



**Reminder:** dark-painted pergola and upright timbers bring an air of New York's High Line garden built on an old railway track

# Strictly for the grown-ups

London empty-nesters who love New York wanted a cool, minimalist garden to remind them of the High Line



Alex Mitchell



**W**HEN Judith and Dave Smithers waved their daughter off to college, it was time to claim back their garden from her. In Sydenham, south-east London, the garden was designed for childhood but a recent trip to New York and its elevated High Line garden — built on a disused railway track — was enough to convince the couple they could now do with something more adult.

They asked designer **Lara Behr** to bring in some of this contemporary mix of loose perennials and industrial aesthetic. "It's about having the back garden they always wanted," says Behr. With a "big" birthday to celebrate, the semi-retired couple wanted plenty of entertaining spaces, lots of colourful loose planting, raised beds for Dave to indulge his vegetable-growing enthusiasm, and, most importantly, no lawn to mow.

**Like many family gardens,** the space Behr first encountered was a lawn with mealy borders around the edge. To make it worse, the whole lawn sloped away from the house so you "felt like you were running downhill towards the back fence".

Behr levelled off the slope and replaced the lawn with gravel inset with slabs of blue grey granite. She kept the planting palette quite limited and low maintenance, designing generous beds of tall, waving perennials that cut across the space so you feel totally immersed in the paintbox of sanguisorba, eupatorium, echinacea, orange geums and grasses such as molinia Transparent and calamagrostis Karl Foerster.

Painting the fences and shed black gave the boundaries a contemporary update and made them recede from view, while a pergola and a line of upright timbers painted in Farrow & Ball's Railings bring a touch of the High Line track-scape to the garden.

Neat ivy screens in front of the shed and fence are another nod to New York, where this elegant evergreen is more commonly used by designers: here the variety is Hedera helix Woerner. Halfway down, Behr made a laid-back corner area around the rusted fire pit with two Cor-ten steel benches filled with firewood and topped with timber.

Dave loves his vegetable garden tucked away behind the planting at the back of the space, but didn't want to be a slave to it. So having the veg

**Sociable space:** friends love the fire pit and the weathered-steel seating so much they prefer the Sydenham garden to the pub for their get-togethers

hidden from the house it doesn't matter if he isn't constantly watering. "The only thing I was really strict on was the colour of the pots," says Behr. "They needed to be black so they blended in."

**The couple love** the brutalist concrete fibre Sponeck chairs and table that make a stylish place to relax towards the back of the garden. There are detachable cushions but without them the chairs are like sculpture, too, and can stay outside all winter where they look fantastic among the frosted grasses.

The result looks like it would host the best parties. No wonder Judith and Dave's friends have started meeting up here instead of the local pub. When the Smithers' daughter comes home from college for the holidays they're all going to be fighting for space around that fire pit.

**No more mowing:** below, the lawn went, replaced by gravel inset with blue grey granite slabs and a limited planting palette of perennials



## GET THE LOOK

- **Commission Lara Behr** at [larabehr.com](http://larabehr.com)
- **Photographs:** by Annaick Guitteny Photography
- **Sponeck concrete fibre chairs and table:** chairs £580; table £390; cushions £140 each ([iotagarden.com](http://iotagarden.com))
- **Cor-ten steel storage benches with timber tops:** from The Pot Company ([thepotco.com](http://thepotco.com))
- **Gravel Cotswold Chippings laid on CEDApath stabilisation system:** [cedstone.co.uk](http://cedstone.co.uk)
- **Blue grey granite — large rectangular pieces and plank paving:** [londonstone.co.uk](http://londonstone.co.uk)
- **Paint for pergola and upright timbers:** [farrow-ball.com](http://farrow-ball.com)
- **Raised beds and compost:** from Harrod Horticultural ([harrodhorticultural.com](http://harrodhorticultural.com))
- **Plants:** How Green Nursery — trade, with regular public weekends ([howgreennursery.co.uk](http://howgreennursery.co.uk))

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