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Social climbing

Lesley Kant Cunneen's city garden is planted for seclusion.

Fig. 1 The long narrow plot is divided into three discrete areas – a terrace outside the back door, four central cruciform borders and the courtyard.

The move was enforced: Steve's illness and treatment regime meant our three-acre country garden would become a liability, not a pleasure. Downsizing was a priority, and after twenty years of rural life we elected to move into the city. We drew up criteria for the house and garden but estate agents found

them bewildering. Apparently few people have garden criteria: a side or back entrance for humping compost and debris, a dedicated space for gardening equipment, and a south facing back garden were essential. It all seemed so reasonable.

We ended up driving round unfamiliar streets until we

discovered our current home. The front apron is minuscule. The back garden, I keep being told reassuringly, is "large for an inner city garden." It seemed terribly tiny to us but it was on the edge of the city wall, we could make the market square in five minutes at a brisk trot, and it met all our demanding horticultural requirements. So we became the owners of a tall thin house with a long narrow garden. The back plot is 30m long and 9m wide. A public walkway runs along one side and we are attached to a mirror house on the other. The garden is walled on three and a half sides, with a coach house at the end for storage. It was bisected two-thirds of the way down by a dilapidated wall which Steve subsequently completed with a gate, to form an intimate courtyard. Instead of looking out on fields and copses, we are surrounded by mid-nineteenth-century Victorian housing. It is, in many ways, a typical town garden.



Fig. 2 The 'sundial garden'.

We had intended to work logically through the house and only then address the garden, which had a rectangular flower bed, a handful of healthy roses, some tree stumps, a great deal of gravel, a rather attractive trellis and a dead eucalyptus. And, oh bliss, a venerable prunus. But I was already grieving for our late garden and felt an atavistic desire to start, despite the workmen occupying both the garden and house. This created its own set of problems, as the simple law of building work decrees that any space perceived as unoccupied will be filled. Eventually I drew a line down the garden and forbade anyone to cross on threat of hysterics.

I had a simple design in mind: three discrete and divided areas – a terrace outside the back door, four central cruciform borders and the courtyard (fig. 1). A greenhouse was squeezed into an unpropitious space and I immediately planted four trees: a white stemmed birch (*Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii*), deemed necessary to take the eye away from a nearby wall painted unremittingly black; a strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo*) with lovely flaking mahogany bark; the snowy mespilus (*Amelanchier lamarckii*) and crab apple, *Malus* 'Evereste', which has a more fastigiate habit than most. Let no one tell you that small gardens and trees are

irreconcilable. The birch does grow rather tall but in summer its leaves shimmer and completely obscure the oppressive wall; in winter its white skeleton acts as a stark sculpture outlined in black. I retained a tall, shaggy *Viburnum opulus* and over five years coaxed it into a topiary tree which hosts blackbirds in spring, and I planted an Irish yew at the corner of each of the quadrangular beds in the pretentiously named (by me) 'sundial garden' (fig. 2). The trees gave the embryonic garden gravitas. After the prunus died, despite the most solicitous care, I planted another white birch to add symmetry to the space. Unfortunately my neighbour objected, so the second birch



Fig. 3 The fernery.

departed to a friend's garden and its space is now occupied by an *Elaeagnus* 'Quicksilver', which has the merit of a swooning scent in April and silver leaves which reflect the *Rosa glauca* (syn. *rubrifolia*) which nestles against it. I have affectionate memories of this rose: in our last garden one plant provided enough seedlings to hedge a large vegetable garden. With the city rose I allow free reign and remove one stem every two years, letting it climb upwards.

Some plants I chose from a knowledge base, others from sentiment, and too many on a whim. The terribly tiny garden is ridiculously overplanted, but I prefer to prune and shear rather than tolerate a gap. This is not good horticultural practice, but it is a recipe for ensuring that you are not overlooked.

