and outside the extension, there were two concrete storage units that partly blocked the view from the house. One of the units was only partially built and its very low ceiling height meant it wasn't fit for purpose.'

THESE AND PREVIOUS PAGES: 12 umbrella trees (six on either side of the lawn), with seasonal herbaceous underplanting, complement the existing trees and frame the view up the lawn, particularly when seen over the green roof of the storage unit immediately outside the back of the house.

'Poorly drained clay soil and the garden's natural topography, which was much lower than the surrounding areas, had also caused some flooding, while the concrete paths appeared to be beyond repair.' Undaunted, the designer took up the challenge to transform the featureless plot into a stylish, tranquil haven.

The owner's brief was for a modern, elegant garden that she and her family could enjoy whatever the season. An existing studio and mature trees protected by Tree Preservation Orders were to be retained, and she also asked Nilufer to integrate the storage units, which were too expensive to remove, into the new design.

'The drainage problems had to be addressed, too, and because the site slopes up from the house to the top of the garden, terracing was needed to make the plot more useable,' says Nilufer. 'We also had to enhance the view from the extension and included naturalistic-looking perennial planting that would add interest throughout the year.'

Because of their status, the trees required careful consideration and Nilufer explains that after receiving the tree survey plan and arboricultural development report from the project arboriculturist, she and her team prepared a tree retention and removal plan. 'This included our proposed working methods within the root protection areas, around those with preservation orders, and details of the trees without preservation orders that we planned to take out,' she says. 'The →



Nilufer Danis

After gaining her Masters in Landscape Architecture, and a Landscape Institute Chartership, Nilufer Danis worked for nine years at leading design and construction practices and as a freelance designer before setting up her own, eponymous studio in 2013. She has three RHS Gold medals, including two Best Show Gardens awards at Chelsea and Hampton Court, and is a pre-registered member of the Society of Garden Designers.

THE MINIMALIST DESIGN OF THREE TERRACES ARE ALL ELEGANTLY BROUGHT TOGETHER BY THE SOFT, NATURALISTIC PLANTING AND SIMPLE GRAVEL PATH.



plan also shaped some design decisions, such as the use of permeable gravel within the root protection areas, and the installation work was all conducted under arboricultural supervision to prevent damage to the trees.'

A light touch

Nilufer created a minimalist design plan in response to the brief, with a pair of steps that lead up from the terrace on either side of a large, two-tiered and plant-filled border that forms the main focal point from the house. The second, large terrace comprises an expansive rectangular lawn surrounded by gravel paths and beds of soft, naturalistic-looking planting framed with *Tilia x europaea* and hornbeam hedging.

To hug the boundary on the left-hand side and protect the path leading to the studio at the end of the garden, Nilufer designed a pergola fabricated in metal and planted *Trachelospermum* along its length to form a veil of foliage and flowers over it. The steps at the studio end, and in the centre of the garden, lead up to the third level, where existing mature *Salix* and *Betula* trees give the space privacy and a woodland ambience. A hornbeam hedge along the rear boundary replaces the original, high-maintenance *Cupressus x leylandii*, and shade-loving plants fill the beds here.

'Working with the architect, we paved the lowest terrace with steel-grey porcelain tiles to complement the white rendered walls and charcoal-coloured detailing of the extension, and its concrete floor inside,' explains Nilufer. 'We also installed a green roof on the fully built storage unit, to create a decorative feature and increase the habitat for wildlife, and clad the walls with slatted timbers so the unit blends into the planting behind it.'

'The half-built unit, which was a roofless shell with three walls, was turned into a sheltered seating area. We fixed a metal frame to the central wall, paved the floor with mosaic-style tiles and used *Ilex crenata* balls and a Japanese maple, all in pots, to soften the structure and increase the sense of privacy.' →

THIS PAGE: Drainage channels have been hidden beneath the gravel paths edged with porcelain tiles and on the third level, behind the existing *Betulas* (middle), a hornbeam hedge has been planted along the rear border in place of an existing high-maintenance *Cupressus x leylandii*.

TOP AND OPENING PAGES: Water from the land drains and the green roof (just visible, right) runs into an underground attenuation tank that is connected to the irrigation system for the beds. *Trachelospermum* will eventually cover the legs of the metal pergola (inset).



On the middle terrace, lacecap *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Dark Angel Purple', the parasol limes and multi-stemmed *Prunus serrula* 'Tibetica' form a structural framework for the space. It is softened by Nilufer's prairie-style planting design that weaves grasses, including *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' and *Deschampsia cespitosa*, in between perennials that have a long flowering season – plants such as *Penstemon* 'Rich Ruby', *Agastache* 'Blackadder', *Verbena bonariensis*, *Verbena rigida* and *Nepeta x faassenii*.

Problems solved

The flooding issues have been ameliorated with land drains, an attenuation tank and planting.

BECAUSE OF THE TREES' TPO STATUS, A TREE SURVEY PLAN AND ARBOREAL DEVELOPMENT REPORT WERE NEEDED BEFORE A RETENTION AND REMOVAL PLAN COULD BE MADE.

'We've hidden the drainage channels under gravel paths edged with porcelain tiles,' says Nilufer. 'The paths also provide easy circulation around the lawn and space for maintenance of both the planting and turf. The water from the land drains is captured in an underground attenuation tank, which is connected to the irrigation system, and surplus rainwater from the green roof also runs into the beds via a drainage pipe. These sustainable drainage systems, together with the permeable paving, have helped to prevent flooding and stormwater runoff.'

Nilufer says that her technical knowledge and previous experience helped her to solve the drainage problems and to successfully introduce new levels into the garden, as well as discharging the planning conditions with regard to the trees: 'It's always challenging to design around existing trees, especially those with preservation orders, but having worked with arboriculturists before, I was able to understand the information they provided about the tree protection areas and make the necessary allowances to gain planning approval.'

The finished garden is a modern, minimalistic design that its owner loves. The design flows seamlessly from one level to the next and the space is filled with colour and interest throughout the seasons. ○

WHO'S WHO

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