



James Scott's 'short and fat' garden stretches across the width of the house, but clever design disguises and makes the most of its shape.

NATURAL LIVING

James Scott took the brief for his own garden from his wife and two daughters. The result is a clever but simple space made for gathering, living and enjoying

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James Scott has devoted his entire career to garden design, pretty much since he left school. And so it's little surprise that this dedicated professional approached the design of his own garden in exactly the same way he would a client's.

"When I designed the garden at our old house, I found it really difficult – and I found this one really difficult as well. There are so many things I could do or ought to do, and I didn't really want it to be a showcase for what I do for a living," he explains. "So I sat down with the family and took a brief from them." James made notes while his wife, Helen, and their two daughters made a wish list.

"There were a few key things on the brief. Helen wanted somewhere we could hold family gatherings and parties. The girls wanted a trampoline, and from an aesthetic point of view I hate trampolines. They also wanted a big lawn, which wouldn't have been my instinct, and Sophie, my eldest, came up with the idea of a fire pit. All of those things got incorporated into the design.

"I really did follow the process – I did a draft design for them, talked it through with them – I treated the girls and Helen like clients, and it really was taking the brief from them that led to quite a



Above Garden designer James Scott in his Bedfordshire garden.

Right *Geum* 'Totally Tangerine' blooms brightly below multi-stemmed amelanchiers.

Below right The sunken fire pit is backed by a bespoke laser-cut Corten steel panel.

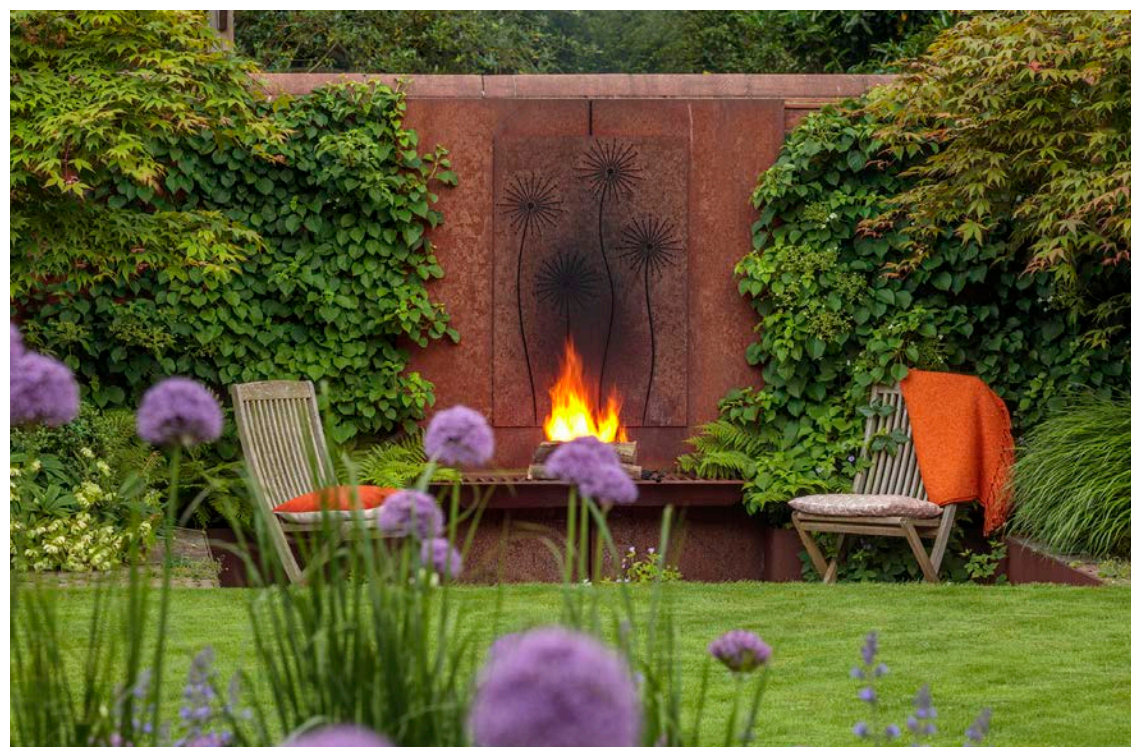
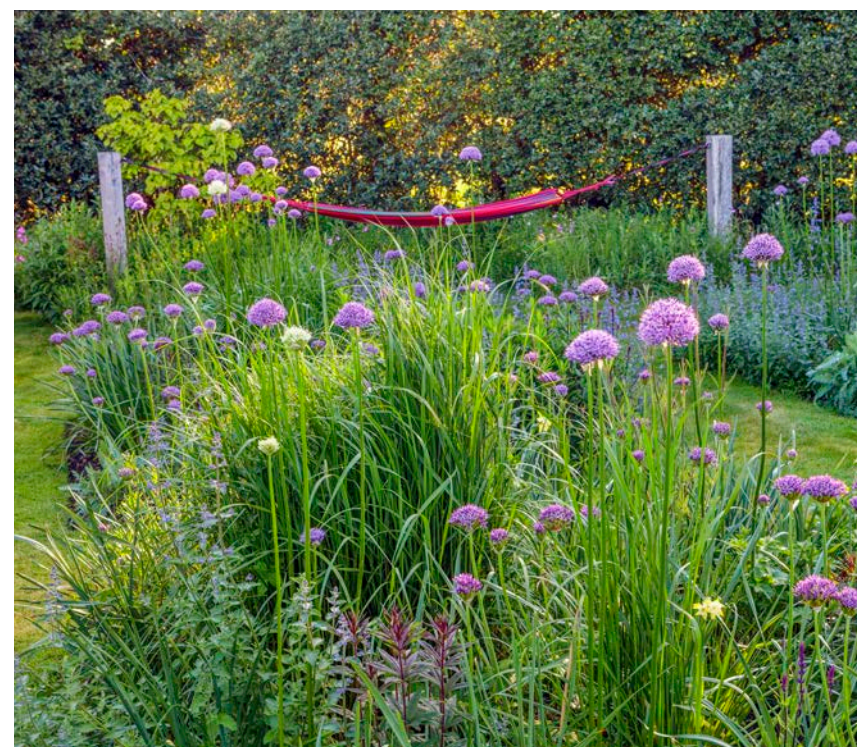
Below left The hammock was one of James's daughters' requests when he asked them for their design brief.

