

# Gardens

“I never dreamt that my garden would be good enough to open to the public”



## Garden visit

When he bought his London home six years ago, **Martyn Cox** inherited a small patch of scruffy grass, but now it's a garden visited by more than 200 people. Photos by Sarah Cuttle

**When I bought my Victorian** terrace house in East London six years ago, I also acquired a tiny, untidy and boring back garden. The rectangular plot was 30ft by 13ft and consisted of an ugly concrete-slab patio at the head of a lawn containing more moss and weeds than blades of grass. Running down the length of each side were thin borders, planted with a motley assortment of overgrown shrubs, while in the bottom left-hand corner, a dilapidated shed was just about still standing.

Apart from facing south, there was nothing remarkable about this garden. In fact, it was an eyesore and, back then, I would never have dreamt that it would ever be good enough to open to the public. But after working on it continuously from the moment I picked up the house keys from the estate agent, I recently welcomed hundreds of paying visitors when I opened it under the National Gardens Scheme.

From the very beginning, my aim was to remove everything and to

leave a blank canvas. The scrappy lawn was easily peeled away with a spade, a few whacks with a heavy-duty sledgehammer reduced the shed to kindling and the shrubs were unceremoniously hoicked from the ground.

### Starting from scratch

My plan for the now-empty plot was simple. I would erect fences to give privacy and provide vertical surfaces for plants. I'd keep the patio, replacing the concrete with sleek slate when I could afford it, and I'd put a curved slate-shingle path down the centre, leading to a small timber deck.

To make the garden more interesting, I decided to edge one side of the path with sleepers, cut to different sizes and placed lengthways to make a curved wall. The spaces either side of the path would become borders.

Putting the 'bones' of the garden together went smoothly enough, but there was the occasional drama. While excavating the soil for laying



TOP The garden as Martyn inherited it six years ago  
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Slate paving creates an elegant seating area; pots of sempervivums; Martyn's storage box doubles as a seat; mind-your-own-business flourishes in a row of glazed pots

the deck, my spade hit something metallic. I scraped away the soil to reveal the outline of something curved. I knew incendiary devices had fallen on the area during World War 2, so I called the police. Within minutes, two officers appeared, followed by their boss, the family was ordered into the front room and the street cordoned off. The bomb disposal squad arrived in a Land Rover and entered the back garden armed with spades. Half an hour or so passed, after which I was summoned outside to find one of the men, with a broad grin on his face, holding a battered galvanised bucket in the air.

**Time to get planting**

Once the structural work was done, I was ready to start planting. I didn't have a plan, but gradually filled the garden with my favourite rare, unusual and choice plants. In total, I've managed to squeeze around 300 different plants into just 450 sq feet. Height is provided by an eastern redbud tree (*Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy'), a couple of towering black bamboos (*Phyllostachys nigra*), a hardy Japanese banana (*Musa basjoo*) and some honey spurge (*Euphorbia mellifera*).

These tall plants have created shady areas in what is a sunny garden and given me the opportunity to grow plants that thrive in low light. Among these are the evergreen Chinese celandine poppy, *Stylophorum lasiocarpum*, whose yellow flowers appear during summer and autumn,



**"I gradually filled the garden with my favourite plants and managed to squeeze 300 different ones into just 450 sq ft"**



An olive, dripping with fruit, packs in beside pots of brilliant red coleus

and *Begonia grandis evansiana*, a hardy variety with pink flowers, which appear on 50cm stems in late summer. Another great favourite, is Maori dock or *Rumex flexuosus*, a rarely-seen plant from New Zealand with zig-zagging stems clothed in narrow bronze leaves. I'm a keen cook, so I wanted the new garden to be productive as well as ornamental. Fences support a variety of trained fruits, including an apricot, peach, kiwi and black Hamburg grapevine (*Vitis vinifera* 'Schiava Grossa'), while redcurrant, blackberry, olive and a fig grow in pots. I also grow plenty of annual vegetables, including tomatoes, cucumbers, tomatillos, chilli peppers and courgettes – 'Black Forest' is

