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## “It transports you to another place”

A tiny urban backyard has been turned into a colourful oasis by garden designer **Manoj Malde**  
*Photos by Paul Debois*

**When Manoj Malde was asked** to transform a tiny back garden in Kentish Town, London, he knew he was in for a challenge. But his love of bright, bold colours and exotic planting was just what was needed to bring this awkward plot to life.

Fortunately, it was colour that his client wanted, along with planting that would evoke memories of her childhood in Tehran and give the plot a Mediterranean feel. At only 4.75m at its widest point and with a long, narrow side return, the space is certainly small, but it is very sheltered and benefits from the warmer temperatures of its city location. However, all that shelter meant lots of shade, despite the garden being south facing, and Manoj had to carefully choose plants that would thrive, as well as give colour and scent.

“My passion is for Mediterranean plants and colour, however, with this garden, it was more about creating the illusion of a Mediterranean garden,” he explains. Roses, evergreen



- 1** An existing wall was topped with timber planks to give extra privacy, shelter and provide support for *Trachelospermum jasminoides*
- 2** In a small garden, large pots and decorative items, such as this Moroccan lamp, make the space feel bigger
- 3** These benches, in complementary shades of blue and orange, provide hidden storage as well as a place to sit and chat





1

jasmine and lavender provide scent and bring in pollinators, while the multi-stemmed, palm-like *Cordyline australis* creates a holiday feeling.

Manoj's client also wanted a garden to relax and entertain in, so he included lots of seating, with benches backed by raised borders filled with plants. By cleverly arranging the space he's managed to include a water feature, an outdoor kitchen, a small veg and herb garden, and even a mini greenhouse. It makes the garden feel practical yet beautiful and a true extension of the indoor living space. "It transports you to another place, especially with the combination of bold colours and the sound of the water feature," says Manoj.

**What kind of garden were you aiming for?**

As a garden designer, I take the client's brief but always push to exceed their expectations. I wanted to create a courtyard garden that was modern, colourful and felt like walking into another room of the house.

**What were your inspirations?**

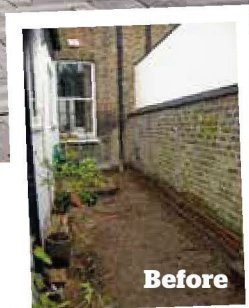
The client wanted colour. On my first visit, I knew what I wanted to do with the space, but I was also worried – would my ideas be too radical for them?

My inspiration came from Le Jardin Majorelle, Yves Saint Laurent's garden in Marrakech. I visited this garden some years ago and was blown away

- 1 The cordylines proved difficult to get into the garden but provide wonderful height and lend an exotic feel to the space
- 2 Not every pot needs a plant, as Manoj demonstrates with these timeless terracotta urns in a group of three



2



by the intensity of that Majorelle Blue and the touches of yellow from the ornate jali ironwork. On presenting the mood board, my client didn't need any persuading – she loved the ideas! She put her trust in me and gave me free reign.

**What was the biggest challenge in creating a garden in such a small space?**

The property has no side access, so everything had to be carried in and out of the house. The biggest challenge came when the triple-headed *Cordyline australis* arrived. The plants were stunning, but they were big and so were the rootballs.

I didn't know how we were going to get these through the house without any damage. So the pots came off and as much of the soil as possible was removed from the rootball to decrease its size. With lots of patience, we managed to get the plants through the house and into the back garden.

**You've managed to fit a lot into such a small space – what is the best advice for making the most of a smaller garden?**

Forward planning is the key. Really think about what the space is going to be used for. A small space is also all about creating illusions and the best

- 1 Although this part of the garden is long and narrow, Manoj has utilised the space cleverly by adding an outdoor kitchen, a miniature herb and veg bed, and a compact greenhouse where the owner can get plants started
- 2 Water was an essential part of the brief, helping to bring back childhood memories for this homeowner





- 1 Most of the planting is confined to two raised beds and a collection of pots, but there is still a joyous collection of blooms: *Salvia* 'Royal Bumble', *Cistus argenteus* 'Silver Pink' and *Isoplexis canariensis*
- 2 Contrasting panels add a year-round colour boost to the garden

way to do that is by not packing in lots of elements but by having fewer, bigger ones that make a statement.

For many of us, the garden is a place to sit, relax and entertain. I would also recommend thinking about the flooring material used indoors. By expanding the same material or colour into the garden, you can create the illusion of bigger space. And don't forget that by introducing a simple level change you can create a journey in the garden.

**And what are your top tips for creating privacy in an overlooked garden?**

In heavily populated urban areas, privacy is always an issue. I would recommend planting trees to block out other buildings. Pleached trees are particularly good as they provide a screen without restricting light. Some of my favourites are *Carpinus betulus* – the common hornbeam – or evergreen options such as *Ilex* 'Nellie R. Stevens' or *Prunus lusitanica*. Raised borders will help elevate your planting and if you create seating areas underneath

pergolas or sails, you will have a private place to relax.

**How did you choose the right plants for this garden?**

I drew on my passion for Mediterranean plants and colour, but, of course, I had to take into account the soil type, aspect and the shadows being created by the surrounding buildings, along with the garden's own microclimate.

For scent, I used roses, evergreen jasmine and lavenders. Those cordylines might have been difficult to get into place, but because they look like palms they are perfect for the look we wanted. Foliage texture and floral colour were also important through the selection process.

**What's your favourite thing about this garden?**

My favourite thing is the feeling that you get when you walk into it – it feels like you are walking into another room of the house. When you open the doors to the garden, you are welcomed by stepping onto a kilim rug made from porcelain tiles. This is exactly the feeling that I wanted to create.

● *Manoj Malde was a creative director in the fashion industry, before becoming an RHS Chelsea award-winning garden designer. Visit [couturegardens.co.uk](http://couturegardens.co.uk)*