

Seek shelter in the calm

Unadorned, minimalist gardens are an antidote to today's sensorial excess, writes **Simon Busch**

Perhaps it was the onset of winter, with its austere mood, or maybe I was reacting to what Augusto Calonder calls our "overstimulated" society, but I recently developed a hankering for gardens so simple they were barely there.

It was while researching these so-called "minimalist" gardens that I discovered Calonder, a landscape architect based near Lausanne, Switzerland, and the serene space he created outside furniture designer Jennifer Newman's home and gallery in rural Wiltshire, England.

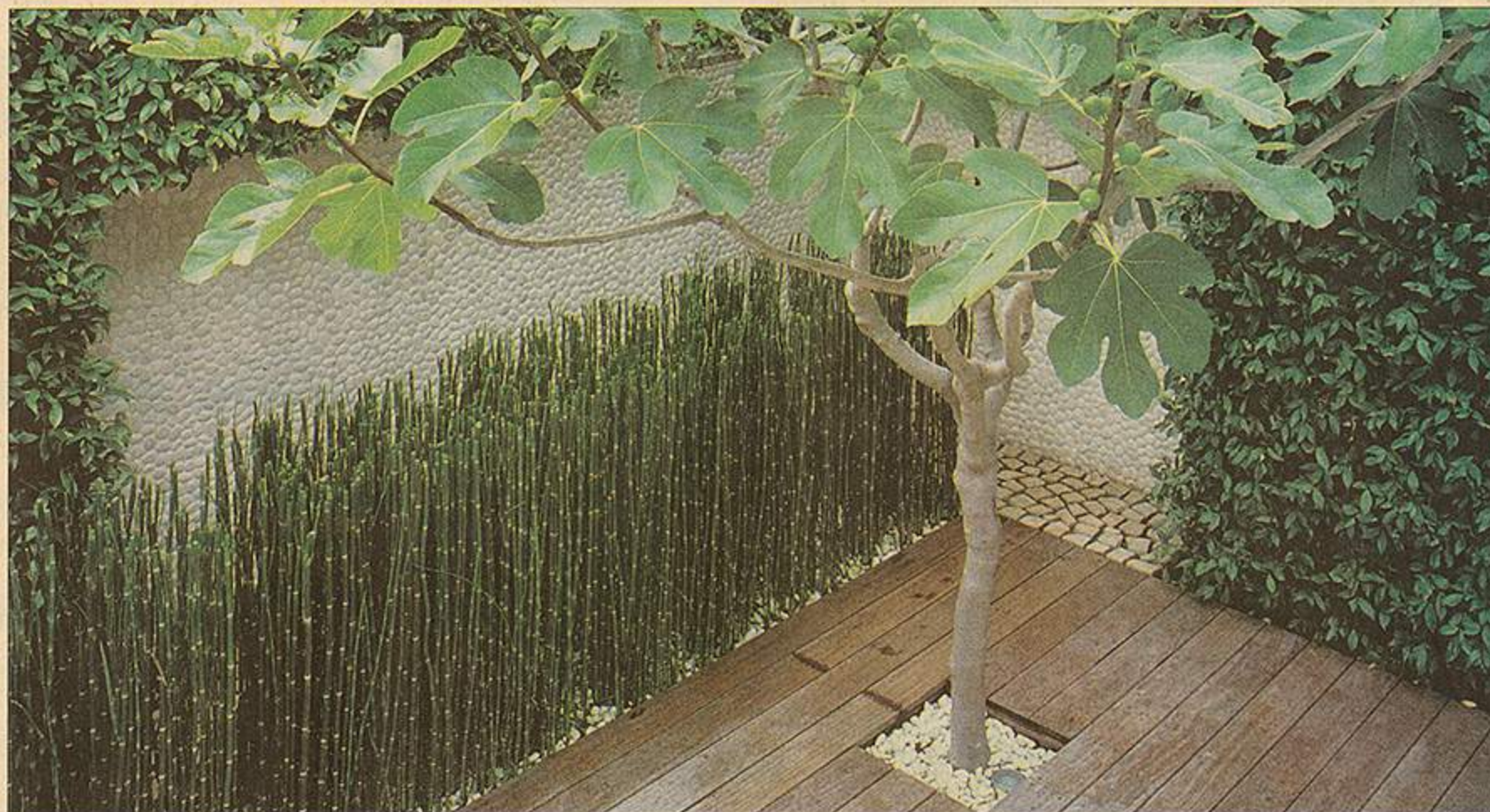
Looking at the extent of the garden – a compacted gravel courtyard, sliced with irregular lengths of pale concrete and interspersed with clusters of white-barked birch – I gave a little sigh. It was a lesson in simplicity. Yet, according to Calonder, this was the outcome of a process rather than anything preordained.

