

PLANTING IDEAS • BEAUTIFUL GARDENS • EXPERT ADVICE

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GARDENS

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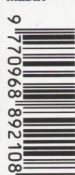
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FABULOUS DESIGN & PLANTING IDEAS FOR
Small town gardens

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An illustrious past

Hidden behind one of the most beautiful canal houses in Amsterdam lies a truly atmospheric garden that is a world away from the bustle of the city

WORDS SIMONE VAN HEININGEN PHOTOGRAPHS MAAYKE DE RIDDER

The owner of this canal house garden has found the perfect use for the four box squares on his terrace: he perches drinks trays on them during garden parties. Robert Broekema, who designed the garden in 1998, applauds his clients making the designs their own. "The owner wanted a garden sympathetic to the house and its rich history. Traditionally, wealthy merchants living in such houses used rooms on the first floor to impress their visitors, so these gardens were never meant to be viewed at eye level," explains Robert. "My design is based on a strong, structural backbone and shapes with clean lines. In classic canal house gardens, evergreens were used to outline the structure, ensuring visual interest through the year. These are not 'flowery' gardens."

The owner bought the 1639 house in 1995. He felt a strong connection to the building, known locally as 'the white house',

as his grandfather had once owned the magnificent five-floor residence. Although it was not for sale, he made an offer that the then owners could not refuse.

At the time, the garden was only half the length it is now. The back section had at some point been procured by a one-time next-door neighbour, Han van Meegeren (the notorious forger of Vermeer paintings and other old masters). But another attractive offer by the present owner meant the garden could be restored to its original 25m length, of which the bottom half is on a higher level. "This is an old and very effective optical illusion, often found in these long, narrow gardens," explains Robert. "Raising the back half of the garden brings it forward, rather than it 'disappearing' into the distance."

The line that divides the garden across the middle, consists of several brick steps softened by box balls, ferns, including



KEY ELEMENTS

What Classically inspired garden behind a 17th-century canal house.

Where Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

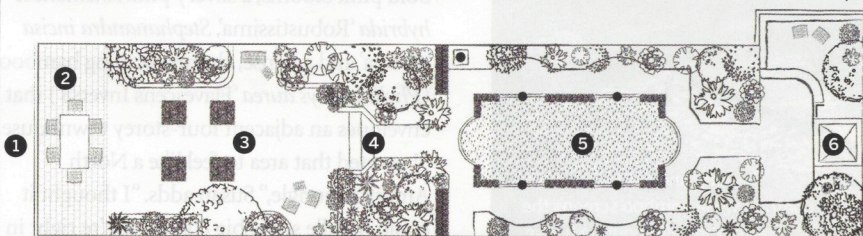
Size 200 square metres.

Soil Peaty clay.

Climate Maritime, strongly influenced by proximity to the North Sea in the west, prevailing westerly winds.

Designed by Robert Broekema (robert-broekema.nl)

- 1 House
- 2 Marble terrace
- 3 Cobble terrace with box squares
- 4 Steps to lawn
- 5 Lawn with statues
- 6 Tea house with cupola roof



Green is the predominant colour throughout, with the emphasis on form and texture. Flowers, which are mostly white, are used sparingly, and along with the painted furniture and marble statues help lighten the atmosphere.



Tips for a town garden

Creating a sense of atmosphere in an urban garden

1 Play with levels. Town gardens are often long and narrow. Raising the level at the back has the optical effect of drawing the back of the garden in towards the house.

2 Consider the architecture. In a small garden it is difficult to ignore the house. So, draw on the architecture to inspire not only the style but also its layout. It is worth considering the garden's sight lines from your dining table, kitchen sink and sofa, for example.

3 Solid backbone. Make sure that your town garden has a strong, evergreen backbone. If you go too seasonal in your planting, be prepared for long, visually boring winters.

4 Practise restraint. In a small garden, it is generally better to opt for a limited selection of hard materials, a limited selection of plants and a limited selection of features. Let them recur throughout the garden for a cohesive effect.

5 Be neighbourly. When planting your dream tree be aware that it might put next door's garden in the shade. Better still, work together and plant a male fruit tree to complement a neighbour's female. Sympathetic planting over various gardens will add a sense of space.

▷ *Matteuccia struthiopteris* and *Polystichum setiferum*, and *Hosta* 'Frances Williams'. "This hosta has yellow-edged leaves, just like the *Hosta fortunei* var. *aureomarginata* used elsewhere. In a fairly dark, monochrome garden such as this, white and yellow helps to lighten everything up," notes Robert. "For the same reason, we had the vintage garden furniture painted white."

Although the landscaping is symmetrical, the planting isn't. "This is not only because of the garden's east-facing orientation, but also as a way of adding interest through texture and leaf shape in what is basically a very restrained scheme," explains Robert. Yet balance remains important, so a free-flowering *Camellia japonica* 'Elegans' on the left is mirrored by a *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'King George' on the right.

Across the terrace of marble slabs and cobblestones, the eye is drawn towards the 'tea house' at the very back. The owner

informs us that, although this is a typical canal house feature beloved by wealthy merchants, this one is not original and believes Van Meegeren had it built.

Another reintroduction is the red brick wall and arched gateway. "We found the old sandstone coping lying around the garden," says Robert. "The wrought-iron gate is dual-purpose: it brings another interesting sight line into the garden and also references the fact that all of these gardens used to be connected, allowing you to wander between them."

In front of the tea house, four 19th-century Carrara marble statues, symbolising the continents, provide corners to a tiny area of grass. "A pond would have been great," says Robert, "but with the chestnut tree next door, it just wasn't practical." What is practical though is the tea house: peering through its windows we notice a lawn mower. Surely the most stylish 'shed' for miles. □

Anti-clockwise from top left Foliage of contrasting size, shape and hue, including several large-leaved hostas, adds interest to this shady corner of the garden.

A 19th-century stone vase, framed by the arched gateway, creates a suitably classical sight line.

Hard landscaping in this garden consists mainly of traditional cobblestones and reclaimed handmade bricks.

The white marble paving sits adjacent to the cobblestone terrace adorned with four box squares, which the owner uses as drinks tables when hosting garden parties.

The impressive, red brick wall was reconstructed using the original sandstone coping found in the garden.

In the 17th and 18th century when tea was so expensive that drinking it was a status symbol, no self-respecting merchant living in an Amsterdam canal house could be without a tea house in his garden.





In front of the tea house, four 19th-century marble statues provide corners to a tiny area of grass

