



Steps to success

Faced with a compact garden on different levels, landscape architect Floris Steyaert has created a unified whole using a limited palette of shade-loving plants

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What do you do when you want to make better use of a basement without losing too much of your garden? The common solution is to dig down, shifting the retaining wall of the garden backwards slightly to create a bigger light well. But when that retaining wall would be 2.5m high, and when the ground floor of your flat is another metre higher still, clearly, a more creative solution is called for.

This was the scenario facing architect-turned-leatherworker Michael Guérisse at his central Brussels apartment. “It’s so rare

to have a garden in this part of Brussels and we really wanted to make the most of it,” he says. It’s small, just 7.5m x 5.5m, and given the dramatic changes in level, Michael kept his expectations in check. “I simply wanted a low-maintenance, informal space,” he says. “Somewhere I could forget I was in the city.”

Thanks to garden designer Floris Steyaert, Michael now has what he dreamed of – and a whole lot more besides. Taking inspiration from the rough brick walls that surround the garden, Floris proposed a wild, informal ‘jungle garden’ planted with shade-tolerant plants that suit the northeasterly ▷

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Top Ceiling-height windows at the rear of Michael’s apartment let in plenty of light but necessitated an innovative garden design that would both look great and maximise light and space.

Middle The limestone rocks for this water feature were rejects from a local quarry, which helped keep costs down.

Bottom Contrasting foliage is key to this garden, with the differing shapes and colours of the *Amelanchier lamarckii*, ferns, hostas and *Hydrangea quercifolia* combining to create green patchwork.

KEY ELEMENTS

What Small, walled, city garden.

Where Central Brussels.

Soil Heavy clay.

Size 7.5 x 5.5m.

Aspect Northeast facing.

Special features Steep 2.5m slope, planted with woodland plants, plus flat, gravelled terrace.

Designed by Floris Steyaert (florissteyaert.be).

1 House

2 Metal grille steps

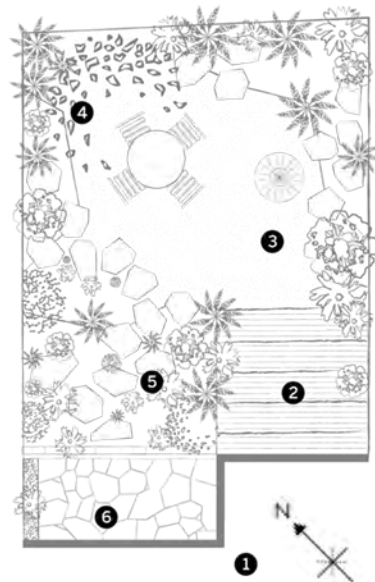
3 Gravelled terrace and seating area

4 Multi-stemmed

Amelanchier lamarckii

5 Stepping stone steps

6 Lower ground terrace





Limestone rocks, act as stepping stones through shade-tolerant planting of hostas, ferns and *Sedum spathulifolium* that create the slope leading down to the basement level.

Taking advantage of tricky topography

Five design tips from Floris Steyaert for coping with a difficult site



1 Always get a survey. Even a garden that appears to be flat, can have level changes of a metre or more.

2 Work with what's there. Sometimes clients want to change everything, but I recommend working with what you've got. It can help with creating the character and atmosphere of the garden.

3 Tricky sites often have tricky access, so be sure to consider this when planning the garden. Although we knew we would be able to bring the multi-stemmed amelanchier tree we were using in this garden through a window in the apartment, it was still quite

a challenge and took three people to manoeuvre it into place.

4 Think carefully about your materials. In a small garden, I wouldn't advise using too many different materials. I like to stick to a limited palette, but to use things in different ways, such as using square stones for a terrace, and then cutting them in half to make a path.

5 Try to be clever. In a small space, every inch matters. We designed the metal steps to double up as seating, and the rock pathway outside Michael's bedroom to look like a natural feature.



▷ aspect and local conditions. Instead of a retaining wall, Floris suggested connecting the garden with the basement bedroom via a slope, densely planted with a patchwork of ivy, lilyturf, barrenwort, hostas and ferns to bind the soil. Limestone rocks (rejected by the local quarry, but carefully chosen by Floris and Michael for their shape and texture) have been placed randomly enough that they look natural, while also forming an apparently serendipitous pathway up to the garden. "Looking out from the bedroom, you see a wall of green dotted with rocks, not merely a route to somewhere else," says Florian.

On the level above, an elegant set of wide, steel grille steps neatly links the living area to the garden, while also doubling up as extra seating for parties or outdoor suppers. It is both functional and a part of the garden to enjoy in its own right – as are the dining area under the amelanchier tree, the limestone fountain and the small paved terrace outside the bedroom – a lovely

spot for breakfast, particularly in late spring when the lilac is out.

To complement the contemporary architecture, a limited colour palette of white, black and green with accents of purple was chosen, although Floris admits that colour is intentionally fairly minimal. "The idea was to work more with textures and nuances of green," he says, pointing out the deeply lobed foliage of *Hydrangea quercifolia* contrasting with the glossy leaves of *Acanthus mollis*, feathery fern fronds and the divided evergreen leaves of *Choisya x dewitteana* 'Aztec Pearl', whose orange blossom scent hangs in the garden air on warm days during spring and autumn.

Despite the garden's small size, Floris's enthusiasm for this challenging project is tangible. "With larger projects, the garden is often the first thing you see, even before you enter the house," he says. "But with smaller city gardens, you never know what you will find. I love creating that sense of surprise." □



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Top At first, Michael wanted to repaint the old walls, but Floris persuaded him to leave them as they are, so their roughness would complement the wild, 'jungle' feel of the garden. *Polystichum setiferum* and *Hydrangea quercifolia* soften the wide metal steps that double as additional seating.

Middle *Anemone x hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert' adds a bright highlight to the predominantly green planting. More splashes of white come from the flowers of *Choisya x dewitteana* 'Aztec Pearl', *Erodium x variabile* 'Album' and *Hydrangea quercifolia*, which gradually fade to pink.

Bottom From his bedroom window Michael can now look out on a lush wall of green that includes hostas, ferns and *Hydrangea quercifolia*, with *Sedum spathulifolium* 'Cape Blanco' and *Erodium x variabile* 'Album' adding ground cover and *Hedera helix* 'Star' partly covering the wall.