

The geometric design of this small courtyard garden features straight gravel paths and eight densely planted beds.

URBAN DESIGN

BLADES *of glory*

A contemporary knot-inspired garden formed entirely from ornamental grasses and specimen trees has transformed a plain square of lawn behind this Jacobean house in west London

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The garden at Sheila and Christopher Richards' 17th-century house has an unexpectedly contemporary feel, with a network of angular paths and beds full of ornamental grasses. "It's like a modern knot garden," says Sheila, "which is a pleasing nod to the period of the house."

In the past two years, this small garden in Brentford, west London, has undergone a transformation. For two decades, it had been a square lawn with mature shady trees and dark-toned flowers, all of which could be seen in one glance. When honey fungus killed the trees, Sheila and Christopher decided it was time for a change – and they did not have to look far to find a garden designer to help. In 2014, their niece, Sophie

Walker, had become the youngest woman to design a garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Having spent a lot of time at her uncle and aunt's house, she was full of ideas for it. "I had never seen a garden entirely of grasses and I set it as a challenge to myself," she says.

The brief was simple: no lawn and no colour. "Christopher is an architect so he only likes black and white," laughs Sheila. "We told Sophie we wanted a green and white palette, and got rid of all the other flowers." The only ones Sheila wanted to keep were peonies, but Sophie dug them up by mistake. "Two survived and they're white, thank goodness, so Christopher approves."

The new geometric paths, and the grasses that soften them, appeal to Christopher's eye for



ABOVE Large ornamental pots help to break up the straight lines and add interest along the gravel path.

FAR LEFT A contemporary aluminium table and chairs provide a place to relax by the L-shaped pond retained from the earlier design.

LEFT The pond's edges are softened by *Persicaria amplexicaulis* and *Miscanthus sinensis* reflected in the still water.

ABOVE RIGHT Swathes of grasses, including *Panicum* 'Northwind', *Calamagrostis* x *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' and *Miscanthus* 'Adagio', are planted by height.

RIGHT A gravel path edged with aluminium zigzags past specimen trees such as *Acer davidii* and *Parrotia persica*, which provide bursts of autumn colour.



RIGHT Christopher and his niece, Sophie Walker, created an aluminium pergola, planted with two grapevines, to provide shade over the seating area.

BELOW Chimney pots from the couple's previous houses make striking focal points seen through drifts of ornamental grasses.

FAR BELOW In early autumn, the leaves of *Parrotia persica* turn intense red, contrasting with the soft golds of the grasses around it.

BELOW RIGHT The Jacobean house was formerly two cottages.



precision and to Sheila's enthusiasm for plants. "We like the limited range of materials," she says, "just aluminium, gravel, water and grasses."

Pink and purple foxgloves have been replaced by lush greens through the summer, and a mix of grasses that take on golden, red and russet tones in autumnal light. In winter, seedheads are left to stand, making a feature in the frost. "I like the fact that it has year-round interest," Sheila says.

The grasses have been grouped by height and colour; some beds are silver in winter, others more golden. Compact grasses such as *Carex* 'Little Midge' and *Pennisetum alopecuroides* contrast with those that reach head height, such as *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Fleming' and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'. The planting lets light through and creates movement.

"I wanted it to blow in the breeze," says Sophie. Sheila loves the result: "When the wind blows, you can hear it going through the grasses and the swaying has a very calming effect."

Now there is a fresh view at every turn. "The garden is only a hundred and fifty square feet but seems bigger," says Sheila, "and it's not all apparent at once." There is nothing they miss from the old garden – apart from a few peonies, perhaps.

GARDEN GUIDE

Orientation South facing.

Soil type Free-draining river terrace gravel with added top soil.

Special features L-shaped pond and specimen trees.

Garden design Sophie Walker, 020 7622 4361, sophiewalkerstudio.com.

