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# Chilled out & cool in Kensington

Designer Philip Nixon is the new kid on the block, showing a bling-but-beautiful look that's perfect for SW5. By **Joanna Fortnam**

In recessionary times it is a slightly guilty pleasure to come across a deluxe garden. But in the London borough of Kensington and Chelsea, designer Philip Nixon has built a garden with a bravado more often associated with swanky Los Angeles pads seen in glossy coffee table books. Sophisticated European in its attention to detail, Californian in its attitude to outdoor living, this seamless indoor/outdoor space has a 39yd-long black granite rill, a fireplace, light walls that glow at night, a 10yd overflowing granite bench water feature, and a swimming pool tucked away underneath (making the whole space effectively a roof garden).

It may all sound a bit "bling". But, in essence, this is a classic outdoor room that would work for any urban family. It offers easy access from the house, shelter from sun and rain, a secluded play area for children off the street, private space for adults, and unfussy planting that performs all year and requires minimal maintenance.

Philip Nixon may be a new kid on the block compared with certain household-name garden designers, but he has been seriously busy almost since he emerged



**LA meets Kensington:** a black bench, top, gently overflows; Philip Nixon, above, has created a garden that provides for all a family's needs but still looks stylish

from a career change 10 years ago, left the City, volunteered at Chelsea Physic Garden to learn plants and practical gardening, then qualified in design at the Inchbald. Since a run of gold medals at Chelsea Flower Show he now heads a team of five at Philip Nixon Design. Key to his success is an ability to be a team player with top-flight architects and interior designers: "The best design comes from collaboration. Clients don't expect me to sit in a room and come up with ideas in isolation – and I find that more interesting ideas are sparked off by others' comments," he says.

Nixon has found a niche in cool, contemporary town gardens and, increasingly, large country gardens (in fact, since the credit crunch, he's found these are holding up better than the town gardens). He straddles two streams – architectural and minimal in town; productive, more traditional gardens for the country.

This project came about after Nixon was recommended by friends of the clients. A modern space that takes its cues from minimalism rather than picking up on the Kensington porticoed



white stucco look, the garden wraps around the end house in a row of three newbuilds. The story is that three friends bought the plot, a former electricity sub station, razed the Fifties building, and each built a house. Quite a property deal, but we're not here to gossip, we're here to see the garden.

The garden starts as a spacious walk alongside the house, running front to back of the property. Pollarded limes mark the boundary wall; square-headed specimens punctuate a low understorey of crisp box cubes, and a black granite rill runs the whole length, linking three pools. This walk takes you, catwalk style, straight to the front door – where a geometric landing of stepping stones and fountains offers a pause.

The straight-line geometry is offset and softened by multi-stemmed trees – a Nixon signature. He enjoys the effect of looking through their twisting trunks. *Amelanchier lamarkii* is rhythmically distributed among the box cubes and multi-stemmed *Euonymus alatus* in planters run alongside the building. In autumn, the warm red foliage tints stand out beautifully against the rich green box and white stone paving.

At the end of the walk, the garden opens out into a courtyard behind the house, edged with more planters filled with euonymus. Practicalities such as irrigation have, of course, been remembered early in the plan, and run under the paving to each planter. Their powder-coated grey finish matches that of the sunken summer house, which

**An exercise in restraint: clockwise from above, light walls glow in the early evening, focusing the eye on the garden rather than next-door properties; looking from the summer house at the pool at the end of the rill; box cubes interspersed with *Amelanchier lamarkii*, with *Euonymus alatus* in planters; soft meadow planting complements minimalist architecture**

terminates the long walk. The handling of materials, colours and concealment of utilities is all part of the discipline that is an important trait in Nixon's work – he'd rather design bespoke than put up with unsatisfactory standards or incongruities. Nothing in this environment is an accident, or left to chance. This architectural vision is interrupted by a meadow-like flurry of plants. *Helenium* 'Moerheim Beauty', *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire', white and purple hellebores, *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln', *Gaura lindheimeri* 'The Bride', *Nepeta* 'Walkers Low' and *Verbena bonariensis* create an airy, naturalistic tapestry that allows the core of the garden to breathe. The architecture frames the plants and their spontaneity keeps the formality fresh. The elements are further tied

together by the reappearance of the black rill that forms blocks of water between plants and paving, Nixon says, "I'm not a pure modernist – I have a great admiration for modernism, I keep going back to that. But if I was a pure modernist I'd be an architect. I like plants too much." However, as he goes on, the plants are every bit as subject to control: "In this sort of garden I treat borders like a vase and take out plants that are not performing and try something else."

