

The future of urban gardens

With a client base of hip young things, Adolfo Harrison champions modern thinking, says **Francine Raymond**

So, you've converted the house of your dreams and you're lucky enough to have funds leftover to work on the garden. Perhaps this is your first garden and maybe you don't have the time or confidence to attempt it yourself. You probably have a vision, needs, desires, but where do you start to look for someone with the horticultural knowledge as well as the creativity and spatial skills to turn these dreams to concrete, or something a little more sustainable? Who do you call?

I'd go straight to Adolfo Harrison. His private, mostly urban gardens are stunning, practical but very glamorous; great places to relax outside surrounded by life-enhancing plants whose maintenance won't overwhelm you. With more than a hundred gardens completed over the last decade, I think his team has succeeded in somehow getting the juxtaposition of interior space and garden environment exactly right.

"We're not trying to create a naturalistic environment, it's an outdoor room that creates a cheering composition from the inside looking out, and is a great place to spend time," Harrison says. "There's a tension between man and nature, especially in cities, and a garden dramatises the designed landscape and makes it today's most relevant artistic medium."

With fine art training and an early career curating in London and Barcelona, Harrison continued his postgraduate studies in garden design and horticulture, and spent a year at The Chelsea Physic Garden. Son of a Norfolk engineer and a teacher from the Canary Islands (hence the eye-catching name), he told me his most important influence is the visionary architect and artist Cesar Manrique whose gardens, sculptures and dicta ("I want to extract harmony from the earth to unify it with my feeling for art") populate the island of Lanzarote.

"Manrique achieved a balance between man and nature that makes sense," says Harrison, 39. "His work is theatrical, its success depends on how much you interfere." He also admires Tom Stuart-Smith, whose successful combinations of naturalism and modernity, he describes as "poetic".

What does he feel is his studio's signature? "We try not to have one; it's our client's signature, we're just the storytellers. I'd like to think the ideas



SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED
Harrison's city spaces create beautiful views



OUTSIDE THE BOX
Harrison in a garden he designed in Highbury

ADOLFO HARRISON'S DESIGN TIPS FOR SMALL GARDENS

□ Challenge yourself to make the garden your favourite "room" in the whole house.

□ The composition must excite you when you look out, so it can be enjoyed in all weathers at anytime of the year, morning, noon and night.

□ Use similar materials and lighting so the narrative you've set in the house continues into the garden, and if the floor levels are both the same, so much the better.

□ Outdoor seating must be comfortable enough to entice you outside. Can you lean back, will your ankles fit underneath and is it wide enough to lie down and grab a quick siesta?

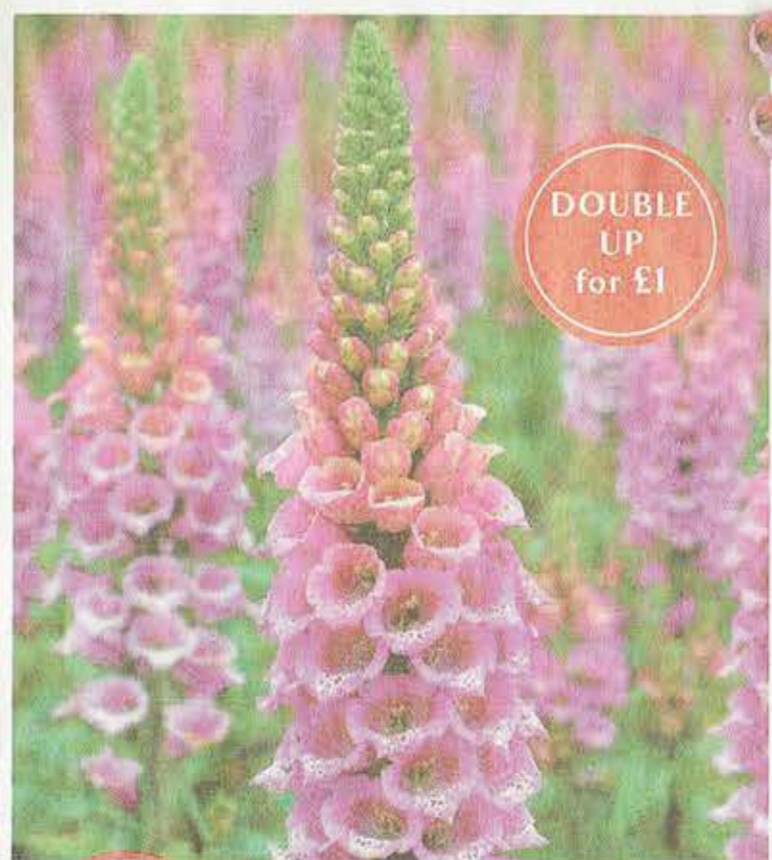
□ Every object in your garden has to earn its keep. Maybe your bench could offer storage space and a raised bed could be built to seating height and double up as a perch.

□ Two thirds of your view will be boundary. Maximise potential with climbers such as Star Jasmine or Climbing Hydrangea and make the most of vital growing space.

□ Be bold with scale: one large architectural plant is better than five medium-sized ones dotted about. And creates a calmer environment.

