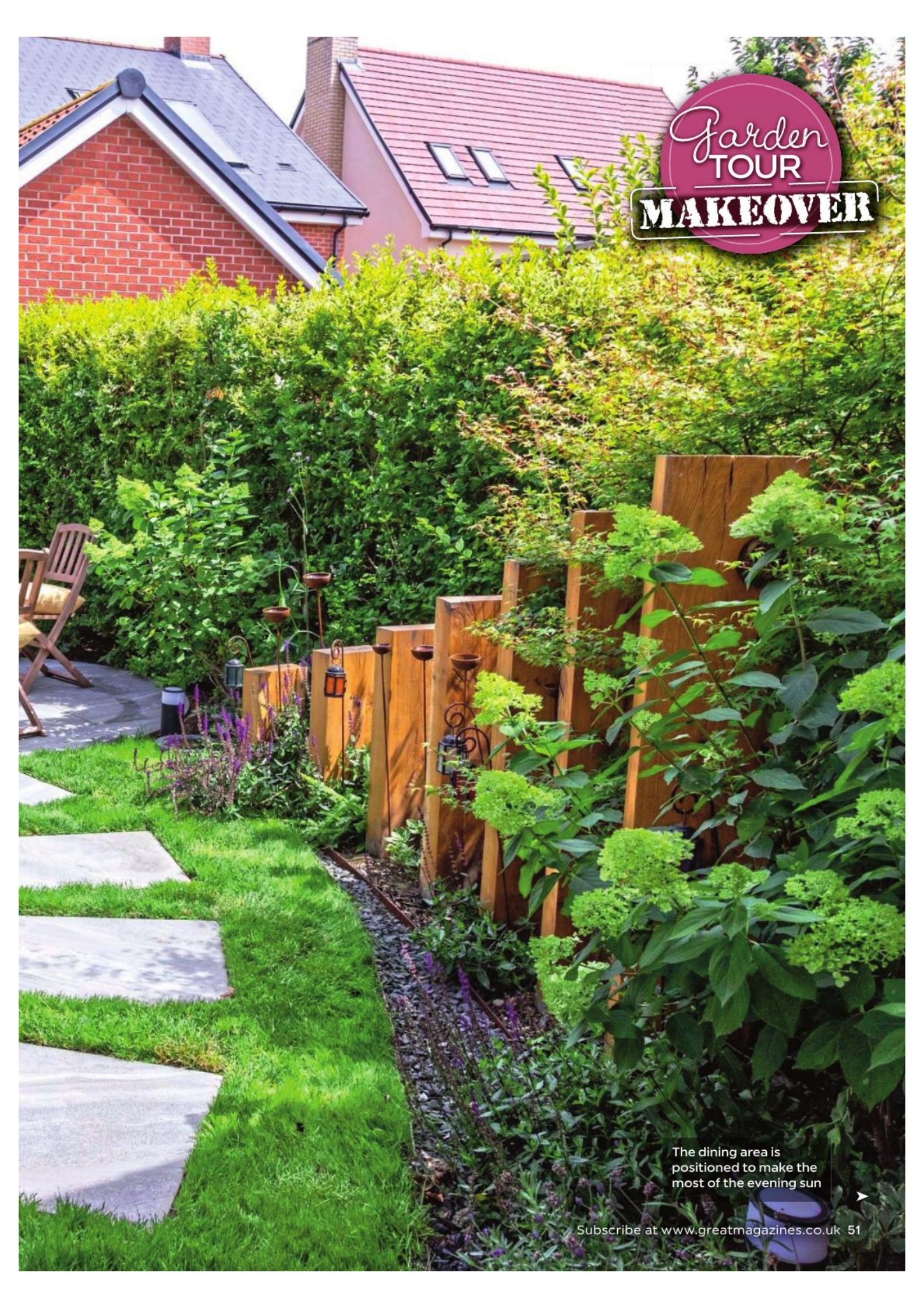


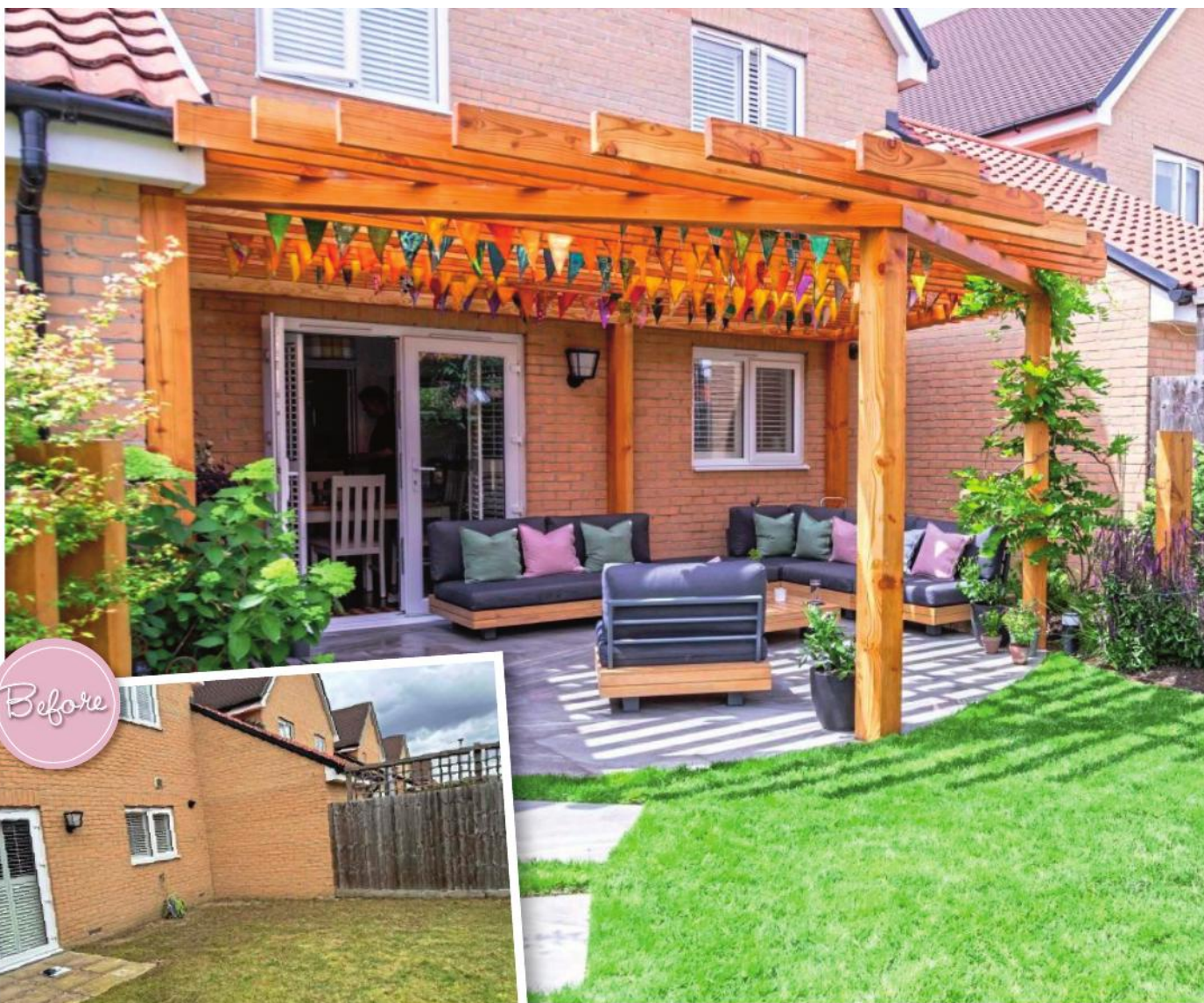
A relaxing retreat

This Essex new build garden has changed from square patch of grass to an extension of the house

A vibrant garden scene featuring a stone path, a wooden fence, and lush greenery. In the background, a red brick house with a grey roof and a pink house with a red roof are visible. The garden is filled with various plants, including a large green bush, a wooden fence, and a stone path. A wooden chair is visible on the left side of the path.