simple layout. If a client ever says 'do what you want to do' it's so hard to know where to start – having a brief is really important."

In 2016, within six months of the family moving in, the garden was underway. "But it only really came to fruition last year," James observes.

That was when his daughters, by then a little older, allowed him to finally dispense with the trampoline. A circular area with low-slung seating took its place.

The house is tucked up a little lane in the Bedfordshire village of Aspley Guise, near Woburn, and sits within an area that was formerly part of a large estate. The 'big house' is long gone, but James thinks the house neighbouring his own may once



have belonged to the garden manager. An original Victorian wall runs along one of his boundaries, and an old holly hedge along another, both dating back probably to around 1850. When the house was built, new brick walls had been added to match the old one and some existing orchard trees removed. So when James and Helen bought it they found they had inherited handsome boundaries and a largely blank canvas within.

Unlike so many gardens in Britain that are long and thin and stretch away from the house, the back garden here spreads across the width of the property. "It's short and fat," says James. But that's by no means a disadvantage: "the garden at our last house had a slightly awkward shape and when you were sitting in the house you didn't feel part of the

This slightly sunken area previously housed a trampoline, but is now a tranquil seating spot, immersed in planting.



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garden, but it’s very different here. The kitchen goes right across the length of the back of the house and you can sit in there and look out on the garden.”

