

“It’s fun to try out plants you’ve seen on holiday and dare to be a bit different”

Small garden

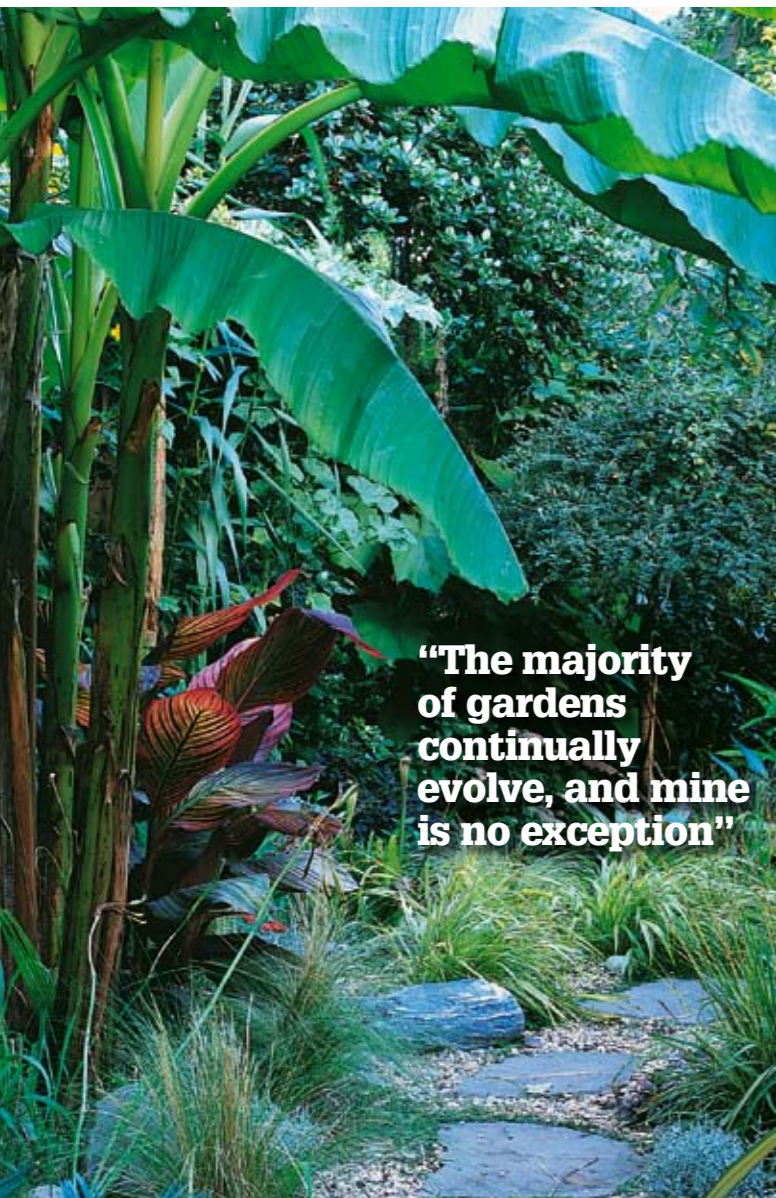
With such exotic planting, you’d hardly believe this garden was in London rather than the tropics, as **Kevin Smith** discovers. Photos by Neil Hepworth

Why settle for an autumn garden that’s putting itself to bed for the winter, when you could have lush foliage, colourful flowers and a taste of the exotic until the end of the year? This is exactly what Robin Beresford has chosen for his town garden, exchanging herbaceous borders for plants more commonly found in tropical climes.

