

The view's the thing!

This slick, contemporary garden blends beautifully with the natural splendour of Epping Forest



The sights of surrounding fields are kept open to create a spacious feel

The outdoor office is positioned at the bottom of the garden, with open views of the planting, and an outdoor seating area





IN THE GARDEN WITH...
AJ and Lucy Campbell

LOCATION: Epping Forest, Essex
SIZE: 40m x 32m
SOIL: Clay with imported soil added
STYLE: Modern country garden with countryside views

This large family garden borders Epping Forest in Essex and benefits from stunning vistas of the surrounding ancient woodland often known as 'London's Lung'. But when AJ and Lucy Campbell moved into their new-build home with their two daughters, there was just a huge and very boring square of lawn that was prone to flooding and surrounded by ugly high fences. The redesign now offers contemporary zoned outdoor living and working spaces that make the very best of the view.

"Having lots of space in the garden is amazing, and being on the edge of the forest means it feels like we're right out in the country yet we're still connected to London via the Central Line so we can go into town when we need to," says AJ, who lives here with his wife Lucy, daughters Ellie and Poppy and two cats, Maverick and Goose. "The garden was a total blank canvas when we moved in, and we knew we wanted to create a structured and usable outside space. We're so lucky to have a big garden, but we really wanted it to be a place where we loved to spend time."

> *We knew we wanted to create a structured and usable outside space*

AJ and Lucy started researching ideas for this substantial space. "We both work quite flexibly, often at home, and always knew we wanted to put in an outdoor office space; that was the starting point," says AJ.

The couple spent a long time online searching for ideas and inspiration.

"For a while our Instagram algorithms were pretty much focused on gardens and flowers! I'm a really big fan of barbecues so wanted a space to cook and entertain, and some trees to add height and character to the space. We were also very keen on making the garden a place where the girls wanted to be, so an area for them to play and explore was a must." So, from here, began the hunt for a good design team.

WORDS: KIRSTY MCNEIL-O'CONNOR, PHOTOS: GAP PHOTOS/DESIGN – CUBE 1994 LTD/SEAN BUTLER



Sesleria autumnalis (autumn moor-grass) forms very neat clumps and develops creamy-white flowerheads in summer



"We spent a fair amount of time doing internet research. We both work pretty full-on jobs, so it was important to us to find a designer who would be able to manage the whole project and offer an end-to-end service. We then had a couple of Zoom calls with different designers and really liked CUBE's approach."

Mixed planting with a purple theme hides the shed and softens the garden boundary



But as the couple discovered, none of the wonderful design ideas could go ahead until the issue of flooding was addressed.

"The one big challenge we encountered was drainage," recalls AJ.

"Although we are on top of a hill, the soil is thick clay and doesn't drain well when there is heavy rain. We had areas which would sit underwater if we had a prolonged period of rain, and that would obviously be a nightmare for any planting or grass."

In the end, though, they made a decision. "We discussed various options with CUBE,







Clockwise from top left A series of star jasmine trained along wires to form a long, fragrant barrier as the garden develops; perennial salvias struggle to survive winter in clay soil but benefit from imported topsoil; *Verbena bonariensis* is a reliable, drought-tolerant perennial for dry areas of the country; there is still a good-sized lawn area, allowing children ample space to play outside; the barbecue area sits on a modern, porcelain patio for al fresco dining; a simple bistro set is perfect for a quick coffee in the garden!







elegantly frames the dining space offering shade and architectural interest. Adjacent to this dining area is a fully equipped outdoor kitchen. The pathway then continues towards the purpose-built garden office, flanked by a relaxed outdoor lounge for office breaks and downtime. "We transformed this garden into a multi-functional outdoor living space, seamlessly connecting the small existing patio by the house to the newly developed entertaining and working areas."

Planting-wise, AJ and Lucy were keen to celebrate the surrounding countryside. Low-level planting and hedging was carefully selected to provide subtle structure while preserving open views. Ornamental trees and fragrant jasmine climbers help to screen the boundary fencing, adding height and softness without enclosing the space. Meanwhile, a mature wisteria climbs the white-rendered walls of the house, adding seasonal interest and blending the built environment into the landscape.

"We were delighted with CUBE's design, which really exceeded our expectations. The way they created the split in the garden with the hard landscaping and cooking area was something we would never have thought of without help, and has created various zones which we use in different ways, really making the most of the space," says AJ. "We absolutely love the garden. Having a dedicated space outside of the house to work makes a real difference even compared to working in the spare room, and the girls and ➤



The pergola makes the barbecue area and bench dining area a focal point in the garden



including soakaways, but ultimately decided on French drains. They were difficult to install but have worked a treat."

Sean Butler of CUBE 1994 Ltd recalls:

"The lawn had leatherjackets – the larvae of crane flies, which can damage lawns, small plants in garden borders and vegetable plots by eating roots – which needed treatment. And the flooding issues would have stopped them being able to install the sunken trampoline, so we installed a sump pump alongside the drainage system to allow this to be included in the design too." The couple opted for a sunken trampoline due to potential wind issues in this very open space. Meanwhile, the garden room was a vital part of the client's brief and is a bespoke building by CUBE. "This was divided into two separate working spaces with acoustic wall insulation to allow privacy for each space and two sets of sliding doors," explains Sean.

> *When the weather is good, the doors to the kitchen get thrown open all day*





Simple string lights make the area beneath the pergola usable for more of the day and add atmosphere

"And the view is integral to the brief. The existing tall fences at the lower end were all replaced with post and rail fencing to open up the view from the house, new patio and garden room areas." An entrance to the entertaining area was created using contrasting dark grey pavers leading onto the lighter grey porcelain patio where a bespoke oak-framed pergola was built that



The planting breaks up the areas around seating, while keeping the countryside views open

We transformed this garden into a multi-functional outdoor living space

their friends love spending time out there. When the weather is good, the doors to the kitchen get thrown open all day and we are in and out all the time. The girls are always unpacking all their toys and having tea parties on the trampoline or in their Wendy house. They are less good at putting them away again!

"And we're certainly becoming gardeners now. It is a lot of work to keep it in shape, but working from home means we can take a little-by-little approach, doing something every day to maintain it. It would be nice to have a gardener to help us keep on top of it, but we are managing for now. And, when we do have a chance, stealing a few minutes during the working day to have a coffee on the sofas together now is bliss.

AJ's Kamado barbecue is now in their outdoor kitchen, which includes a firepit for marshmallows and nightcaps. "Part of setting up the garden the way we have is because we love entertaining. We will often have friends over at the weekend with their kids, who will run riot while the adults hang out around the barbecue. Having that kind of space also allows us to host larger family gatherings with aunts, uncles and various plus ones. Having the split garden with different 'zones' means however many we are hosting there is always space for different groups to form and for people to have their own conversations. Kids love the trampoline and play area, and the coffee and seating area outside the office is a lovely spot for us to chill out under the cherry tree. On a good day, we can just spend the entire time outdoors, which we love.

"Being able to spend our evenings relaxing and staring out over the fields is fantastic."