Garden TOUR MAKEOVER

The dining area is positioned to make the most of the evening sun



CHRIS'S GARDEN PLAN

LOCATION: Rochford, Essex
LOOK: Modern cottage garden
SIZE: 10m x 10m
ASPECT: North-east
SOIL: Essex clay with British standard imported topsoil added

When Chris Howse moved to his newbuild home in Rochford, Essex, just days before the first lockdown of the COVID19 pandemic, his garden was just an overlooked square of grass and, despite being his first garden for many years, not somewhere he wanted to spend much time in. Fast forward six years and Chris now has anything but a bare and square space. Clever design of his small garden has transformed it into a lovely plant and feature filled space. "In the summer it feels like I have an outdoor lounge which attracts bees, birds and butterflies!"

"Previously, when I lived in Shenfield I didn't have a garden, just a couple of windowboxes. So, when I finally got a house with a garden it was important to me to turn it into a lovely, relaxing space," says Chris. "As is often the case with newbuilds, the garden was overlooked and I wanted to build in some privacy without turning the space into a fortress. When I first moved in, the garden was a complete blank canvas, just a square of grass and nothing else."

The house was built in 2019 with a partial

"I didn't want the plants to look overly manicured"

clapboard exterior to fit in with surrounding architecture. "It's a three-bedroom detached house with a garage and a small front garden and bigger back garden. The house was new and built to a really good standard with very few snagging issues. I work in London and need to live somewhere with easy access to a reliable train line. It's less than a 10-minute walk to the station, which is really convenient," says Chris. "It's also within easy reach of the coast, countryside and estuaries, bordered by thriving towns, such as Rayleigh, and charming places, such as Battlesbridge, with its antique shops and picturesque old tide mill from the 1830s. Rochford also benefits from being on the doorstep of an international airport in Southend. But, most importantly to me, the area is very peaceful and full of places to



This Douglas fir pergola has provided welcome shade to make the lounge area a sheltered, relaxing space



Blechnum spicant is an evergreen native fern that thrives in full or part shade

walk and cycle in open countryside – a great place to relax after a busy working week.”

But the small square garden was anything but a place to relax. “I wanted to get the garden professionally designed and planted so I was reluctant to change much until



Oak posts add definition and year round sculpture to the border

I could find a company capable of transforming the space for me,” he remembers. “The fence on one side of the garden was quite low, so one of the first things I did after moving in was to order a young privet hedge, which I planted and was full height within a few years. And in a corner of the garden I also planted a young cherry tree, which grew and grew and now gives added privacy from neighbour’s windows. I did nothing more than that, there was no outdoor furniture and very little reason to use the garden. It was just a case of cutting the increasingly moss covered lawn and waiting to get funds in place to



Bunting made from sarees adds an extra pop of colour to the pergola

transform the garden into a beautiful retreat." Chris was keen to choose the right company for the job and started with a simple Google search of 'garden design Essex'. But it was 18 months after discovering CUBE 1994 Ltd online that he actually contacted them about the job. "I did wonder if my garden would just be too small for them but from the very first phone call to their office right the way through to the final project sign off, their work was outstanding and I definitely have no regrets.

"The garden lacked any cohesive design; mostly laid to lawn, with no dedicated planting beds and only a small bistro-sized

“Purple always feels like such a relaxing colour”

patio area directly off the back of the house," says Sean Butler, Managing Director, of CUBE 1994 Ltd, of his initial visit to Chris's home. The work began but with limited access through a doorway via the garage. All materials were carried in by hand, making it impossible to use diggers for ground



Hydrangea 'Sweet Annabelle' starts pink before fading to greenish shades



preparation or wheelbarrows and lifting equipment for transporting materials. The existing cherry tree and hedging were retained to maintain a sense of privacy without completely blocking sunlight.