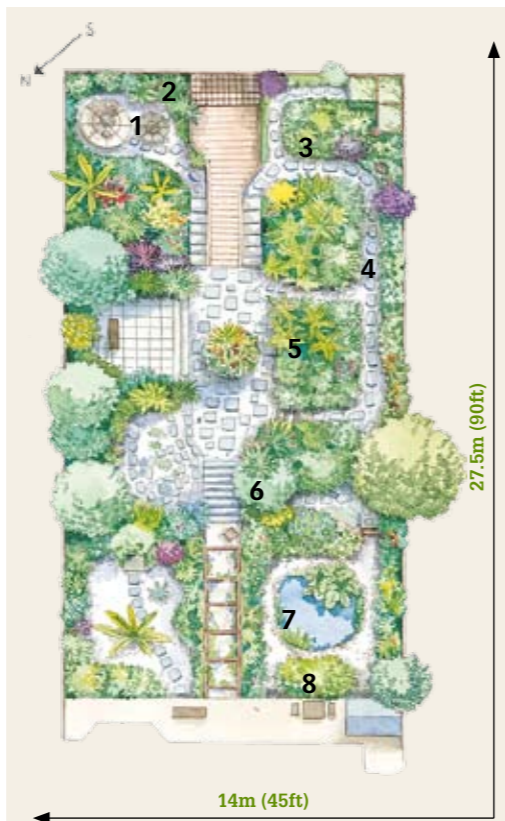
Robin’s story starts 10 years ago when he bought a ground-floor flat in Dulwich, south-east London, with a 27m x 14m (90ft x 45ft) garden, on

a steep slope. He says: “I didn’t really know what I’d bought – the garden was literally a wall of weeds and I had no concept of exactly how much it sloped. It was important I had a garden, however, and I was confident that I could get it into shape.”

As a landscape gardener, Robin had the skills and contacts to clear the space, and within a few months he was ready to lay out the bones of the landscaping, opting for a series of paths, terraces and steps. For the planting, he had just one aim:



“The majority of gardens continually evolve, and mine is no exception”



The plan

Surrounded by trees, this south-east-facing garden has its own microclimate, sustaining an array of exotic plants.

1 Wood sculpture	5 Tree fern grove
2 Cordylines	6 Summer mimosa
3 Japanese maples	7 Wildlife pond
4 Woodland walk	8 Bamboos



LEFT Tall banana trees give support to smaller, more intense plants
ABOVE The garden's clever structure gives a sense of depth and creates the illusion of size
BELOW Robin loves to take a chance on new tropical plants



“I needed to create a microclimate in order to grow the plants I wanted, so I planted lots of trees to provide a very definite boundary to the garden.” His choice of trees set the tone for things to come, with exotic trachycarpus rubbing shoulders with natives. The rest of the planting took Robin three years to complete, using a mix of robust evergreens for structure, dramatic foliage plants and a selection of vibrant late summer and autumn-flowering plants.

How does Robin explain his passion for the strange and unusual? “I hate herbaceous perennials and normal plants – they’re just so boring,” he says. “It’s much more fun to experiment, to push the boundaries, try plants you’ve seen on holiday and dare to be a bit different.”

Robin is true to his word, with every corner of the garden revealing an exotic specimen, from a striking bromeliad (that can live without soil

and flowers for months), to the lush tree fern, a spiky succulent and even the odd carnivorous plant waiting for an insect to satisfy its appetite.

A garden can’t exist without a few of the more common culprits, and Robin has succumbed to yuccas, bamboos, bananas, phormiums, cannas and grasses to form a backdrop to his extrovert performers.

It's the future

So what’s next? “I want to try growing orchids outside. I’m not sure if it will work,” he says, “And if it doesn’t it will be an expensive mistake!”

Whether his approach is more brave than foolish, Robin freely admits he’ll pay anything for a plant if he can afford it. But what about frost? His aim to create a microclimate has clearly worked, and he believes his initial tree plantings of 10 years ago have allowed most of his plants to escape

the bite of frost. “I never bring anything in for the winter and things just take their chance,” he says.

“I must admit I’ve lost quite a few plants over time, but in recent years I’ve had fewer victims.”

So what is the maintenance regime like for such a lush garden? While Robin admits he spends a lot of time outdoors, he claims most of his plants look after themselves. He also has a ‘leave alone’ approach to his trees, not bothering to clear vast numbers of fallen leaves, instead leaving them as a natural mulch. “This is what would happen in the wild, and that’s good enough for me. Lots of my plants like really rich soil and a good leaf mulch is just the thing to produce that.”