Glass is another material repeated in various guises. A glass boundary wall separates house and garden – we peer over into a black slate basement where the gently rippling floor can be drained to allow the owners to walk across from their basement to the swimming pool –

hidden out of sight directly beneath our feet. Quite a construction challenge, as Nixon remarks.

Turning back to face the garden, a glass light wall sits opposite the house hard on the boundary (the client collects light artworks). This comes into its own at night, glowing softly, silhouetting trees grouped in the foreground and transforming the garden into an intimate entertaining space.

Rippling light and movement is provided by the long black granite bench that gently, constantly overflows – to the joy of the clients' children and local magpies looking for a bath. All of the water elements were designed by Nixon in conjunction with water expert Andrew Ewing, Nixon gives a nod to the Mexican landscape architect Luis Barragán in

## TOP TIPS FOR TOWN GARDENS

"People are often not attracted out into their gardens," says Philip Nixon. "They show it off from inside the house, but don't go out. As a designer I try to supply something that draws them out to the space."

**1 Try to let go of the lawn**  
City gardens are small and can be quite shaded so you end up with a very small lawn and patchy growth – and when it's wet and miserable you won't go out there at all.

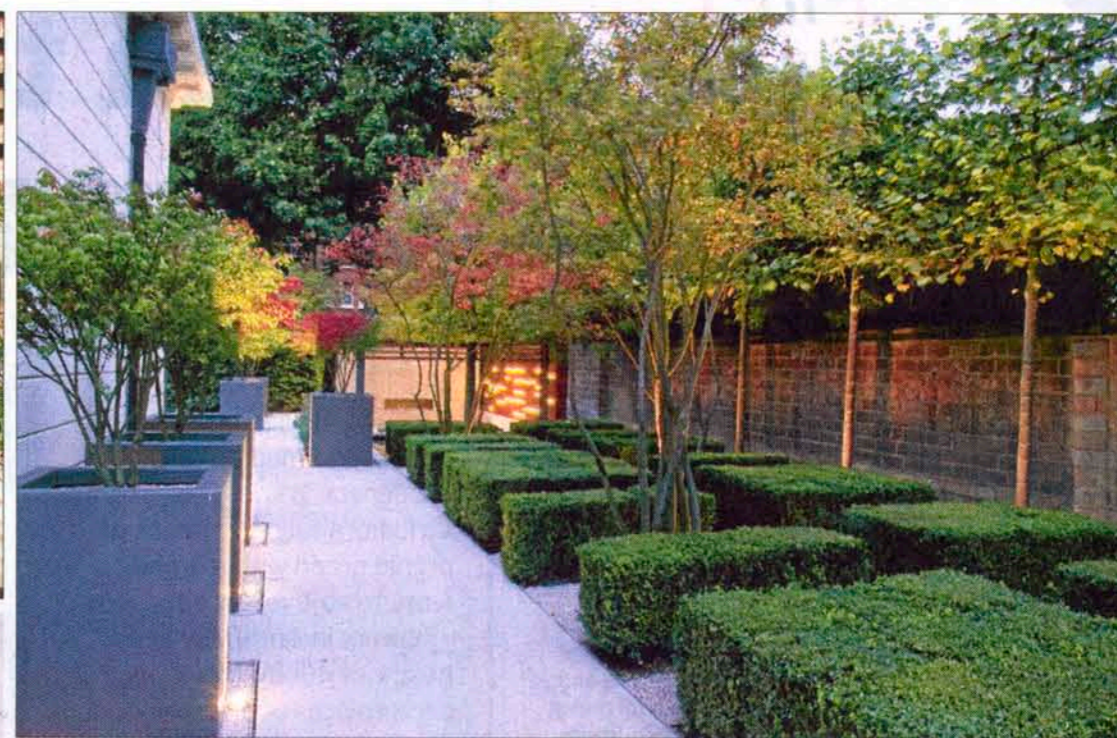
**2 Pay attention to the lighting**  
Much of the time you will be looking

at the garden from the house so make sure it can be seen through the long winter evenings.

