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Hardwood decking and fake grass mean this broad terrace in London's Spitalfields requires little effort to maintain. All the greenery is planted in oversize pots, allowing plenty of space for entertaining guests

Low-maintenance gardens

You might be starved for time, but that doesn't mean you can't have an attractive or exciting garden. Here's how...

Lawns, shrubberies and big, blousy borders full of summer-flowering perennials are great if you've got time to look after them, but for those who lead busy lives, the thought of mowing, pruning or deadheading is a complete turn off. Yet even if you're short on time, you can still create an outdoor space that has plenty to shout about. With skilful planning, along with a careful choice of plants and materials, you can create a bold garden that will largely take care of itself. A low-maintenance garden is perfect for anyone who would rather kick back their heels and enjoy their outdoor space than spend countless hours maintaining it.

Consider your space

The design of a low-maintenance garden largely depends on how you want to use the space. For instance, singletons and couples may want somewhere to chill out, to party or to use for alfresco dining. You may even want a combination of all three, so plan the space carefully to ensure you get the maximum use out of it. Family gardens are a compromise between what adults want and the need to provide an exciting space for children. To prevent this from becoming cluttered with lots of toys, you will need to incorporate some clever storage solutions and avoid plants that might harm kids, such as spiky exotics.

If your space is largely shaded by buildings or neighbouring trees, make the most of any available light by placing your outdoor dining furniture in that area. Conversely, if you have a sunny, south-facing space, you may want to put seats in the shade to give you respite from

clockwise

from left Giant pots have been carefully planted with drought-tolerant flowers and grasses. An automatic

irrigation system waters them twice a day; this plastic recliner can stay outside come rain or shine; the stunning view needs no upkeep

the sun when you eat. If you don't have natural shade, create it by erecting a shade sail (see left).

A great consideration when planning a garden is how much time you can spend maintaining it, whether it's 10 minutes a week or an hour every month. If you can only spare a few minutes, choose easy-to-clean, hard landscaping materials and avoid too many plants – all will need the occasional trim to remain in good health.

Material world

To ensure your garden is easy to look after, pick hard landscaping materials carefully. For paving and patios, large slabs of natural stone are ideal, such as slate. Indian sandstone is another popular material, but much of its production is considered unethical – landscape supplier Marshalls has signed up to the Ethical Trading Initiative,

ensuring there are better wages, safer working conditions and no child labour in the production of the stone it imports. Stone does not require more than the occasional sweep with a broom to remove leaves or debris – if the stone is butt-jointed to create a seamless floor it is even easier to clean.

Decking makes a durable, attractive and tactile surface. Go for hardwood, rather than softwood, which discolours quickly and becomes slippery due to the build-up of algae and moss over winter. Western red cedar, oak or other hardwoods from a certified scheme, such as that run by the Forestry Stewardship Scheme, are ideal. Alternatively, try Eco Decking Tiles. These are made from ipe, a South American hardwood that is resistant to lichens and moulds due to the density of the wood. The tiles are mounted on a weatherproof...

Perfect planters



Curves fiberglass planter in pink £165, Bright Green



Tuscan planter in natural £133, Bright Green



Small stackable trough in titanium £10, John Lewis



Tall square green pot £92, The Conran Shop



Ciri planter £8, Habitat

City roof garden

When garden designer Sara Jane Rothwell was commissioned to transform an empty roof space, she was given one important criteria – to make it the ultimate low-maintenance garden, perfect for both adults and children. Sitting among the rooftops of Spitalfields, east London, it could swiftly turn into an eyesore if plants and materials were not picked carefully.

Presented with a 12x8m blank canvas, Sara Jane covered much of the bitumen roof with hardwood decking, incorporating patches of fake grass. This helps to give the space a lush feel, at odds with the surrounding concrete buildings.

Without any soil to plant into, all of the plants are grown in pots. White-stemmed birches sit in powder-coated galvanised containers and

are underplanted with drought-tolerant grasses, lavenders or *Erigeron karvinskianus*, a vigorous daisy that thrives on neglect. Elsewhere, silver astelia makes an architectural statement in tapered terrazzo pots. To ensure plants remain healthy, they are watered twice a day by an automatic irrigation system.

'I chose easy-to-care-for furniture throughout, much of which can be left outdoors all year round,' says Sara Jane. Plastic built-in bench seats lie under a shade sail with a carpet of fake turf beneath, providing a comfy spot out of the sunshine. This relaxing area is enclosed on three sides by strips of hardwood, with a rectangular mirror set at the back to reflect the view opposite of the 'gherkin' and Nicholas Hawksmoor's magnificent Christ Church.

Easy-to-maintain plants



Agave Americana
(Century plant)
Grows to form a rosette of glaucous, stiff, pointed leaves



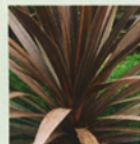
Phyllostachys nigra
(Black bamboo)
This tall, black bamboo is ideal for large pots



Festuca glauca
(Blue fescue)
This hardy grass suits full sun and needs little watering



Stipa tenuifolia
Drought-tolerant grass that loves to bask in the sun



Cordyline australis
Striking foliage plant suited to dry conditions



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Gardening needn't be back-breaking work: tall containers mean you don't have to stoop and strain

below

A young white-stemmed birch tree sits surrounded by drought-resistant grasses in a galvanised pot



polypropylene base and originate from a certified scheme in Bolivia. They can be easily slotted together and cost £78 per sqm.

Gravel is often suggested for low-maintenance gardens, as it can prevent weeds from growing if spread across a weed-suppressing membrane. However, it can soon turn into an outdoor cat litter tray or need raking to stay looking sharp. To avoid this happening, use resin-bonded gravel – the stone is scattered on to wet resin, which then holds it in place. You can lay the material yourself (£15-£20 per sqm) or pay £35 per sqm for a contractor to lay the resin and the gravel. Resin-bound gravel, where the aggregate is mixed with the resin before laying to prevent stones from ever becoming loose, costs £60-£70 per sqm for a specialist to lay.

Lawns are not ideal for those

pressed for time. They need cutting, weeding, feeding and watering on a regular basis. However, if you have children and feel the need for a verdant sward, try fake grass. There are many styles available, and they make a passable alternative to the real thing. Honest! When laying, fake grass is unrolled like a carpet and held in place with staples. You can even choose from a variety of piles, ranging from 17-38mm. Expect to pay between £32.50-£55 per sqm.

Planting

Flowering plants need a lot of TLC, but there are many plants that don't need regular deadheading, cutting back or staking.

Perhaps the ultimate low-maintenance plants are sun-loving succulents. These thrive on neglect and are naturally tolerant of drought. Ideal if you forget about watering

STYLING: JANE BAKER; PHOTOGRAPHY: JANE BAKER; GARDENING: JANE BAKER