

Words: Jennie Musgrove Images: Lee Garland

A GARDEN FOR ALL MOODS

An imaginative garden in Chester combines structured landscaping with a quirky, segmented design scheme to inspire the senses. Jennie Musgrove paid a visit to meet garden designer David Keegan and find out more about his latest creation.

Situated in a sleepy village near the ancient city of Chester, Hilltop is a modern detached house that would not look out of place in the warmer climes of the Mediterranean. Its newly designed grounds complement and accentuate the home's exotic aesthetic, incorporating tropical water features and foreign planting within a cutting-edge layout.

The garden is divided into different areas, each designed for a different purpose and to reflect a different mood. "The idea is that when you see one section of the garden, you won't know what to expect when you go round the corner," said garden designer David Keegan, who was given an open-minded brief. "The clients Peter and Christine were very adventurous and open minded which really helps when you are creating a space that is not exactly conventional," he said.

To the front of the house, stepping stones alongside a series of raised beds lead up to an aluminium and glass balcony, on which stand two specially commissioned pieces of oak and slate furniture; an asymmetric bench and a piece that looks like a bench turned on its side to stand vertically. "The clients tend to lean on the balcony a lot, so I thought it would be nice to have a proper piece of furniture for them to lean on," said David. The ingenious 'leaning bench' signifies only the start of his inventive ideas that feature throughout the garden.

A modern steel gate leads from the balcony round to the back of the house, where the space is divided into three areas; sunken terrace, sculpture garden »

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All exotic planting provided by Crug Farm Plants in Caernarfon, North Wales.

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Sculpture by Alan Ross at Artinsteel.

Tel. 01989 563153 or visit: www.artinsteel.co.uk

Building materials and stone supplies:

Beers Timber & Building Supplies, Hooton Branch

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Tel. 07789 751678

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and, to the side of the house, a sun garden. A perfectly straight waterway runs through the sculpture garden and ends in a rectangular pool in the centre of the sunken terrace. "It's designed so that if you sit on the curved wooden seat to the opposite end of the garden your eye is drawn along the stainless steel rill to a stone figure of a woman in the sunken garden, your eye is drawn down the garden lengthening the space," said David.

Lining the waterway on either side are two rows of unusual sculptures; thin steel rods with artificial grass balls placed on top. In theory, it sounds like something a contemporary art gallery might exhibit. Yet in reality, the balls (called La Boule Gazon, meaning literally 'ball of turf') create a fascinating and surreal focal point as they gently bob from side to side in the breeze. The avant-garde artwork idea, however, is not far off the mark from what David wanted to create, as he explained: "I wanted to use something artificial but which mimicked a clipped plant. The fact that they are artificial means they will always look perfect and there's no need for maintenance."

"The sculpture section is a bit more playful than the rest of the garden. An installation would be the true definition of what I was trying to create; it's not meant to be a garden in the traditional sense of the word. The whole area is sculptural – the pathways and areas of lawn are treated as sculptural pieces."

At ground level, the waterway cuts through waving stone pathways which are lined by festuca glauca 'Elijah Blue' grasses. A wall of bamboo provides a backdrop for the sculpture garden, with a couple of small seats (designed by David) integrated strategically to get the best views of the house.

Interestingly, the sculpture garden was inspired by an English National Opera production of Xerxes. "It's a bit of a take-off on the royal family – in the opera they turn Buckingham Palace into a minimalist theme park," said David. "I went to see it many years ago and for some reason it stuck in my subconscious and resurfaced in this garden!"

Carrying on round the house, the next section is a sun garden with timber decking bordered by exotic planting in a bark mulch. The area, intended for sun-bathing because it is completely sheltered on all sides, is surrounded by timber fencing and has been fitted with recessed uplights, so that it can be enjoyed both day and night.

Oak railway sleepers have been used as steps down to a lawned area, on which stands an old cedar tree, the only original tree to survive the garden's redesign. Tree surgeon Bernie Jelfs worked on the cedar to make it less overgrown, and carved a wooden swing to hang from the tree, with 'Lexy' (the name of the clients' daughter) carved into it. "He's quite a character," said David of Bernie. "He spent a week on the job and actually got on really well with the family – they ended up inviting him in for tea!"

The garden is a work in progress, and there are still two projects to be completed – a black slate grotto which will be built near the cedar tree, and a summer house with a New England style verandah.

"The idea is that each space creates a different mood," said David. "Some of it looks a bit surreal – it's a homage to the fakery of gardens, where everything is eventually reclaimed by the elements. The garden is about openness, about setting the house into the garden so that they complement one another."

This design ethos certainly seems to have worked; David and his team have created a visually stunning and innovative outdoor living space to be enjoyed throughout the year.



