

ADDED DIMENSION

A simple, Japanese-inspired aesthetic brings tranquillity and cohesion to this commuter-town plot

WORDS NATASHA GOODFELLOW PHOTOGRAPHS MODESTE HERWIG / GAP PHOTOS

KEY ELEMENTS

What Suburban garden.
Where Den Dolder, the Netherlands.
Soil Sandy.
Size 9m x 7m.
Aspect South-facing, with shade from trees.
Special features Limited palette of materials and planting with year-round interest, including a bamboo hedge.
Designed by Gemma Diks (groenid.nl).

When garden designer Gemma Diks first saw the garden of this new-build terraced house in Den Dolder, a commuter town outside Utrecht in the Netherlands, it was in many ways the archetypal suburban garden: a patch of lawn hemmed in by other buildings, some narrow perimeter beds and a basic strip of paving that the owners, a young family, had tried to enliven with a selection of pots.

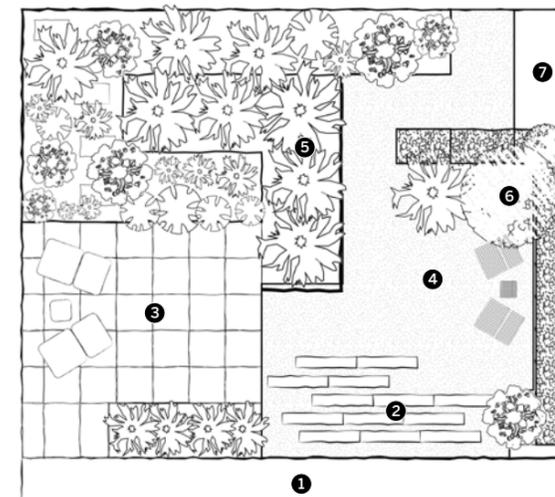
“It was such a flat, two-dimensional space,” remembers Gemma. “You really only noticed the fencing. The owners had chosen some nice plants, but they were struggling to achieve the sense of unity they wanted.”

Gemma’s brief was to make the space more appealing and to include two seating areas and a large storage chest. The owners also asked her to keep the plants they had already selected – a liriiodendron, a liquidambar, a cornus and a choisya. “The liriiodendron is really far too big for the garden, but it did hide an ugly neighbouring wall, and they loved it so much, we had to keep it,” says Gemma.

Noting the owners’ love of Japanese culture (bamboo and gravel gardens had been mentioned, and the husband practises aikido), Gemma took this as her inspiration. “For me, it was a clear case of less is more,” she says. “In order to create the harmony and tranquillity the owners wanted, I knew we had to use a relatively limited palette of materials and plants.” She painted the fencing black and persuaded the owners to lose the lawn in favour of two distinct areas – a concrete, paved terrace large enough to ▷

GARDEN PLAN

- 1 House
- 2 Concrete pavers
- 3 Paved terrace
- 4 Gravel area
- 5 Bamboo hedge
- 6 *Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis*
- 7 Storage shed



PLAN BY LIAM MCAULEY

Facing page
A key feature of the garden is the bamboo hedge. Planted in the middle of the garden, it adds height and interest.

This page from top
This elegant *Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis* was moved from a shadier spot by the back fence to a sunnier position where it is planted directly into the gravel.

Gemma used the concrete kerb stones that she used for the borders to make paving slabs, which she fixed into the gravel.

The long, thin concrete pavers create a transition between house and garden. Echoing the concrete of the terrace, they also unify the two parts of the garden.





Facing page

To unify the space materials and plants are kept to a minimum and repeated throughout, from the two bamboo hedges, to the concrete of the terrace, pavers and edging, and the black-painted fence at the back of the garden and adjacent to the house.

This page from top

Hydrangea aspera 'The Ditch' is one of Gemma's favourites, as much for its delicate, airy flowers as its form, which can be appreciated as a multi-stemmed shrub by removing its lower leaves.

Growing up to 2m tall, *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Malepartus' makes quite a statement, especially in a small garden such as this.

The glossy, wavy-edged, evergreen leaves of *Asplenium scolopendrium* make a good contrast with more feathery plants such as bamboo and grasses.



▷ accommodate a dining table, and a more informal gravel area. To marry the two, she also used concrete pavers, albeit of a different shape, in the gravelled area. "They give a more solid transition from the house," explains Gemma. "They also add interest, as well as being easier to walk on."

To tackle the flatness, Gemma planted a bamboo hedge of *Fargesia* Red Panda (= 'Jiu') in the centre of the garden. "People are used to placing hedges at boundaries," she says, "but I knew this was the thing that would give the garden structure."

The same bamboo is repeated along one side of the garden, abutting a tall hedge of an existing *Prunus lusitanica*, which was also retained. Running at right angles into the garden, it helped create a pathway through the space, as well as providing a neatly hidden spot behind it for the storage chest.

The hedges, teamed with several evergreen plants including *Asarum europaeum*, *Asplenium scolopendrium* and *Ilex crenata* 'Convexa', give the garden colour and structure all year round, and there is also a succession of ever-changing seasonal highlights – far more than you might expect in a garden of this size. In spring, epimediums give way to anemones, followed by the beautiful autumn tones of the liriiodendron and the liquidambar. *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Malepartus' flowers from July to September, and in winter has beautiful seedheads, rimed with frost.