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flow from the front door gracefully through to the garden." And who are his clients? "They are young, mid 30s to 40s, design savvy. They're very collaborative and open to suggestions for their gardens."

Lawyer Jack Arnold from Highbury, north London, met a couple of designers before deciding that "Adolfo was the most willing to think creatively with me and didn't just go with his own ideas. He tried to understand what I wanted and made it better," Arnold uses his garden throughout the year, admitting it has transformed the interior as well because it can be seen from all the rooms. He has even got rid of furniture so the garden can be the main focal point. "I love the way the sun is backlit through the fig and catalpa leaves and they make shadows on the walls in the courtyard."

Harrison has installed an upstairs balcony full of comfortable seating shaded by the furry leaves of *Rhus typhina* 'Dissecta', reached by a stunning metal staircase against a gold-painted wall. The patches of mossy Mind-

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'We're not trying to create a naturalistic environment. It's an outdoor room'

GARDEN SHOP THREE ASPARAGUS FOR A LONG SEASON

chosen by plant hunter Lark Hanham

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your own business (*Soleirolia soleirolia*) on the granite floor mimic the shadows of the heart-shaped catalpa leaves, and are repeated in the way the paint has peeled on the vintage café chairs. Purple wisteria and *Akebia quinata*, the chocolate vine, climb the walls and stairs.

Designer Siobhan Donaghy moved from a flat to her Dalston town house six years ago. "I saw Adolfo's work in *Elle Decoration* and immediately liked it. Nothing is flashy; he uses natural materials with beautiful contemporary planting I knew would work with a Victorian house, and he seemed genuinely interested in the ideas on my Pinterest board, especially the herringbone patterned fencing.

"The three benches catch the early morning, noon and late afternoon sun so my husband and I can sit out at any time during the day and enjoy the most fragrant species of jasmine and roses,



and my favourite hydrangeas: *H. aspera sargentiana* and *quercifolia*. I love the combination of materials: the soft grey limestone cobbles, the tones of the cedar and the Corten steel make it feel warm and Mediterranean, even during winter when we can see the garden from the house, lit at night and feel we're dining outside."

Materials are carefully sourced from clients' wish lists. Some are reclaimed, most are recyclable and chosen for their longevity, how they age and whether they develop an attractive patina, true to the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi sabi* – the acceptance of transience and imperfection. In the smaller gardens the colour palette is limited and reflects the current fashions for greens, purples and whites.

You can see Adolfo Harrison's designs for public spaces created in part-

HOW TO CHOOSE A DESIGNER

The Society of Garden Designers' website (sgd.org.uk) offers a search facility by name or location, advice on working with a designer and suggests:

□ Look at websites, portfolios and visit previous projects, earmarking elements you particularly like, then spend time thinking about your brief, so you can be articulate about plants, materials and colours.

□ A designer will produce tailor-made designs to match your budget, so be clear how much you can afford. Charges vary (Harrison's small gardens and roof terraces range typically from £15,000 to £100,000), and estimates are essential, with payment stages, often payable before your garden is finished.

□ Be realistic when estimating timings: depending on size, scale and the weather, but allow about six months. Popular designers often have a waiting list (Harrison offers a free initial consultation "that lets parties get to know one another, and if there's a good feeling, we find ways of making the timing work").

□ Finally, be prepared for disruption, especially if materials have to be brought through your recently decorated house, and discuss any build or design issues as they arise to avoid upsets to make sure the project is as painless and successful as possible.

nership with Darryl Moore for Cityscapes (cityscapes.org.uk). They bring a new approach to the way parks and urban open spaces are designed. Collaborations include the RHS London Urban Garden Show; the Remix Garden at Oxo Tower Wharf and Greenwood Theatre. The roll call of Cityscapes participating designers is impressive: Joe Swift, Zandra Rhodes, Andy Sturgeon and Sarah Eberherle.

Harrison is currently working on a project with the Conservation Founda-

HOMES AND GARDENS COMBINED

Harrison's work seeks to complement the existing flow of the house's interior design, creating one space

DON'T FENCE ME IN
Harrison's project in Dalston, London



'Alfonso seemed genuinely interested in the ideas on my Pinterest board'

tion most readers are unlikely to see: designing a garden and horticultural training programme for Wandsworth Prison. Called Unlocking Nature, they are turning tarmac exercise yards into green spaces for growing food and keeping bees and hens (my contribution).

I asked the Foundation's director, David Shreeve, why Harrison was chosen to design these gardens. "The project is a challenge. We're starting with a desolate Victorian pile and we need someone not only with outstanding design skills, but a with great enthusiasm and a talent for communication. Adolfo ticked all the boxes and we're looking forward to a great result."

RECOMMENDED DESIGNERS



□ Anoushka Feiler (bestique.co.uk) is a multi-award-winning gardener based in Oxfordshire and London working on stylish residential, commercial and public gardens throughout the country.



□ Chelsea medal winner Kate Gould and her team will tackle all shapes and sizes of projects from city courtyards to country estates. Have a look at her work at kategouldgardens.com.



□ Daniel Lobb says, "The most rewarding aspect of garden design is the time-based aspect of nature; each space evolves season upon season." His work ranges from a breaker's yard to manor house gardens (daniellobb.co.uk).