

# International Homes

London's almost-secret hideaways



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## A park to call (almost) your own

LONDON

Communal gardens give neighborhood residents a protected place to relax

BY SUSANNE FOWLER

**Green space**  
Above, Ipek Muminoglu, left, and her husband, Miray, in the Canfield and Greencroft Garden in northwest London. In the Belgravia district, right, where apartments can fetch \$10 million, Eaton Square has six gardens.

Most Londoners will never get the keys to the castle, but a lucky few do get the keys to a communal garden, semi-private spaces for the exclusive use of residents with homes in surrounding buildings.

Some of these leafy spaces qualify as mysterious, almost-secret hideaways, tucked behind homes and invisible from the street. Others are tempting, well-groomed areas in plain view but cordoned off by iron railings and gates.

With the city's once red-hot real estate market so depressed because of concerns around Britain's possible departure from the European Union, buyers are looking for that something extra, even if access to a parklike communal



garden can come with a set of seemingly random rules: Older than 12? You may not be allowed to toss a ball around.

Most of the garden squares in the English capital date to the Georgian or

Victorian eras, when the city was fast expanding over fields and marshlands. But at least a few smart Londoners saw value in holding onto these patches of greenery: Many are now protected by

the London Squares Preservation Act of 1931, which also limits their use to "ornamental pleasure grounds or grounds for play, rest and recreation."

Experts say there really is no accurate count of how many are out there. The city's last complete inventory was carried out almost a century ago, according to Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, a landscape architect redesigning the gardens of Kensington Palace and the author of "The London Square."

"There are possibly 350 early squares (17th to early 20th century)," he said. "If one were to count communal gardens that are not called 'squares,' 'crescents,' etc., I expect the number would be closer to 600 to 700." Some of the newer ones, he said, "are merely street widenings and excuses for the builders to inflate the asking prices that surround them, as it is still very desirable in London to live on a square."

Ipek Muminoglu and her husband, Miray, say that having access to a communal garden has made big-city life more serene.

The couple bought their four-bedroom, 1,750-square-foot, or 160-square-

meter, apartment in 2010 in a building that abuts the Canfield and Greencroft Garden in the South Hampstead Conservation Area. Mr. Muminoglu is a banker in the Canary Wharf financial district about 25 minutes away by Tube, while Mrs. Muminoglu is a stay-at-home mother.

"I was brought up in a house with a garden in Istanbul, so I had this romantic idea of getting a house with a garden," Mr. Muminoglu said over tea in their sun-drenched salon. "But then I realized that a communal garden is the best because someone else looks after it. I wanted a garden and a balcony, and we got both."

Their neighborhood in northwest London is a zone of multistory red brick Victorian-era single-family and subdivided homes that feature terra-cotta panels, original stained glass and decorative ironwork on balconies.

Front gardens are packed with rose and lilac bushes, and are enclosed with low walls and green hedges. It's not uncommon to hear French, Italian or Japanese being spoken by neighbors.

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