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High and mighty:

## A minimalist with a taste for the unusual

James Aldridge is a rising star of design, known for his dashing modern designs and quirky plant combinations. Words by **Stephen Lacey**, pictures by **Andrew Lawson**

James Aldridge, 38, has impeccable credentials. First, after studying horticulture at Wye College in Kent, he jumped in the deep end by applying to work for a couple of months for the doyenne of gardeners and designers, the inspirational but formidable Rosemary Verey. "I got barked at on a regular basis," he laughs. "But it was a fantastic experience." Then, Mrs Verey got him a full-time job as a gardener with her most prestigious client – the Prince of Wales.

It was at Highgrove in the early 1990s that I first met James. He was clipping topiary shapes up a ladder, in the company of the then head gardener David Mason, clearly having a good time. "It was such an interesting period. The garden was still relatively small, and David and I were a young team, more or less running the show, with a lot of involvement with HRH. We were let loose and trusted, and were meeting wonderful gardeners and designers like Roy Strong, Molly Salisbury and the Bonnermans." He stayed there a full seven years.

"While at Highgrove, I did a garden and landscape conservation course at the Architectural Association, thinking I might go on and work for the National Trust,

but in the end, I decided to move to London." After a spell doing garden maintenance, he embarked on the one-year garden design course at the Incehald School in Pimlico, and then got some practical experience with established designers Christopher Bradley-Hole and Luciano Giubbilei.

Only for the past three



years has he been on his own, but already his work is displaying such originality and polish that I am happy to take a punt on him as a big name for the future. I am not alone in my opinion. The photographer Andrew Lawson, who sees the work of great many designers, advised his sister to commission him to work on her garden, and

the Incehald lost little time in inviting him back as a regular lecturer.

With his background in Cotswold gardens, you might expect the flowery, artsy-craftsy look from James Aldridge, but not a bit of it. "Plants are my passion, but I've always been interested in modern design, and how you can create something new and interesting with unusual hard and soft materials." In fact, his gardens tend towards the dashingly minimalist.

The first he showed me, on a tour of London, was a tiny Kensington roof terrace, 5m (16ft) by 3.5m (11ft). Here, he has set a floor of black pebbles and black grouting on a plastic floating membrane, and lights made out of fibreglass squares "like glowing amber". "I love using warm, as well as cool grey shades, in combination with the greens. It is something I see in nature, and they help make a more restful scene."

The clients wanted something "a bit funky", and that's what they have got. Yellow-stemmed bamboos, *Phyllostachys aureosulcata*, and a yellow-flowered succulent, *Aloe striatula* (which James says is hardy in London), contribute further arresting forms. And privacy is

provided by a fence made of wooden slats of varying widths, which give light and views but keep out prying eyes.

In a back garden in Parson's Green, south west London, the number of ingredients is similarly pared down to make a clean, architectural accompaniment to the large white kitchen. Glass doors open onto a wide wooden deck, with a deceptive sense of space, and the visual stimulation is concentrated on the walls. "The more a garden is stripped back, the more important the boundaries become. It is easy to hide them in large gardens but not

in small ones, so I like to tackle them seriously."

Here, slatted fencing, combines with panels of white pebbles and ivory grouting, set into rendered blockwork, and steel-mesh frames, clad in scented *Trachelospermum jasminoides*. I loved the little green-stemmed palisade of ornamental horsetail, *Equisetum hyemale*, growing underneath – well irrigated, and contained in a plastic liner to keep it moist. And in the tiny front garden, which partners black paving slabs with black-caned bamboo, I was intrigued by *Euonymus fortunei* 'Kewensis', which cloaks walls in small

evergreen foliage like the creeping fig you see in National Trust orangeries.

Such unexpected choices are a sign of real plantsmanship. "I may not use many plants in a garden but I like them to be interesting, and it is fun trying new ones out. I am always attracted to the weird ones in the nursery. Most of my holidays are to wildernesses like Nepal and Iceland, and I always keep a journal, noting how plants are adapted to hostile environments – often very relevant for roof gardens and light wells in London – and taking inspiration from the natural plant and colour associations I see."

We finished up in a garden in Clapham, which he designed for friends 12 years ago, while he was still at Highgrove. It is a jungle of exotic plants around a mosaic-studded pool –

beautifully atmospheric, but a fascinating contrast to the discipline he practises today, and an insight into how much his style has been honed in the intervening time.

What all three gardens have in common, though, is that they provide a sensual oasis in bustling London. "Clients with high-pressure jobs need a getaway. Calmness is what I try to create." That can be achieved with a mass of plants or, as he now proves, with a

restful simplicity of design and just a handful of green shapes and harmonious colours.

### THE LOOK

- ◆ Imaginative modern materials
- ◆ Unusual plant forms
- ◆ Natural colours
- ◆ Inventive boundaries

### THE PLANTS

- ◆ Aloe
- ◆ Astelia
- ◆ Bamboos
- ◆ Equisetum
- ◆ Trachelospermum

◆ www.jamesaldridgegardens.com



## KITCHENGARDEN

Medwyn Williams



Store single-cropping veg, such as beetroot, until you need them

will have the finest taste, as well as exquisite internal colour and structure. The longer you leave them in the ground, the more tough and tasteless they become. This problem is exacerbated when you use F1 hybrid varieties bred for the commercial market. One of the key features of hybridised vegetables is that they peak at the same time and can be harvested all at once: great for the commercial grower, but not always desirable for the home gardener.

You can pickle or bottle beetroot when they get to size, or share them with friends and neighbours. Leaving them in the ground is not an option as, apart from growing big and tasteless, they will certainly be attacked by pests such as slugs, which love the damp mornings and evenings. I prefer to store my beetroots until I need them. Fork up the roots then twist the leaves off, rather than cutting them off, to minimise bleeding. Store them in boxes packed with damp peat, making sure that the roots do not touch each other. Be sure to keep only blenheim-free roots. Stored in a dry shed or garage, the roots will remain firm until small shoots emerge from the crown sometime in the new year.

As anyone who has grown their own will know, when you have experienced the thrill of eating something so fresh that it hardly counts as cooking, you really can't help but brag about it. However, not all vegetables are harvested in the same way; some, such as peas and tomatoes, are picked from multi-cropping types, and you rarely have a glut of these. But you only have one go at single-cropping vegetables such as cauliflowers, beetroot and carrots, with no chance of another crop unless you have prepared well and sown at different times. It means that with vegetables such as beetroot, you often have a surplus that are all at the optimum size, condition and flavour for harvesting at the same time.

Harvest beetroot when they're about the size of a tennis ball; they

### Reader offer

Gardening readers can buy a mixed beetroot seed collection, comprising one packet each of 'Boltardy' (red, 400 seeds), 'Albina Vereduna' (white, 250 seeds), and 'Cheppa' (pink and white, 300 seeds), for £5.29. Please send cheques/postal orders to Telegraph Garden Service, Dept TE605, PO Box 99, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 2SN. Or call the credit/debit card line on 0870 112 6015, quoting ref TE605. October delivery to all UK addresses.