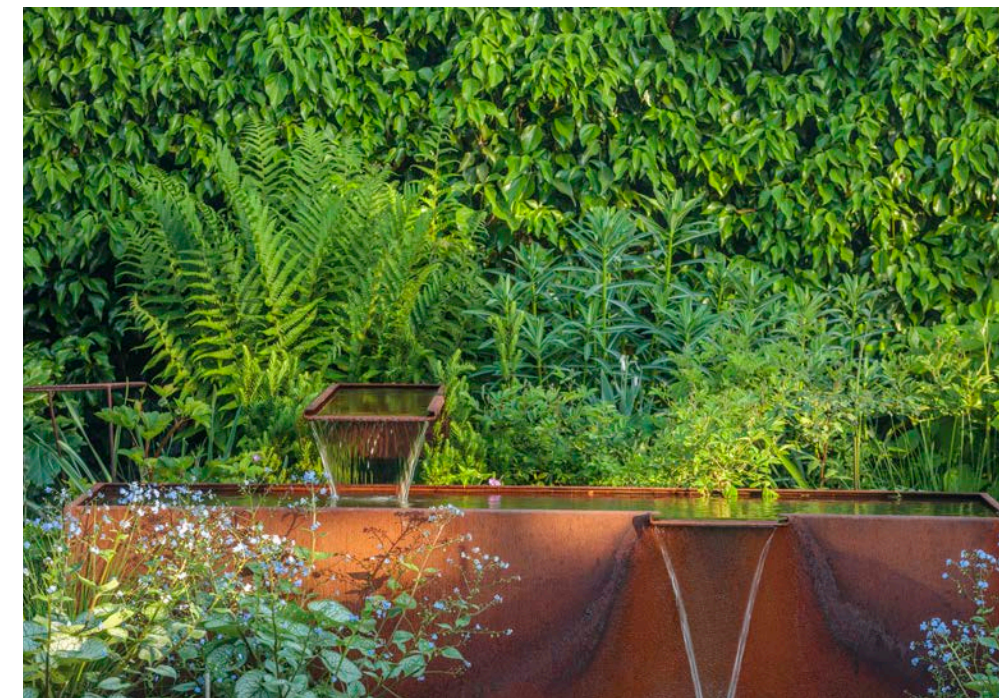
Clever design mitigates what the garden lacks in depth. “There’s a row of amelanchiers quite close to the house in planters of Corten steel. It means your eye goes there first because you’ve got foreground interest. If you don’t have anything in the foreground, the first thing that stops your eye is the back wall and that tends to make the garden feel shorter, wider, fatter. If you’ve got things of interest in front, it just makes the garden feel proportionately much better,” says James.

On one side, four square borders have been cut into the lawn – James calls them his quadrant beds – that serve a similar purpose. When the perennials growing in them reach their full height and bloom in summer, it looks like one large block of planting. Behind them sits the greenhouse, a lean-to built against the boundary wall to James’s own design. It’s here that he likes to take his morning coffee.

Helen and James had always wanted to incorporate water into the design, so James drew up a plan for a Corten water feature to sit in front of the ivy-clad back wall, “with a little bit of a nod to the heritage of the place – it feels like it could have been an old feeding trough from back in the day”. Whenever he designs a feature like this, James says he tends to sketch a rough design first, and then does ‘the maths’. “I use the principle of the golden ratio, so the size of the troughs and the height of the water drops were worked out using that. You end up with something that, through somebody else’s cleverness, looks just right.”

On the other side of the garden is the fire pit. It sits in a small sunken area created when the garden’s slight slope was adjusted to put the lawn on the same level as the terrace and house. “It’s only 45cm deep, but that’s low enough for you to feel completely surrounded by garden,” says James. “It gives a completely different perspective.

Top Geums contrast with acid-green euphorbia in raised steel beds that stop the eye from being drawn to the boundary. **Middle left** Chives have seeded into the gravel infill between paving. **Middle right** The zesty lime-green bracts of *Euphorbia polychroma*. **Bottom** Measurements for the Corten steel water trough follow the rule of the golden ratio.





It's the same where we had the trampoline, which is now a slightly sunken seating area. When you sit in the low chairs you really feel like you're down in the planting with insects buzzing around you."

Following a brief foray into forestry after leaving school, James switched to study landscape design. He got his lucky break when he won a competition to design a garden at Chelsea, and after a couple of years spent designing gardens for a London garden centre he set up his own business, The Garden Company, when he was just 23. For the past 31 years James and his team have designed, built, maintained and won awards for their gardens, and James's enthusiasm for it has never waned.

With the exception of the annual trim of the 3m-high, 100m-long holly hedge, for which he confesses he has help, James looks after the garden himself. "In summer when it's light, I'll get home and potter around a bit. I find it really therapeutic. I'm a huge fan of gardening and the benefits of it. I'm not the 'cobbler's son' with no shoes, I do enjoy it." His favourite thing though, is not a smartly

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designed Corten raised bed, or a particularly nice multi-stemmed tree, but seeing his family enjoy the garden, too. "Seeing people interacting and having nice family gatherings and parties. I think that's what I like most: other people enjoying it and it just being used," he says.

James admits he's always liked the Mac Griswold quote 'Gardening is the slowest of the performing arts', but in just over six years he's created a garden that marries his design skills with his family's needs. Now it can simply be enjoyed at leisure. ■

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Above Both lean-to greenhouse and water features have been made to bespoke designs by James, whose attention to detail is evident throughout the garden.