

FULL FRONTAL

First impressions matter, so don't introduce yourself with bulging bins and an old mattress. An elegant front garden can be planted up in a weekend, says Ann-Marie Powell

There is something especially intense about front gardens. They are an opportunity to stamp your personality not just on your house, but on your street. What does an overflowing dustbin, a pile of builder's rubble and an old armchair really say to passers-by about you and your home?

Admittedly, front gardens are not the easiest of spaces. Pollution, vandalism and thieves make people wary of upgrading this area, but getting to grips with it pays dividends: people are less likely to throw their rubbish over your wall if the garden beyond it is beautifully cultivated. And thieves can be put off by a prickly shrub or thorny tangle of foliage around the ground-floor windows.

Okay, they're small, but front gardens still have potential, and their diminutive size means you can conceivably tackle the transformation in a weekend. You have two choices: pinch ideas from your neighbours, adding to the harmony of your road, or stand proudly against the grain and catapult your garden into notoriety.

Whatever you choose, remember the practicalities. Paths should be wide enough to carry pushchairs and armfuls of shopping bags, and be relatively direct. Though completely unglamorous, bins and recycling boxes are necessary evils that must be considered. Once practicalities are resolved, you can consider style. The best front gardens bind house and entrance together. To get it right, your home's architecture and setting should govern how you treat the doorway.

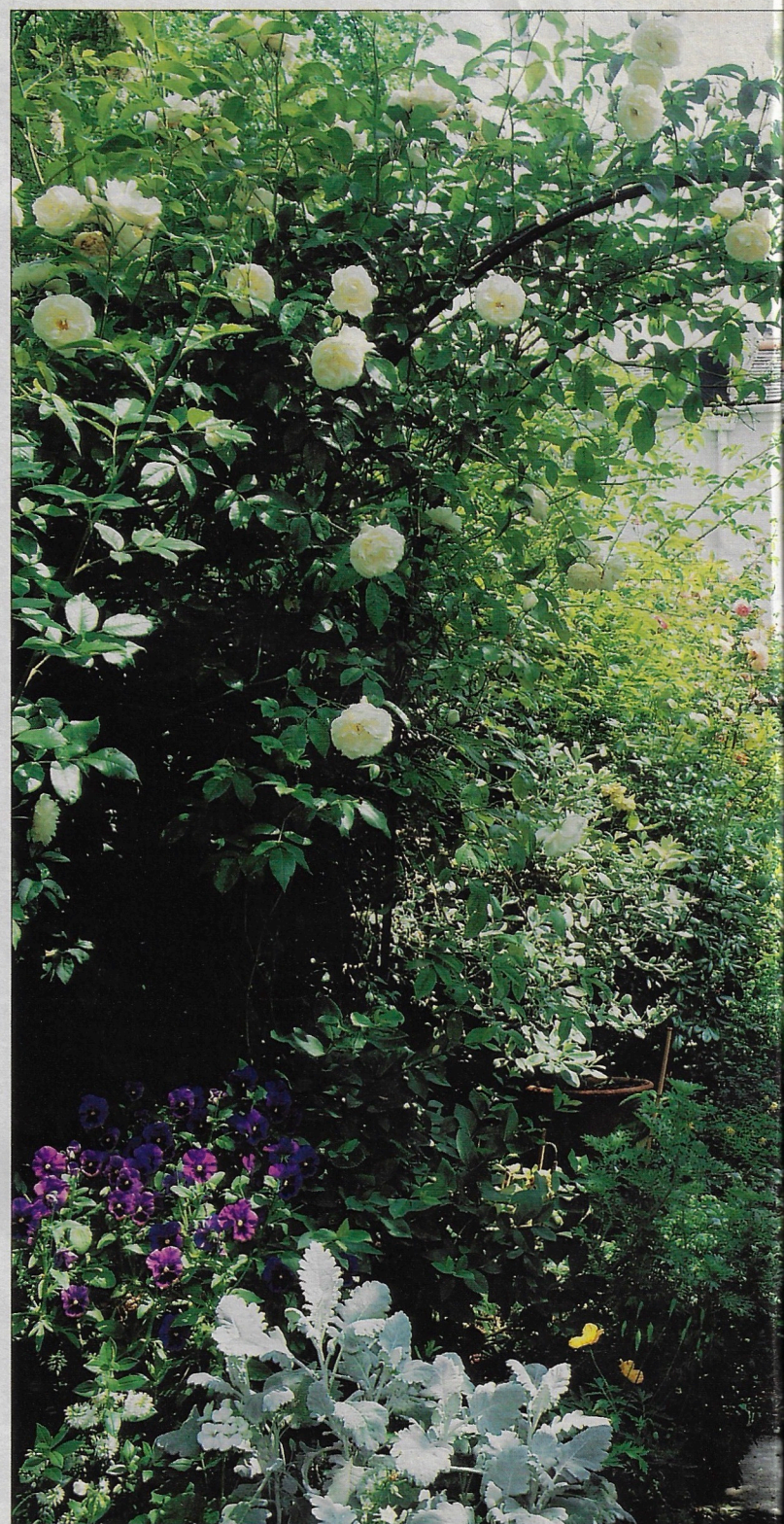
Floor it

Unless you enjoy the exhibitionism of regular weeding in a public space (think of all that bending over), then keep things low-maintenance. To save face (and time) if you are not too green-fingered, cover much of the ground with a hard surface. The trick to avoiding blandness is in choosing the right material for the job.

