



Rip it up & start again

Perseverance and the right choice of plants and materials were essential in taming the appearance of this Victorian villa



Words *Caroline Sommerville*
Photographs *Ray Cox*

To transform the front of a Victorian house from gloomy to smart, its owners had to keep the faith with their design team. The traditional 19th century villa, in Edinburgh's Newington, had a look typical of its time, surrounded by heavy planting from old shrubs and trees.

The brief was primarily to increase space for car parking and to replace planting with something more modern, while retaining privacy. Some of the older features were being kept, including mature rhododendrons, the flags, paths and reused sandstone. But the aim was for clean, sharp lines.

The design studio that came up with the plan for St Alban's Road knew what

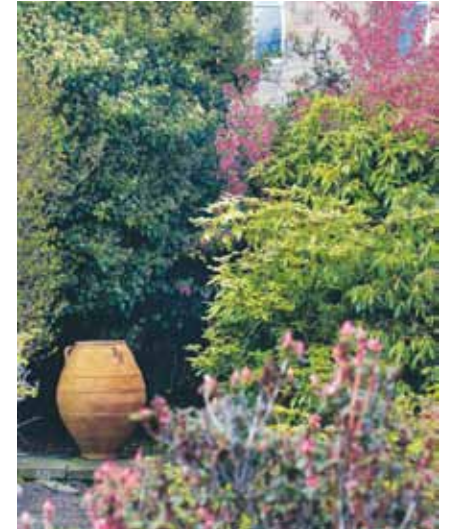
the outcome would be: a crisp look with strong, bold spaces; old and new materials juxtaposed. But it was a big job involving ripping up the existing hedging structure and moving the driveway to the other side of the house.

"We do always say it will look worse before it looks better," says Diane Blood, co-owner with Steven Johnston of Silver Flowe Design. Taking away the mature trees and hedging so the driveway could be moved was at the centre of the design and the boldest decision the owners made. The new driveway was lined with tall trees and more were planted to the street side, creating an avenue and a smart style that is reflected throughout the garden.

"It was a huge job taking out the tired old hedging," says Diane, who worked with contractor Puzzled Monkey Landscapes. "The garden was a large sunny, south-facing space but had a

large unused area shaded out by a huge conifer tree at the other end of the front garden. We decided to move the drive to that end, where there would be enough space for several cars. The existing trees and front hedge were old and past their best so we replaced the hedge with 'instant' yew and planted 23 new trees, including the pleached trees to the side."

Instant hedging – plants that are supplied mature or semi-mature – meant areas could be defined with natural boundaries, without waiting for them to grow. In this case a 20-metre-long, two-metre-tall stretch of yew was installed, showing the breathtaking transformation that can be achieved using ready-grown hedging. It's not cheap, but the boundaries of a garden are one of its most defining characteristics and if what's behind them can be lived with as a work in



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progress, then instant hedging is worth considering in a redesign.

One of the heavier landscape projects was the rebuilding of the front steps. These were worn and chipped away, and replacing them with new stone meant another of the hard landscaping elements could be given a modern, clean finish without actually changing its function. The steps were wide, and to replace them, the contractors had to wait to get stones big enough from the quarry, which were then precision winched into place.

Repointing the exterior walls on the street side extended the look out into the neighbourhood. “Quality material choices were very important to bring a smart, formal feel to this garden, with premium sawn sandstone paving, bespoke cut stone detailing, clean curves of steel edging and raised beds, modern drive cobbles, pale wood-effect deck and steps off the conservatory with contrasting steel uprisers,” says Diane.

The planting was equally bold – no point in having sleek hard landscaping if the soft can’t complement it. All-year foliage covers a palette of silvers, lime greens and reds. Diane explains how they used plants to achieve waves of colour through the season, and introduced movement and airiness from the many ornamental grasses. Each area works hard at a certain time of year then hands over to another, and limiting the colour and plant palette in each border increases its drama.

The conditions vary from hot and sunny at the house, to shadier behind the hedge and in the side garden. This means different plant choices, but linking them by colour or shape. The old driveway to the side of the house is in shade, and plants that tolerate the conditions include textural ferns and grass-like sedges, with flowering hellebores and tiarella. Paving recycled from the old garden was used to make a new path through this area.

The lawn was retained as a foil for the surrounding planting and to create “negative space” – which balances the high-performing designed parts. Paths from driveway to house and rear garden are surrounded by hedging which forms screens to separate the drive from the

conservatory and the side garden. The planting choices in the side garden give it its own character, linking to the front garden through purple pittosporum, ornamental grasses, geraniums and Japanese anemones, with added pops of intense colour from violet salvias, orange geums and yellow crocosmia “Honey Angels”. Stilted hedging of evergreen photinia “Red Robin” is a sophisticated way of maintaining a boundary.

Beyond the side garden and towards the rear a patio was given a simple planting treatment to wrap round and separate it from the rear garden. Raised beds outside the conservatory are filled with bright tulips. Later in summer they show off the fluffy seedheads of Korean feather reed grass *Calamagrostis brachytricha*, complementing the lemon-yellow crocosmias.

Along the neighbour’s side of the driveway raised beds hold screening trees of red-leaved crab apple *Malus “Rudolph”*. Along the street boundary are maples – *Acer x freemanii “Armstrong”* with unusually shaped leaves and fantastic orange and yellows in autumn.

The emphasis on clean lines is perfect for small urban gardens, but larger ones such as this need the softness to balance the age and setting or they could look harsh and uninviting. Copper beech brings walls of warmth and drifts of daffodils will give way to the balls of alliums. Herbaceous planting includes *Euphorbia “Black Pearl”*, salvias and geraniums in early summer, shifting to agapanthus, perovskia, kniphofia and heleniums later in the season. The fragrant jasmine-like climber *trachelospermum* frames the front door. In autumn the colour of the trees and shrubs such as *Cornus “Midwinter Fire”* and scarlet *Euonymus alatus “Compactus”* take over with the blonde grasses as a calming backdrop.

Older, mossy pots and ornaments, in terracotta and stone, complement the new materials and straight lines. What’s achieved is a multi-functional garden with light, space and mood.

To contact the designers and landscapers visit www.silverflowdesign.co.uk and www.puzzled-monkey.co.uk



Clockwise from below: the patio and conservatory; *Pittosporum tenuifolium* “Tom Thumb” by an urn and a hellebore bloom; a raised photinia hedge, daffodils and grasses; daffodils in a raised bed; flowering currant stands out in rhododendron and hydrangea foliage