"Curves were introduced to soften the hard lines of this space and create a more visually appealing and spacious feel. Curved pathways, sweeping planting beds, and a rounded seating area were incorporated to break up the rigidity of the small, square layout, making the garden feel more inviting



Clockwise from top left A lush corner of tough plants, including *Liriope muscari*, *Dryopteris affinis* 'The King' and *Pachysandra terminalis*; wisteria was inspired by visits to country cottages in the Cotswolds; lavender in a terracotta pot is an easy way to add some classic charm while still keeping an overall contemporary feel; the porcelain slabs have been cut on a curve to give the lounge area a stylish shape; a potting bench in the lounge area keeps the space feeling connected to the garden; the wooden posts follow the curve of the lawn



and organic." They also included a series of bespoke oak posts, descending in height: "these add sculptural interest and a visual rhythm to the space," explains Sean. "To extend the indoor-outdoor living experience, we designed and installed a bespoke Douglas fir pergola at the rear of the house to provide shade to the lounge area and the rear of the house during the day and offering a sense of enclosure and privacy in the evening. Its curved form wraps around the new porcelain lounge patio, and the meandering

stepping stone path guides you through the garden towards the circular dining area, which is perfectly positioned to capture the evening sun and ideal for relaxed outdoor entertaining," he says.

Planting-wise Chris requested an informal cottage garden style. "I didn't want the plants to look overly manicured. It needed to have more in common with a country cottage garden than a newbuild house. I regularly visit the Cotswolds and was inspired by the wisteria-covered cottages and soft planting.

Purple always feels like such a relaxing colour and I was also keen to have different bursts of colour throughout the year.

"I'm a gardener with a lot to learn, but very much enjoying finding out about the different plants. When I moved in I enthusiastically replanted the small front garden area and have replanted it several times since, after not always getting it right! I find wandering around a garden centre relaxing and inspiring, and I try to spend each Friday doing some gardening, cutting



Garden TOUR MAKEOVER

A curved path helps break up the rigidity of the square shape of the garden

“*It’s as much an outdoor lounge as a garden*”

the grass, trimming the hedge and keeping things fed, watered and free of weeds. It’s been a bit of a learning curve. I was keen to have as much year-round colour in the garden as possible. Of course, no season matches summer but the combination of hydrangeas, grasses, ferns, foxgloves and echinacea have helped give interest each month. My favourites are the hydrangeas and bursts of purple from the salvias.”

After five long years, Chris gets to finally enjoy his garden. “It really has transformed the entire house. Before the garden was developed, the kitchen shutters were always partly closed to help hide the space. But now, it feels like the house has been extended.

“Every week there is something new to look at as the garden comes into bloom. I really enjoy the lovely bistro area for coffee in the morning. The space feels cosy now and is no longer overlooked. There are lots of classy design touches too,” he says.

“The feature posts add great height and texture to the borders. It would never have crossed my mind to add posts! And, they are actually one of the features that my friends and family comment about most. I absolutely love the way they curve around the edges of

the garden and the design of the pergola makes that area feel so welcoming, too. It’s a lovely area to sit and entertain friends. Again, the curves of the pergola and of the patio really help give a relaxed feel to the garden now.

“It’s hard to imagine how overlooked the space used to be. It’s such a cosy corner, the perfect retreat after a long day. It’s a real sun trap, too, which makes it even better on those long summer evenings. So perfect for entertaining or just putting my feet up in the evening with a couple of relaxing candles on the table. It’s as much an outdoor lounge as a garden, and gives such a great perspective across the garden. And I think the bunting I bought from Etsy, made from recycled sarees, is an eye-catching addition!”