Finishing Touches

The garden brings together many different elements to create an incredibly rich living space. It's the immaculate attention to detail, however, that makes it all work.

Planting

A vast array of exotic plants has been used throughout the garden. A collection of tree ferns stand next to a bamboo screen which hides the garage. The sunken terrace and sun garden have been filled with numerous exotic plants, including: Astranthia; geraniums; acers; Shefflera; silverleaf buddleia and Veratrum.

Sculptures

David commissioned artist Alan Ross to create two steel figures for the sculpture garden. One is sat reading a book, the other is standing and reaching upwards – both add further visual interest and complement the contemporary aesthetic of the area.

Lighting

The garden has been fitted with lighting throughout, with white up-lights on the tree ferns and a variety of recessed spotlights in the sunken terrace, sculpture garden and sun garden. Blue LED lights have been fitted into the walls of the sunken terrace to create a cool, relaxing glow in the evening.

Storage

A garden shed is neatly concealed by a wall at one side of the house, providing storage space for gardening tools and seating. The 'cheeseblock' (so-called because of its shape) is a triangular paved terrace surrounded by bamboo on two sides, providing space for compost bins.

GARDEN NEWS

UK PRODUCED GARDENERS GIFTS

Any keen gardener is bound to have noticed changes in the weather and the environment, and are likely to be aware of increased concern around the environment. That's why Fairwind are stocking UK manufactured gifts perfect for any keen gardener like these pruning pouches. The leather pouch has a water repellent protection and is designed to be used all year round. Included with the pouch are a pair of good quality pruning shears, a pair of cotton gloves and an adjustable belt. The pouches come in camel, conker or fuchsia for £29.50.

Visit: www.fairwindonline.com



The Organic Fruit and Vegetable Gardener's Year: A Seasonal Guide to Growing What You Eat

By Graham Clarke.
GMC Publications £14.99 PB

The Organic Gardener's Year is an indispensable guide to everything the aspiring organic gardener needs to know - season by season. Whether you're planting on a narrow windowsill, in a small patio, an allotment or a large garden, you can dip in to this easy-to-navigate reference and discover facts, tips and inspiration to help you grow the most popular produce - the organic way. By following the clear symbols and colour codes, you'll easily find the solutions tailor-made to your needs. Key sections give up-to-date advice on how best to manage pests and disease without using abrasive or toxic substances; while step-by-step instructions take you through the basics of sowing and growing through to harvesting your own organic crops, as well as the organic way to care for trees, shrubs and garden plants too.

Essential Garden Accessories

The Oak Barrel Company has been set up to offer an eco-friendly option to the familiar choice of plastic water butts commonly available. The barrels are all genuine ex-distillery oak barrels that have been used for maturing spirits such as whisky and bourbon. Similar to wine and beer barrels they are ideal, when re-conditioned, for holding water. Available only via the website the barrels come in a choice of rustic or deluxe and prices start from around £97.

Visit: www.theoakbarrelcompany.co.uk



Bring Colour to Your Winter Garden

As the colourful autumn shades blow from your garden and the winter settles in, why not add some colour to your exterior, by applying pretty colours to your timber. Sadolin woodcare specialists have a great range of shades for you to choose from, whatever your style. Add some colour with some of these top tips,

1 Dry weather is scarce during the British winter, so concentrate on decorating the smaller wooden accessories and items of furniture in your garden, which you can bring inside to paint – a couple of carefully treated garden accessories are guaranteed to cheer up your gloomy garden.

2 Even a small splash of colour, such as on a bird box, will help to raise your spirits, not to mention those of your feathered friends. String them around your garden and treat with charming colours such as Sadolin Four Seasons Garden Furniture Colour and Protector in Prospect Bay (£14.99) for maximum impact.

3 As long as the ground is not frozen, winter can actually be a great time to plant trees and shrubs. Prunus Serrula and clipped Hornbeam columns are a great option for your winter garden, as they will provide beautiful colour when most other plants will be waiting until spring to blossom.

4 For a quick afternoon fix you could spruce up an old planter. Want a shade that looks great against a frosty courtyard, leafy suburban garden or urban living balcony? Then try Sadolin Four Seasons Garden Furniture Colour and Protector in Botanic. You could even finish it off by planting pretty heathers in pink or purple.

5 If you do get a few dry days this winter, take the chance to get outside with your paintbrush. Instead of trying to disguise sheds, fences and gates, try and make a feature of them. Choose a pretty shade, such as Sadolin Classic in 'Winter Ice', 'Smoky Mountain' or Sadolin Superdec in 'Ponderosa Pine', which will complement spring blooms when they arrive and look great in the meantime.

For more information contact the Sadolin Woodcare Advice Centre Tel. 0844 7708 998 or visit: www.sadolin.co.uk