

Perfectly formed

Chelsea gold medal-winning garden designer Jo Thompson shares her tips for planning a small but stylish urban haven. Interview by **Caroline Wheeler**

Jo Thompson knows a thing or two about creating bijou gardens. At the 2009 RHS Chelsea Flower Show, her courtyard design for children's charity Demelza House won a silver-gilt medal. This year, she won a gold and the award for Best Urban Garden with her show garden for the charity Thrive. Her winning design, titled "The Unexpected Gardener", was a sleek, tranquil space that was aimed at older and less able people, offering easy-access raised beds, abundant seating, shade and low-maintenance planting schemes. So, what are the secrets to her success?



OUTDOOR ELEGANCE

"Treat your garden like your house," is Thompson's opening gambit. "I view it as another living space that deserves as much investment as a room indoors." Accordingly, she doesn't scrimp on furniture or features, and likens pots to cushions, interchanging them to spice up seasonal planting or to use as a portable kitchen garden. She approves of painting nondescript walls and fences to give visual lift to a space. "The Farrow & Ball exterior range for wood and masonry that we used at Chelsea is as good as anything for the interior," she comments.

Lighting is also high on her list – if starting a garden from scratch, she likes to lay cabling so that trees can be spot-lit and steps and paths illuminated. "You can cable for speakers, too, and have an iPod point hidden in seating," she adds. For easy maintenance, a simple irrigation system – a pipe with drip holes – saves water and worry.

HATCHING A PLAN

But where to start? "Firstly, don't be put off by what you've inherited in a garden," says Thompson. Her first step is to create interest: "Even in a small garden, there should be two or three destinations, with plants to look at along the way." The focal points to draw the eye could be seating, a water feature, an arbour or a fire bowl.

Inspired by childhood visits to formal Italian gardens, her instinct is to use geometric shapes in beds, paths and patios or terraces, softened by loose, blowsy planting. She prefers hard landscaping over a handkerchief of lawn, and likes her seating: "For those idle moments, I incorporate lots of places to sit," she says. "I often have a raised bed in a terraced area, with 1ft 6in walls that double as seats."

For extended patios and terraces, she prefers durable materials – limestone, although it can be slippery in the rain, York stone (new and reclaimed), and hardwood decks. For paths, she uses Cedec (www.cedc.co.uk), a mix of granite and quartzite aggregates. "It's easier to walk on than traditional gravel and gives a clean look," she says.

CREATING HEIGHT

Thompson has a penchant for installing largish trees, as opposed to "doll's house varieties" in small gardens: "It means you make the most of the cubic volume." She likes boldly structured varieties, with multiple stems and beautiful



bark such as the Tibetan cherry (*Prunus serrula*), and the paperbark tree (*Acer griseum*), both of which can grow to around 32ft high. Amelanchier "Ballerina" is another favourite, with spring blossom and good leaf colour in autumn, growing up to 19ft. In winter, the trees have a sculptural quality.

Another way to raise the eye level is to plant against walls and fences and over arbours. Thompson teams roses with clematis, so that one or the other is always in flower from May to October. Favourite combinations are the roses "Pink Perpétue" or "Iceberg" planted with early flowering *Clematis alpina* "Frances Ravis" and "Willy", and the later flowering *Clematis viticella* "Etoile Violette". The modest-sized scented honeysuckle, *Lonicera "Serotina"*, is another good buy. They can all be kept under control with a light prune each year.

A TAPESTRY OF COLOUR

For flower beds, Thompson favours traditional herbaceous perennials that die down in winter and spring up the following year, needing little more than a good mulch with compost and/or

Sitting pretty: above, Jo Thomson's winning garden design at this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show; left, containers with *Buxus*, pansies and grasses

“Thompson teams roses with clematis, so that one or the other is in flower from May to October”

manure in autumn and some feed in spring. She likes to plant a veil of tall plants at the front of a bed – a mass of *Verbena bonariensis*, say – that reveals lower-growing things at the back. "It's a very loose planting style that creates a tapestry effect," she explains.

Colour depends on taste, but a palette of three basic colours works best – pale for a spacious look, jewel for vibrancy. "And rather than have 50 different plants, limit yourself to 12 or 15 types, but use several of them. This prevents the garden from looking dotty," adds Thompson. Extra oomph comes from bulbs planted in spring and in autumn, for late- and early-season flowering, while evergreen box balls and cubes provide winter structure.

As with her garden for Thrive, she often uses one plant regularly to provide a sense of unity in the beds. At Chelsea, it was white cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*), but Thompson also loves the purple "Ravenswing" variety. Hardy geraniums are another good option that will cope in sun or dappled shade.

Last, but not least, include some self-seeders that may provide a few baby plants at no extra cost, such as Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*), fennel, *Verbena bonariensis*, feather grass (*Stipa tenuissima*), sedge ornamental grasses and chives. It makes good gardening sense.

Jo Thompson is based in Marden, Kent
(01622 691596; www.jothompson-garden-design.co.uk)

Outdoor essentials



Made to last
This pretty and durable metal table, £115, and chair, £48, in Aniseed Green are from the Bistro range by French company Fermob. Available in a rainbow of colours. (www.fermob.com)

Hazy days
Hammocks and hot days go hand in glove. Swedish designer Sagaform's Seaside one is a smart choice. From £23. (0844 264 2070; www.royaldesign.co.uk)

Time for thought
Mooch in this white Adironda chair, from £280, and be transported to your very own dock of the bay. (0344 848 4000; www.conranshop.co.uk)

New flame
Use Heal's steel Revolver Firepit, £200, for cooking as a fire, or unfit and added as a table. (08700 240780; www.heals.co.uk)

Double up
The Double Deck Chair, £145, by Cox & Cox has room for two friendly adults or several rippers in its striped acrylic folds. (0844 858 0744; www.coxandcox.co.uk)



Personalised perch
A deceptively simple green oak bench, from £690, by craftswoman Mamie Moyle, is a thing to treasure – and you get to choose your own inscription too. (01635 281786; www.greenoakfurniture.co.uk)