Because we live in a radically "eclectic" society, manifested in a mishmash of building and design styles that we tend to experience as a barrage, he thinks most of us seek shelter in the calm, the ordinary, the local. His aim is therefore to divine the specificity of a site, taking into account both natural and man-made environments, and then to interpret that identity, in stripped-back, elemental form. "A design that enters into a narrative with the surrounding landscape or buildings is often calmer than a decontextualised equivalent," he says.

In the case of Newman's property, Gibb's Barn, "the two starting points were the industrial, chicken-shed structures" on the site and "the surrounding, sparse landscape". Both "seemed to imply" the resulting, radically quiet, unadorned garden.

At a large private estate in Somerset, the search for harmony involved "taking things away rather than contributing them". "We've removed vast amounts of shrubbery that didn't relate to the scale of the place at all," Calonder explains. Surrounding meadows, fields and bands of woodland have been reinterpreted as expanses of fine lawn and formal hedging.

With their lines and squares, minimalist gardens might seem antithetical to nature. But according to designer James Aldridge, who previously worked with Christopher Bradley-Hole, author of sem-



Bare minimum: above, James Aldridge's Lilyville Road garden; below, Gibb's Barn; bottom, James Lee's Chelsea garden featured in Caroline Tilston's book

Andrew Lawson

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inal book *His Minimalist Garden*, inspiration for spare, elegant spaces does often come from vegetation. "I spend a lot of my holidays in wilderness areas; the Patagonian coast, alpine New Zealand, the Greenland tundra," he explains. "In those landscapes the plants grow in broad brushstrokes – large tracts of similar things in greys and other soft colours." His gardens are an attempt to "abstract and simplify" such vistas, he explains, importing the "calming atmosphere" that seems to suffuse them.

Calonder's strategy is similar, especially in the UK, where gardeners "still display a great fascination" with the 18th-century pursuit of collecting exotic

species of plants. "As a result, the gardens [are] often very sumptuous in their diversity but nervous and overstimulating, rather than calm and peaceful." Tapping into a local palette of materials and vegetation is, by contrast, "a starting point for simplification".

To some extent minimalist gardens suit their owners' personalities. "I don't like fuss, I don't like frills; I have just six things hanging in the cupboard," says Newman, while Joseph Cali, author of *The New Zen Garden*, describes the "sense of wellness" he gets from the spare aesthetic, the emotional reward for "turning decay and disorder into order".

There are more down-to-earth reasons for the simplifying trend, too. One is modern-day homeowners' desire for low-maintenance gardens. Designer Aldridge notes that few clients want to spend five or six hours of their precious weekends tending the garden and not everyone can afford to have someone else do it for them.

Heightened interest in contemporary architecture and an increase in modern, glass extensions for older houses are



also a factor, says designer James Lee. "In opening up [back rooms] you're exposing the garden; the minute you step in, the garden is visible through the glass," he explains.

The risk is of an ugly clash between the clean, modernist lines of the addition and a garden showing more or less baroque neglect. But Lee works in close collaboration with architects to resolve such contradictions. "It's very rare you'll see curves or irregular shapes in my designs," he says. "They are mostly rectilinear, their lines taken from the house."

Although he is featured in the "minimalist" chapter of Caroline Tilston's new book *Small Family Gardens* and admits to keeping architect John Pawson's epochal book *Minimum* "right by" his desk, Lee says he prefers "modernist" to describe his spartan designs. His ethos is one of form follows function, the function being the client's requirements and the form being the simplest means of realising them.

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Growing global

One to see now
Royal Botanic Gardens,
Kew, London, UK

What for?
Ideas for shrubs that flower at this time of year, walks in warm conservatories and the outstanding Henry Moore sculpture exhibition, which features 28 large-scale works in the landscape setting of the gardens. It continues until March 30 next year before moving to New York.



One to have
Camellia sasanqua
'Narumigata'

Why?
To cheer up the winter garden. Camellias are usually associated with early spring but the sasanquas are a welcome sight, flowering in autumn and winter. 'Narumigata' is a fairly tough and reliable shrub, with shiny, rich green foliage and white, pink-tinged flowers.



Diane Summers