On the more challenging north-facing coach-house wall I planted a *Pilostegia*

viburnoides which is resilient and accommodatingly hugs the walls and bears creamy panicles of viburnum-like blossoms in mid-summer. Probably of all the plants in the garden it is the one that provokes the most enquiries. An *Azara microphylla* 'Variegata' clothes the adjacent wall: initially I had ordered the green form but the nursery produced this cream-speckled shrub. Although the spring-time scent from the inconspicuous yellow flowers is much lighter than the type, its bright foliage lifts the dark corner it covers so obligingly. The courtyard also contains a fernery (fig. 3) and three delicately leaved climbers (perhaps scramblers would be more accurate) grow amongst the ferns: *Ecchremocarpus scaber* 'Tresco Cream', a plant grown from seed which has remained with me for ten years; the reliable *Clematis*



Fig. 4 Climbing dicentra, *Dactylicapnos*.

'Alba Luxurians' with its hint of apple green lifting the froth of delicate white flowers; lastly a recent acquisition, the late-emerging climbing dicentra, *Dactylicapnos* (fig. 4), with yellow hanging lockets which scrambles over a *Dicksonia antarctica* and in turn provides it with frost protection.

This is the crux of gardening in a restricted space, the desire for privacy tempered with the necessity of living in harmonious proximity to others. Climbers were to prove my salvation: to clothe the walls, trellis and fence and allow a simulation of seclusion.

A long-suffering rose occupies one wall: *Rosa* 'Royal Gold' was thriving when we arrived so when Steve



Fig. 5 *R.* 'Climbing Souvenir de la Malmaison'.

constructed the raised beds for the ferns I asked for it to be saved. Moving the rose was impossible as it was embedded in concrete. The rose survived and now climbs over the back of the stone terracing, coping stoically with her imprisonment and my neighbour's black mulberry which hangs rather menacingly over the fernery. The rose was introduced in 1957 and unknown to me, but identified by Simon at Peter Beales. I occasionally wonder if an earlier occupant of the house planted her in celebration. Pruning requires a mountaineering expedition and is undertaken only once a year, but she is healthy and scented and sweet tempered. Although the mulberry has a romantic heritage and bequeaths luscious mulberries in August, the violet staining which covers the terraced beds and the old bricks is less endearing in such a confined

space. But the tree has precedence and I accept its presence with measured grace.

Roses scramble over the east and west boundaries: *Rosa* 'Leverkusen' is a lovely, soft mid-yellow climber with glossy, dark green leaves and tolerates remarkably well the birch overhead and *Akebia trifoliata*'s relentless twining nearby; *Rosa* 'Sombreuil', with cream, double, fragrant flowers, appears content with its enforced cramped conditions. *Rosa* 'Climbing Crimson Glory' tempted me with its powerful scent and seductive suede-soft heavy blooms. Unfortunately it sulks, its flowers too heavy for its stems, and it does not appreciate the crowded conditions: it is a prima donna rose and deserves a spotlight on the wall of a spacious, well-ordered garden. The rose which attracts the most comment is *R.* 'Climbing Souvenir de la Malmaison'



Fig. 6 The exquisite kiwi vine (*Actinidia kolomikta*).

(fig. 5). I cannot claim any credit, for it was one of the roses I inherited and now we are acquainted I would never be without her. She is a pale blush pink, fully double and beautifully scented, and when she comes into flower proves a show stopper; she has sequestered her own niche by squeezing through a small gap into the alley where she flowers ecstatically over the heads of passers-by, frequently stopping them in their tracks.

Shoehorned between the roses grows the trumpet vine, *Campsis radicans* f. *flava*, which is much better behaved than its hooligan red cousin 'Madame Galen', a climber much regretted and picked for summary execution. The exquisite kiwi vine (*Actinidia kolomikta*) (fig. 6) nestles nearby, its spring foliage splashed strawberry-pink and cream. Despite the growing restrictions, the kiwi is beautifully behaved.



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Fig. 7 Floriferous double Banksian rose: *R. banksiae* 'Lutea'.