**3 Keep things simple**  
Don't use too many materials or the garden will be visually very busy.

**4 Use plants that will be happy in the light and moisture conditions you have**  
No matter how great the design, if the plants are not happy the garden will soon look second-rate.

**5 Try to include water, especially in city gardens**  
The sound and sight of water transforms the experience and makes a focal point.



## BORDERLINES

Ursula Buchan

I've suffered a drought this autumn – but we're surviving nicely

This summer and autumn has seen a distinct and marked west/east divide in weather: those gardeners in the west and north have had far more rain than they would have liked, while those of us in the eastern counties have been decidedly short. Many gardeners will find the following hard to credit but, in my garden, between August 8 and October 20, I measured only 1 1/4in of rain. If you take into account summer sun and wind, you can see how little benefit plants derived from that.

My spring bulbs languished in their cardboard box after delivery in September, since the soil in which I wanted to plant them was dry for 4in or more in depth.

A drought in September and October is not unheard of in my part of the world (north Northamptonshire). The last time was in 2003, when no quantity of rain fell until the day England won the Rugby World Cup on November 22. But does a drought at this season matter? That is what I have been lately asking myself.

In 2003, as now, many trees and shrubs dropped at least some of their leaves prematurely. Bulbs could not be planted until well into November. Asters and other autumn-flowering perennials had to be watered from time to time, and mildew ramped away on the

novi-belgii types as well as on aquilegias, monardas and late-flowering roses. Hardy chrysanthemums grew shorter than usual.

On the plus side, then as now, containers continued to look good well into October, not becoming sodden masses of leafage as happens in very wet autumns.

Moreover, perennials have already made their flower buds for next year, so won't take much harm. As for deciduous woody plants, the early dropping of leaves in response to drought is a mechanism adopted to prevent damage, and there is no reason why they shouldn't leaf up fine next spring.

Best of all, anything at all tender in the woody plant line will have had a chance to ripen its wood before the onslaught of frost, so will be in better condition to survive a winter outdoors.

So nothing really

*Perennials have made their buds for next year*

desperate has happened. And I have managed to be out in the garden frequently, with the sun on my back as well, cleaning the borders of bindweed and other perennial weeds, and ensuring that my garden goes into winter in a better state of care than usual.

True, my bulb planting has been delayed, as has the division of hardy perennials to fill gaps, but the ground is still very warm, so a spurt of activity in this next month should see all that achieved as well.

So what's not to like about a dry autumn?

✦ *Back to the Garden* by Ursula Buchan (Frances Lincoln, £16.99) is available from Telegraph Books for £14.99 plus £1.25 p&p. Call 0844 871 1515 or go to books.telegraph.co.uk

is finished – finished in the Japanese sense of being complete, not waiting on further development.

It may not be the plantsperson's approach to gardening, but it does illustrate one of the advantages of working with a garden designer. Just like a well-furnished room, a garden can be thought through in every detail to reflect and serve the needs of its owners. And once handed back to them, all it needs is maintenance – admittedly of a precise and knowing kind.

For hands-on gardeners it may be hard to think of a garden as ever being finished, but in town, where entertaining, family and social life are the priorities, it makes perfect sense.

✦ For more, see [www.philipnixondesign.com](http://www.philipnixondesign.com)

*'I treat borders like a vase and take out plants that are not performing'*

the long, horse trough-like form.

What Nixon reluctantly calls a summer house is a hub for outdoor living. In honey-toned iroko hardwood, with California Modern overtones, this elegant building contains a fireplace with low seating and a generous dining area. Lighting is again used inventively: strips of light are interspersed with the horizontal iroko panels. The same detail, but using slate with the iroko, is mirrored on the opposite boundary wall.

As Nixon says, details are everything in such a garden; he points out the metal strip that runs around the paving: "That little metal edge around the stone – it lifts the whole thing."

The colour of the planters, the repetition of multi-stemmed trees, all convey a subliminal sense of a space that