perfect for a small garden because it climbs up a cane, rather than sprawling across the ground. After spending so much time and effort on the garden, I had a brainwave last summer. Why not see if the discerning inspectors from the National Gardens Scheme (NGS) would think it good enough to be included in the famous Yellow Book – the directory of gardens that open to raise money for charity? A quick phone call to my local area organiser had her come to scrutinise my plot. She asked me some questions, took a few photos, then left. I soon got a call to say I'd been accepted. I've set foot in many small gardens open for the NGS and know that some cap the number of visitors allowed in at any one time to prevent the kind of

crush you get when you brave the January sales. To test my garden's visitor capacity, I carried out a dry run last autumn. I invited friends and neighbours to come in and wander about, and discovered that 10 people in the garden at any one time was comfortable. Any more and they would think we were playing an impromptu game of sardines.

## The final countdown

In the weeks leading up to opening, I spent every free moment weeding, pruning, tying up plants and plugging gaps in the beds left by the long, harsh winter. Finally, on 28 June, the garden gates were opened. The first visitor appeared bang on the stroke of 10am, and the last one appeared a few minutes before we were about to close at 5pm. Over the seven-hour period, 230 garden lovers turned up, helping us make £640 for Marie Curie Cancer Care and the other charities supported by the NGS.

Opening my garden was a great experience, but there are drawbacks. As the creator of the garden, everyone wants to talk to you, so I was on my feet, answering questions in the blazing sun, all day. Some of my plants were damaged, too, although I've come to the conclusion that this is inevitable, especially if your garden is as small and heavily planted as mine.

Despite a few worries, the day was extremely rewarding and the positive comments from visitors, plus the amount of money I raised, left me

## Find an open garden to visit near you . . .



**Enrol friends and family for a dry run**

You'll find more than 3,300 gardens participating in the National Gardens Scheme on the NGS website at [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk). And don't forget the famous Yellow Book directory – it's a glove-box essential on every trip. You can also find gardens opening in support of the British Red Cross at [www.redcross.org.uk/opengardens](http://www.redcross.org.uk/opengardens). Many other gardens are opened privately, so look out for posters advertising them in libraries, local shops, newsagents and garden centres. Also, check the 'what's on' listings in local papers, magazines and on gardening websites.

feeling elated. Would I do it all again? I thought I'd sleep on it for a few weeks before deciding... and just two days later, I'd already made up my mind. I can't wait to do it all over again! □

*Martyn Cox's garden, at 24 Brunswick St, London E17 9NB, will be open to Gardeners' World Magazine readers on Sunday 13 Sept, 2pm-5.30pm. Entry costs £2 (children free). Money raised will go to charities supported by the National Gardens Scheme. For full details, go to [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk).*

**Martyn Cox is a garden writer, blogger and author of *101 Ideas for Small Gardens* (see offer, right).**



## My tips for opening your garden

### Getting it accepted

Join an established scheme. The National Gardens Scheme, British Red Cross and other charities will help you publicise the event, and supply you with posters, collection boxes and other useful items.

The NGS will send a county organiser to inspect your garden, so weed, water, mow and tidy up your plants a few days prior to their visit. If your garden is turned down, the inspector should offer you some positive feedback. Act upon it and make the changes.

### Planning ahead

Avoid long holidays leading up to the opening. If you go away for the weekend, enlist a neighbour to keep the garden well watered. Advertise the event by putting

up posters in shop windows, doctors' surgeries, garden centres and libraries, and send them to local gardening clubs, newspapers and community websites.

In the week leading up to the opening, price up plants for sale and, if you're serving teas, bake some cakes. Recruit as many people as possible to help. You will need to show visitors around, take money on the gate, sell plants and serve refreshments.

### On the big day

If your garden is large, give visitors a simple plan to help them find their way around, plus a list of any unusual plants. Display some photos to show how the garden has developed, with a brief history of how it was put together.



**TOP** Son Louis inspects carnivorous pitcher plants and sundews  
**ABOVE** Despite the tiny space, 230 visitors came to see Martyn's garden

**Gardeners' World offer**

### Get Martyn's top tips for small gardens

Order your copy of Martyn Cox's handy *Gardeners' World Magazine* guide, *101 Ideas for Small Gardens* (BBC Books, £4.99), for just £4.50 with FREE p&p. Call 01872 562 312 or visit [www.efcbooks.com](http://www.efcbooks.com).