The flowers are insignificant but as a partner to spring bulbs and early perennials it has no equal. The final rose on the eastern boundary is the floriferous double Banksian rose: *R. banksiae* 'Lutea' (fig. 7). An existing *Ceanothus* 'Puget Blue' partnered it for a few years, the cerulean and yellow a stunning combination. The ceanothus eventually gave up the ghost when usurped by this rampant, early and thorn-free climber. Now I have to safeguard the arbutus as *R. banksiae* makes further unwelcome advances. But it responds well to annual shearing, showers the alley with primrose petals, and lifts the heart with its late-April blooms. Foolishly I planted a *Holboellia latifolia* alongside to provide the scent its neighbour lacked. Despite healthy foliage it has offered neither flower nor scent so it is condemned to autumnal eviction together with a recalcitrant wisteria which has not repaid the investment, despite its careful selection



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Fig. 8 *Clematis* 'Madame Julia Correvon'.

and privileged position on the south-westerly facing corner. All the plants on the west-facing wall prefer to perform on the eastern side; the climbers provide a street show for the Norwich neighbourhood – a kind of horticultural social service.

Amongst all these robust plants I have squeezed in a great many claret and deep purple clematis, mostly late-flowering *C. viticella* such as 'Madame Julia Correvon' (fig. 8), 'Royal Velours', 'Etoile Violette' and my absolute favourite, 'Purpurea Plena Elegans'. As snails adore old walls the garden is a snail-fest and some clematis have succumbed, but sufficient have survived to provide rich flowering in the midsummer months. I have learned that in the tiny garden clematis perform better in large pots than in the ground, so I take the precaution of planting two in the same hole, a doctrine borne of desperation. I am philosophic about the snails: they are collected weekly and transported to the



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Fig. 9 *Akebia quinata*.



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Fig. 10 *Solanum crispum* 'Glasneven'.



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Fig. 11 The neighbour's neglect of her early-flowering quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa* 'Nivalis') is a great benefit.

country, which Steve describes as my bird-pimping expedition; better than slug pellets any day. Gastropods do not appear to impact on winter-flowering *C. cirrhosa* var. *purpurascens* 'Freckles', which lights up a gloomy corner alongside *Akebia quinata* (fig. 9). I find little difference in the two *Akebia* species: they are both vigorous climbers but easily cut back. The maroon, pendulous flowers are lovely and early, though I dislike the late-summer fruits: plump suede purses which plop onto the pathway and have a slightly prehistoric quality. *Solanum crispum* 'Glasneven' (fig. 10), another star performer, takes over the show by midsummer, a late-flowering purple stalwart.

Rosa 'Scharlachglut' has electrifying scarlet blooms and a bold golden boss which compensates for its single, albeit bounteous flush and minimal scent. It copes remarkably well with its annual visit from an inherited Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) on the east fence. The vine is a problem because it desires a wall to hug and envelops other plants in desperation to find a secure niche. I have tried to eliminate it with

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Fig. 12 Hidden behind high walls, this is a secret garden.

scant success and am now resigned to regular cutting back. It is undaunted and the autumnal reds and purples help me tolerate its rampancy. My neighbour rhetorically enquires if the creeper is mine and what should she do? I reply unhelpfully "Hack it back", remembering the escapee ivy which covers my bathroom window, the mulberry whose large heart-shaped leaves cast relentless shade and dictated a fernery; the bindweed which creeps under the fence; and the banished birch. These disadvantages are partly mitigated by my neighbour's white early-flowering quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa* 'Nivalis') (fig. 11) which brightens a dull urban March, and by an exquisite white

climbing rose; unpruned and untrained it is a lesson in the benign effects of neglect. It soars into the air and bears free-flowering white roses all summer long. I glean all the benefit, for she luckily prefers life in the east and has become an integral fixture of our garden rather than her own. Recompense for all my climbers with social leanings on the other side perhaps.

After ten years of city gardening (fig. 12), I now appreciate that a tiny plot can require infinitely more ingenuity than three acres of neighbourless green space. The social context and the necessary give and take of cheek by jowl city living have proved much more challenging, and surprisingly rewarding. 🌹

Lesley Kant Cunneen and her husband moved to Norfolk in the 1980s and to Norwich ten years ago. Lesley is a garden historian, currently researching public open space at UEA. Stephen was declared in remission last year. They have recently discovered that large dogs and small gardens are incompatible. The dog stays.