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Pride of our alley

Transform the neglected shady passageway linking house and garden from shameful eyesore to asset

WORDS: SADIE STOWELL



The area directly outside the back door of many gardens leads into a narrow alleyway shaded by the house wall or fence, which may or may not receive any sun. The design potential for this tricky area is often overlooked, but with a little creative use of space it can become a feature in itself, as well as a creditable link to the main garden.

The journey is the secret of good garden design. Lead the eye to a focal point and the feet will follow. An interesting plant, tree, sculpture or water feature, which can be viewed as you step outside the door, will draw you into the garden. Slow the journey down by providing interest in the passageway itself. An attractive feature, such as a large pot or fountain, set into or against the wall on the boundary side of the

space, creates a diagonal emphasis. Use paving or stepping stones set in gravel to create a diagonal or curving path, which will slow the journey and give an impression of a wider space. Avoid a straight path, as this will effectively cut the area in two and emphasise its long, narrow shape.

The whole idea is to create an illusion of width, to soften the boundaries with appropriate plantings, and to add interest. It is important to keep things simple and uncluttered, so don't include lots of different materials. Two types of hard-landscaping should be ample and avoid visual confusion.

Don't forget vertical surfaces and overhead space, as these provide further opportunities for planting. A pergola constructed over an alleyway is ideal for climbing plants. If there is

sun for part of the day, climbers such as *Clematis montana*, *C. armandii*, honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) and winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) can be trained overhead. The choice is more limited where the passageway is in complete shade, but there are some ivies with beautifully marked leaves which will create a fine canopy of foliage – *Hedera helix* 'Goldheart' and, to cover a large area, *H. colchica* 'Dentata Variegata'. For a shady border try plants such as *Tellima grandiflora*, *Dicentra spectabilis*, *Alchemilla mollis*, *Aquilegia*, *Viola* and *Primula*. Cool, shady conditions also favour ferns and grasses including *Hakonechloa macra*.

Raised beds create a formal look. To create an informal effect, edge your border with tiles or bricks that echo those used on the house. However you choose to transform an alleyway, any time and effort spent fulfilling its potential will be well repaid.

The journey is the secret – lead the eye to a focal point and the feet will follow

Sadie Stowell (sadie@clayphoot.demon.co.uk) was joint winner of C4's The Great Garden Challenge 2005.



Alleyway Tips

- When developing your garden, consider the alleyway as an integral part of the garden as a whole.
- Combine shade-tolerant plants which have interesting foliage, form and textures. A tapestry of greens creates a calm and peaceful mood in the space.
- Remember to make the most of vertical and overhead space when planting, using shade-loving climbers.
- Use the diagonal axis in the design to make the space seem wider than it really is.