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MAY 2023 • LIVING-MAGAZINES.CO.UK • A NEWSQUEST PUBLICATION • COMPLIMENTARY

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Inside

HOMES & GARDENS
ARTS & CULTURE
STYLE & WELLNESS

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HOLLYWOOD STYLE IN THE ESSEX HILLS

A Rayleigh garden gets the star makeover from Earth Designs Garden Design

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BETTER PERSPECTIVE PHOTOGRAPHY**

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No, this isn't a garden in the Hollywood Hills, although you could be forgiven for thinking it was. This glamorous hillside pad is, in fact, in Rayleigh, Essex. Following renovations of the property itself, the garden has also recently been given a star makeover by local Essex garden designers and landscapers, Earth Designs.

When the owners called in husband and wife team Kat and Matt from Earth Designs, they knew the steep incline would

be a challenge. The triangular shaped garden drops in height dramatically, sloping away from the house. It would need careful planning to negotiate the difference in levels.

A rather rickety set of steps and a deck that had seen better days were the extent of the existing garden design. But the owners had big dreams. They wanted a place to entertain with private dining and a seamless transition between levels. Luckily, Garden Designer Kat is good with dreams.

The first problem to overcome was the considerable drop between the house and



the garden. And the second was going to be privacy. The height of the houses compared to the gardens created a strong danger of being overlooked. The designers needed to take both these problems into consideration. But they seem to have gone a few steps further than that and created something rather wonderful.

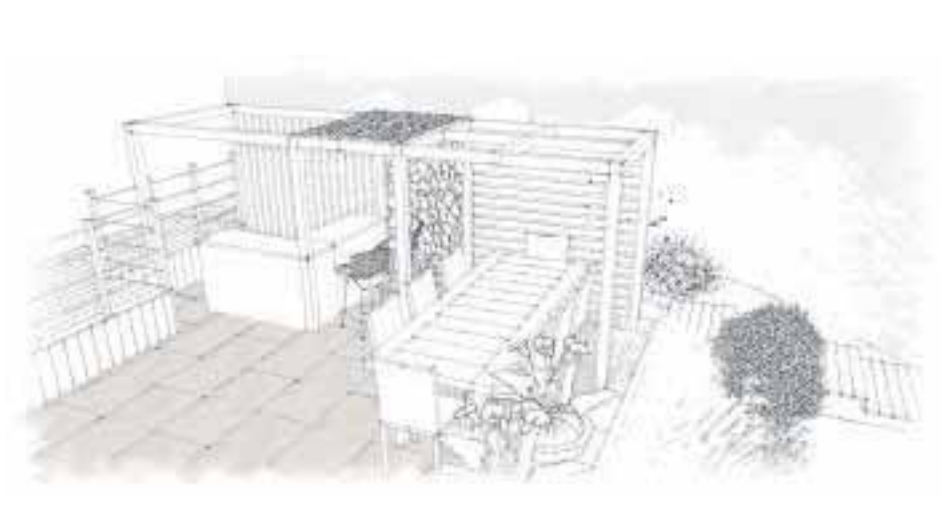
The deck that greets you from the back doors wraps around the house, but is only a few metres wide. Just enough to squeeze in a sofa and swing chair, but only in the quiet places out of sight. Keeping the deck narrow on this top level allows most of the garden to sit below. Helping to protect both the owners and the neighbours from being overlooked.

P pausing for a moment at the glass balcony bordering the deck you can take in the full view of the garden below. At the foot of the stairs in front of you, an impressive patio area stretches across the width of the garden. To the right, a hot tub juts out over the edge, like an infinity pool in a swanky hotel.

Greenery from below reaches up to soften the edges of the terrace, so it feels like you're floating among the treetops. I can imagine spending many happy evenings in there letting the pressures of the day bubble away.

To your left a sweeping staircase takes you to a comfy seating area with a circular sofa made for cosy chats. To one side, a bar and dining area enclosed with a timber screen creates a private dining area that looks tempting and inviting in equal measure.

But what I love about this garden is how it allows you to make an entrance. There's a genuine feeling of excitement and pleasure in entering this space. I feel I should descend the staircase in a ballgown, like the leading lady in an old movie, while cameras flash from below.





There are no cameras, sadly, but there is still plenty of drama. The stairs are framed on either side by beds filled with pink hydrangeas, long grasses and weeping cherry trees.

The planting arrangement reminds me of Las Vegas fountains, rising and falling in cascades of pink and green. The last step is flanked by two stylish rusted corten steel water features, from which water pours onto pebbles below.

As you leave the stairs, you're greeted by three statement planters, like butlers welcoming you into the ball. Behind them a corten steel wall adds texture and privacy.

On the right, a space to entertain waits for the next party, just add guests. Sipping cocktails from the bar and mingling on the terrace. From the patio to the dining set, materials are smooth and stylish. Gunmetal steel, pale fabrics, rusted metal and unfinished timber remind me of the understated style of New York loft apartments.

Follow the sweeping staircase down again and find yourself on an artificial lawn. A strip of green bordered by voluptuous beds stuffed with bustling hydrangeas and flouncy black sambucus. Among them delicate astringia anemones, verbenas and euphorbia, creating a soft ebb-and-flow of pink, white and plum.

While the occasional larger specimen, like cotinus or magnolia brings height to the display. A pathway to one side leads down to the last and final level where the lawn seeps away to a vanishing point at the end of the garden. A space waiting for the garden room that the owners hope to add at some point in the future.

From here there's an opportunity to look back and marvel at what's been achieved in this difficult and dramatic terrain. The drastic



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drop in levels tamed by horizontal spaces that criss-cross the garden, creating gradual steps down the slope. Each level provides a unique space to relax or escape and benefits from the delights of the levels above and below.

There's a touch of old school Hollywood in this dreamy, grandiose garden, sweeping down the hillside like a starlet. But modern furnishings and finishes bring it into the realms of today's luxury villas in the Hollywood hills.

But time is irrelevant here anyway. This is a place for pleasure and relaxation.

Somewhere you can imagine yourself at a party with the rich and famous, drinking cocktails and dancing until dawn. Or perhaps you'd rather sink into that hot tub in the sky, let go of your worries and float among the trees?

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