

AN EXOTIC ESCAPE IN LUTON

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Omar and I have always had an interest in plants and gardening; some of my earliest memories are of assisting my grandparents in their garden. Prior to 2005, we had a very small garden: 30 feet long by 12 feet wide. Despite its small nature, this was home to a number of exotic plants even then; bamboos, palms, cordylines, acers and grasses. We had outgrown the house and outgrown the garden, so over the winter of 2004/5 we set about looking for a new place to call home.

One of the key requests to the estate agent was to find a property with a large urban garden. Perhaps really we were looking for the right garden that had an acceptable house! By the spring of 2005 we had found our new home and, having moved in, we were able to begin the transformation from overgrown and unloved outdoor space to our tropical paradise.

When we moved in, the garden had been neglected for a number of years; there were numerous self-sown sycamore saplings, brambles and buddleias growing throughout the garden. The old shrubs and trees had been left to grow unchecked and had more than outgrown the space available to them. We began with a significant amount of clearance, removing conifers and chopping back trees to more sensible sizes. A small number of established plants we inherited survived the initial cull.

We were fortunate that the garden had some good hard landscaping, including retaining walls and a patio as well as a large workshop, much of which survives to this day. One item that was removed was a pig sty; a former resident had decided keeping Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs would be a great idea in a residential suburb!

In the first few years, we concentrated on much of the key planting, adding bamboos, palms, trees and shrubs. The garden had something of a master-plan, although that has constantly evolved. Many of those initial plants now give the garden an established feel. What were small *Trachycarpus fortunei* palms with perhaps a foot of trunk are now over 6 feet tall.

Our garden has always been a place of sanctuary, somewhere to escape from the stresses of work. We both work long hours; Omar travels into the centre of London each day and I frequently work away from home. As a result, we often spend much of our free time in the garden, tending to plants or undertaking a project. Our approach has been to create a sense of enclosure, so that when you are in the garden, you can't see the neighbouring properties. This has led to quite dense and, at times, slightly chaotic planting schemes; plants have to perform hard, and fight for their space.

Although we refer to our garden as tropical or exotic, very few plants are truly from a tropical location, but are selected to give the impression of the tropics. We look for unusual shape or form, or plants with particularly large leaves. For example we use *Fatsia japonica* throughout the garden; it's pretty tough and in many ways quite a common plant, however it does have large, unusual-looking leaves, and when combined with bamboos or palms, looks truly tropical. We also use a lot of ferns - including natives - and hostas, in particular large leafed forms such as *H. 'Sum and Substance'* or *'Empress Wu'*.

Alongside the more 'common' plants we are always on the lookout for the unusual as well. The garden is home to around ten different hardy *Schefflera*, many from Crûg Farm. We have found a number of these to be extremely hardy, such as *S. taiwaniana* or *S. rhododendrifolia*, which showed no ill effects from the winter of 2010.

Like many keen plants-people, we are always seeking out new nurseries and newly-introduced plants, regularly travelling to nurseries in different parts of the country to hunt down that must-have plant. Several holidays in Cornwall have been centred on visiting nurseries and gardens, with us coming home with a car packed with plants that we just couldn't leave behind. It has been known for Omar to endure the six hour journey home with a plant on his lap or at his feet!

Along with the hardier plants, we do grow a number of more tender ones, including less hardy palms, succulents, and other unusual or rare plants we just had to have! We are fortunate in having greenhouse space, and also that workshop I mentioned earlier, which are used to keep these plants frost free in winter. The plants in the ground generally have to take their chances with winter, as we only protect a small number, such as the tree ferns.

Some tropical-gardening friends we know go to great lengths in winter to build shelters over key plants or even construct small poly-tunnels over entire sections of the garden. We did go through a stage of protecting plants this way, but eventually we decided that we prefer not to look out onto a shanty town in the winter. As well as being keen gardeners, we are also keen koi keepers. We had kept fish for a number of years in a pond we had built on the site of the former pig sty, but four years ago decided to build a large pond dedicated to keeping koi. The koi pond took us over two years to complete, during which time we hand-dug over 40 tonnes of clay and chalk (the garden access is restricted, so a mini-digger was out of the question). As this was going to be a pond partially raised out of the ground, the next task was to construct the pond walls, laying over 15 pallet-loads of breeze blocks. The resultant pond holds over 8,000 gallons of water and has given another dimension to the garden. Tropical plants *and* exotic fish!

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