

# Gardening

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## My Space



I feel comfortable in gardens fenced in by high walls, great green rooms open at the top, enchanted places where one leaves behind the mundane world and enters a domain of dreams and the imagination. My modest patch in East London is a reflection of my abiding fascination with such places.

When we acquired our house from the Spitalfields Trust in 1998 it was gardenless: the forecourt was buried beneath a typewriter repair shop, and the back garden beneath a sprawling warehouse. I knew, however, from my research that the house, formerly the home of prosperous 18th-century merchants and their widows, once possessed a large pleasure ground and an orchard that gave on to open fields.

Happily, the council allowed us to pull down the later extensions to expose its original forecourt. We gutted the shops and began to conserve the fabric. A gale assisted us: the flimsy shop-front facades collapsed into the street on the eve of the Millennium, to reveal the house and forecourt as they had not been seen since the mid-19th century.

This prompted us to speed up our plans to throw up a brick and wrought-iron palisade and plant a garden behind it. This has since developed into a lush tangle of broadleaf evergreens softened in the summer months by clouds of climbing roses, clematis and jasmine.

The north-facing back garden has become a fernery. Like the forecourt, it is encompassed by imposing brick walls. I'm a great believer in the design premise that one should use big bold things in small spaces, so what better than tree ferns?

I have loved all forms of ferns since encountering them on childhood treks in the West Indies, they are among the oldest surviving plants on earth, and hold a timeless magic for me. Tree ferns were indigenous to Britain before the ice age, so I love to imagine that my little garden is a remnant of the pre-glacial landscape; that the prickly stipules on the

trunks of my ferns still render them unappetising to foraging dinosaurs.

I have 12 large tree ferns. Mine were brought over under licence from the New Zealand Forestry Commission, where they were threatened with destruction by logging. The tallest is around five metres high, and may be more than 300 years old.

Most of my ferns are evergreen, and I love the fact that right through the winter the garden remains beautifully green and lacy. Views from the house are important: looking down from the upper floors, the tree ferns resemble great green fireworks, whose crowns are occasionally commandeered by nesting blackbirds and wrens. I also enjoy looking up through the canopy from my study in the basement.

Walking into the back garden is a bit like entering an oversized terrarium, or a Wardian Case as they were known in Victorian times. As well as the ferns, there is also a scattering of decaying statuary and building fragments including cobbles, slates, bricks and York stone pavements. It now looks much as if it's always been here, covered in moss and mind-your-own-business and fringed with the fuzzy tendrils of *Muhlenbeckia complexa*. I've trained wisteria and other climbers through the eye sockets of the stag's skulls fixed to the walls.

My gardens don't need much care. I'm away a fair bit through work, and you can't be out there worrying about every frost or drought. Like teenage children, I think small gardens, once established, should pretty much be able to take care of themselves. If I try things and they don't

work, it means they don't really belong. I do, however, research my proposed plants beforehand, so most seem to thrive, like the cobra-headed arisaemas in pots, which add to the somewhat curious, melancholic atmosphere.

I don't use unusual plants just for the sake of it; for me, designing gardens is all about creating a sense of atmosphere or theatre. Although I have a scholarly interest in 18th-century town gardening, I have never aspired to recreate a garden of the "powdered head and pigtail" period; I have, likewise, eschewed mimicking on a small scale the grandeur of the royal gardens in which I work, Hampton Court Palace in particular, where I have advised for over a decade.

I am content that our house is marooned in a setting very different from its original one, and that this requires a new response. But, like generations of Londoners before me, I have planted the specks of earth around me to give me some of the pleasant enjoyments of a country life in the midst of the hubbub of the town. When you walk out into your garden you should feel great pleasure, and a real sense of wonder, and this is what my little spaces do for me.

Todd Longstaffe-Gowan was talking to Elspeth Thompson. *The Gardens at Hampton Court Palace* by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan (Frances Lincoln) is available at £23 (rrp £25) + £1.25 p&p. To order please call Telegraph Books on 0870 428 4115.

### Urban jungle

Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, in front of his house in the Mile End Road, East London, left, with melianthus and a fan palm. Tree ferns in the rear garden, centre and top, and the view from upstairs, above