You’d be forgiven for wondering if some of Robin’s glamorous plants have anti-social habits, rampaging through the garden or bullying their neighbours. He defends all his

10 autumn plants with exotic attitude

If you’re inspired by Robin’s choice of plants, why not try some of these? With some protection, most of them will survive our chillier climes, enabling you to create your own piece of tropicana.

Exotics for colour

1 ABUTILONS derive from subtropical regions of Africa, Asia, Australia and North and South America, and can be evergreen, deciduous shrubs, perennials or annuals. They flower prolifically in a vast range of colours through summer and autumn. Frost tender.

2 CANNAS originate from forests in Asia and tropical North and South America and have dramatic foliage and striking flowers. Protect from frost.

3 BROMELIADS are striking evergreens, forming rosettes of spiky rigid leaves with white, red or purple flowers. Native to Central and South America and the West Indies. Protect from frost.

4 FUCHSIAS are firm favourites for a bright splash of autumn colour. Many are frost hardy.

5 SARRACENIAS are carnivorous perennials whose ‘pitchers’ catch



Bromeliad



Equisetum

unsuspecting insects. Plants prefer damp, shaded soil and some are frost hardy.

6 SEDUM is a popular, classic plant with spectacular, bold late autumn flowers. Frost hardy.

Exotics for structure

7 BANANAS (*Musa*) can reach 7m (20ft) high if they survive successive winters, and are key to Robin’s design, and are found in North East India and Bangladesh, Japan and North Australia. Protect from frost.

8 HORSETAIL (*Equisetum*) has striking, vertical spikes that make a bold statement. It’s very invasive, so should be grown in a pot. Hardy.

9 TREE FERNS (*Dicksonia antarctica*) are just the thing for the tropical look, originating from South-east Asia, Australasia and South America. Tender, but easy to protect from frost with straw and fleece.

10 BAMBOOS are native to Central China and the North-east Himalayas but are surprisingly at home in the UK.

choices revealing his biggest problem plant is, in fact, tiny. “Mind-your-own-business is probably the plant that gives me the most bother, as it can become so invasive, but it’s easy enough to control with a glyphosate-based weedkiller.”

Autumn beauty

It’s worth considering why Robin’s patch looks so spectacular at a time when most gardeners are struggling with late-summer bedding or trying to inject colour with winter pansies. It’s all about plant choice and climate. Robin’s selection of cannas, and bananas naturally reach their crescendo at the end of the summer and into the autumn. The garden’s microclimate also helps to extend the plants’ performance into winter, maintaining the display throughout the entire year, so the garden never has a bad moment.

Sounds easy doesn’t it? But it would be interesting to see how Robin’s approach would work north of Watford! He’s clearly managed to



get the balance right and is keen to share his knowledge with others, opening his garden under the National Gardens Scheme. He explains: "People are always amazed when they visit the garden, especially if they come at dusk. The style of planting lends itself to flickering candles and hidden lanterns."

Like many NGS openers, Robin sells plants he's propagated himself. But instead of buying run-of-the-mill herbaceous plants, visitors are more likely to leave with an unusual one that has captured their imagination.

It's not just plants that make Robin's garden a magnificent success – his clever design plays a large part. The series of intricate paths, steps, terraces and seating areas means an explorer never sees more than one part of the garden at a time. Each area is different to the last, and by the time a visitor gets to the bottom of the plot, they'll have forgotten where

they came from. Robin laughs: "In my 30 years as a landscape gardener I've drawn so many scale plans, but I haven't got one for this garden. It just evolved over time and the master plan is in my head."

So what's in the pipeline for Robin and his garden? "The majority of gardens continually evolve, and mine is no exception," he explains. "I'm not planning to do anything drastic to the layout, but I don't think I'll curb my fascination for discovering, propagating and growing plants that have got a bit of attitude." □

You can find Robin's garden at 63B Overhill Road, East Dulwich, SE22 0PQ. It's open by appointment on Saturdays, Sundays and week day afternoons all year. Call 020 8516 1900.

Kevin Smith, our commissioning editor, is in the process of creating a small coastal garden in Essex



ABOVE Rough paths lead the visitor through secret coves of colourful subtropical displays
LEFT Bromeliads growing out of driftwood create a striking feature