Most decking is not visually solid enough to look convincing against brick walls; it will not anchor your home to the ground. As a rule, materials that are darker than the building itself will nail it down without overwhelming it. So, brick, stone, slate and granite in generous swathes will cope with the heaviest of traffic and act as a bridge from home to street life.

Think about patterning these surfaces, to keep things interesting: if you're using bricks, setts or paving, think about the direction in which they're laid; running towards the house, they'll have the eye speeding towards the door, but if laid against the line of vision, they'll slow the onlooker down, allowing time to stop and enjoy the view.

Don't get too slab-happy, however. If you plan to grow a display of plants (particularly that show-stopping wisteria around the front door), then remember to leave planting pockets in the floor — they'll enable the plants to grow big, and won't need half as much watering as pots. This means planning ahead, and knowing what to plant before any concrete goes down.



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The boundary line

A garden's boundary is hugely important, enclosing it with an all-encompassing embrace. Periphery walls or fences shield your front garden from the street, and should be treated with the respect they deserve. Expand them to screen necessary horrors (wheelie bins, dustbins and recycling boxes).

In contrast to paving, walls look best if built in the same material as your house; they'll create a visual link that stamps ownership on a front garden. If you can stretch to it, railings



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Path finder: The best front gardens work with the architecture of the house — a pretty rose arch of *Rosa* 'Iceberg' (main picture), offset by bright purple pansies, provides the right cottagey entrance; a more heavy-set Tudorbethan home (left) is balanced by a bold display of azaleas, acer and yew; while a smaller, terraced house (below left) has a low-maintenance garden, with topiarised box on hassle-free stone chippings

gardens than anywhere else, giving a sense of permanency and year-round interest. So, two-thirds of your planting should be evergreen. Topiarised box, *Fatsia japonica*, skimmia and mahonia are all low-maintenance winners, and can all be underplanted with bulbs to emphasise the seasons.

Consider, too, winter-scented bloomers — *Sarcococca confusa*, *Daphne odora* 'Aureomarginata' and *Osmanthus* \times *burkwoodii* are all evergreen, small and deliciously scented. Climbers are a must as well — by clothing the walls with foliage and flowers, they effortlessly integrate house and garden. Be wary, however, of the invasive roots of ivy or the shade-loving *Hydrangea petiolaris*, as they may damage your brickwork.

Many wish to gain privacy in the front garden by planting hedges but, as you won't be using the front garden for barbecues, is privacy really so important? High hedges can become pariahs, stealing light from your front room and providing a hiding place for burglars. If you feel the need for protection, use a less-solid screen plant. Bamboo is ideal (*Fargesia dracocephala* is well behaved, as is *Phyllostachys aurea*), providing a veil like a net curtain.

But if you do nothing else in your front garden, at least buy a pair of architectural urns. Planted up and positioned by the front door, what could beat such elegant formality? Make them too heavy to move, or fix them to wall or floor with chains to scupper anyone who just can't help themselves.

can add a touch of delicacy and charm — and are ideal as a clinging-post for trailing plants.

If your walls are rendered and/or painted, then keep them ship-shape — nothing looks worse than a peeling, crumbling wall. As for timber, panel or picket fences, stain them an unostentatious colour, then plant them behind with evergreen climbers that will create a tangle of foliage. And if your gate hangs precariously from its hinges, is battered, rusty or just plain foul, then dump it and buy another. A front gate is the first contact a visitor has with your house, your garden and, ultimately, you

— and first impressions count. Keep it in proportion with your front door in terms of height, then, once fitted, keep it well-maintained.

Planting

Front gardens seem to be arenas where plant torture is paraded for all to see. Macabre, sickly specimens swamped by cracked concrete, scrubby, useless lawns and dense, bulky hedges bulging unceremoniously on to pavements are the norm. And yet it's so easy to put right. Choose plants that are low-maintenance and undemanding or that have

interest throughout the year. Above all, keep it simple. Plants that will ultimately outgrow their allotted space are a no-no; think of the hundreds of trees you see butchered into awkward shapes simply because the owner never bothered to learn their eventual height and spread.

If you're going to plant a tree, then choose a small one. Standard olives (climate-permitting), *Pyrus salicifolia*, *Acer palmatum* var. *dissectum* 'Crimson Queen', or *Prunus serrulata* 'Kiku-shidare-zakura' are ideal.

Structural, evergreen, architectural foliage is more important in front