In keeping with the owners' wishes, Gemma also spared the *Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis*, although she moved it from the shade of the back fence to a sunnier spot where it is now thriving. "Before it was overlooked; now its form can be appreciated," she says. The same could be said of this simple, yet highly effective, garden. □

GEMMA'S TIPS FOR A LOW-MAINTENANCE GARDEN



Use groundcover plants, such as the evergreen *Epimedium x rubrum* and *Asarum europaeum*. *Hakonechloa macra*, also used here, grows well in shade and colours bronze in autumn. *Acaena microphylla*, a New Zealand native, forms a mat of red flowers in autumn.

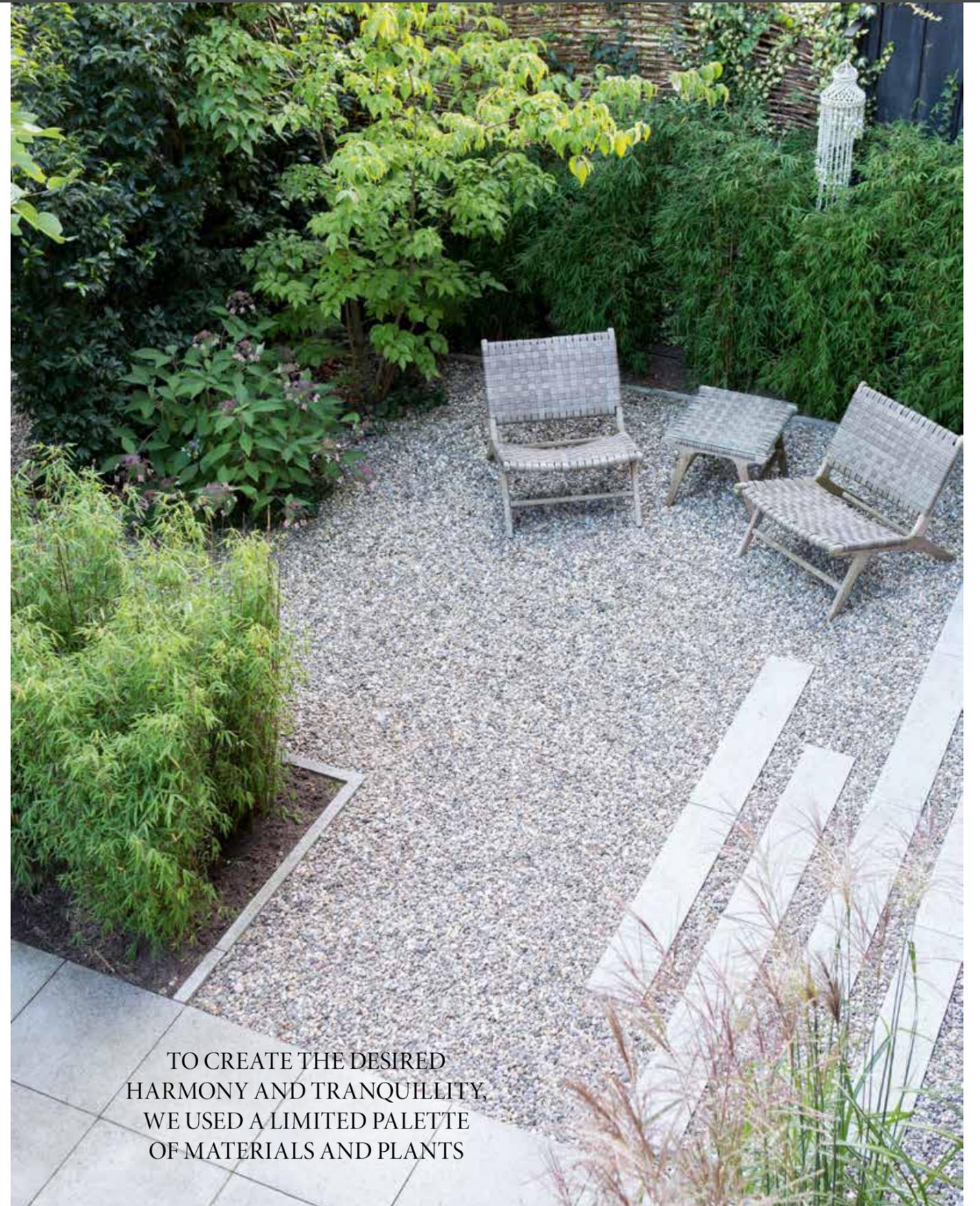
Choose easy-to-care-for hard landscaping materials.

The gravel in this garden needs a bit of attention, but the concrete paving stones are very easy to sweep and keep looking pristine.

Don't have too many containers. Plants in pots need watering, feeding and repotting – far better just to put plants straight into the ground.

Practise 'right plant, right place'. If you locate plants where they will be happy, there will be less need to intervene, and you will save yourself time and money.

Choose plants that have a long season of interest, for example, trees that change colour in autumn, or grasses that hold their shape in winter. A garden that includes evergreens will retain its structure and look good all year round.



TO CREATE THE DESIRED
HARMONY AND TRANQUILLITY,
WE USED A LIMITED PALETTE
OF MATERIALS AND PLANTS