

GARDENS, TERRACES & BEYOND

HOW TO DESIGN A LUXURY LONDON GARDEN

LAYOUT / MATERIALS / PLANTING / LIGHTING / TRANSFORMATION



DAVID DELAVEGA

GARDENS, TERRACES & BEYOND

How to turn a messy London garden into a beautiful modern outdoor room, using David Delavega's design principles, materials and techniques.

DAVID DELAVEGA

PROPERTY DESIGN, RENOVATION AND PRACTICAL LUXURY

A practical design book

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This handbook presents David Delavega's method for turning small, neglected urban gardens into calm, luxurious outdoor rooms. It combines design principles, material matching, construction technique and planting. It is not a substitute for site-specific planning, structural, drainage, electrical, arboricultural or horticultural advice.

- All garden photographs in this edition are new and used once.
- London scale: courtyards, terraces and compact family plots.
- Check live permissions and product instructions before construction.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Luxury comes from proportion, restraint and workmanship - not from making a small garden pretend to be large.

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The London garden

Small outside spaces deserve architectural thinking.

The London garden is seen from the house every day, often more frequently occupied. Its design must work as a view, a route and a room. The strongest schemes use a few clear lines, disciplined materials and planting that softens boundaries without obscuring the whole plot.

- Plan the view from the kitchen first.
- Keep circulation generous and simple.
- Use one main material and one accent material.
- Plant for structure before seasonal colour.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

If the garden looks composed from the main room in February, it will feel beautiful all year.

Start with the mess

Do not design around clutter that should disappear.

A neglected garden usually contains five problems at once: poor storage, broken surfaces, uncontrolled planting, no useful zones and weak boundaries. Photograph everything, then separate what is valuable from what is merely familiar.

- Keep healthy mature structure where possible.
- Remove dangerous paving and dead timber.
- Measure sheds, bins and service points.
- Do not clear protected trees without checks.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The first luxury move is subtraction: remove visual noise before adding features.

Transformation one

Overgrown strip to illuminated outdoor room.

The original garden had weeds, loose pots, failing fences and no destination. The redesigned version uses a single pale paving module, integrated benches and deep planting beds. Lighting repeats at low level, while multi-stem trees interrupt the long boundaries.

- Clear and sort.
- Repair boundaries.
- Set one continuous datum.
- Build storage into seating.
- Plant in repeated groups.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Repeat one paving size and one timber tone; the garden immediately feels calmer.

Transformation two

Patchy lawn to a two-level dining garden.

The existing lawn could not cope with shade and traffic. The solution replaces the damaged centre with gravel, introduces raised dark-brick planters and creates a defined dining terrace at the far end. The level change becomes a feature rather than a defect.

- Remove lawn where it cannot thrive.
- Use permeable gravel for flexible areas.
- Widen steps for generosity.
- Hide bins behind a ventilated screen.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A failing lawn is not compulsory. Replace it with a surface suited to the light and use.



Use the far end

A destination makes a narrow garden feel deeper.

A garden with all furniture beside the house feels short. Create a reason to walk to the end: a dining table, studio, bench, water bowl or specimen tree. Keep the route visible but not perfectly exposed.

- Place a focal point slightly off-centre.
- Narrow planting openings to reveal space gradually.
- Keep the far zone proportionate.
- Avoid a large shed as the only destination.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Depth comes from sequence: foreground, middle layer and destination.



Rescue the concrete yard

Turn hard ugliness into a disciplined base.

Before replacing every slab, check levels, drainage and whether a stable base can be retained. A simple courtyard can become luxurious through one high-quality surface, concealed storage and strong vertical planting.

- Survey falls toward the house.
- Remove hollow or unstable areas.
- Introduce a planted edge, not random pots.
- Screen bins as part of the architecture.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The expensive look comes from continuous lines and hidden practical items.

Clay paver transformation

Warm colour palette connect directly to London brick.

Red clay pavers within herringbone turn a plain yard into a tailored space. Dark timber, evergreen planting and warm light prevent the room from looking rustic. Use a restrained palette and organic edge details.

- Match paver undertone to the house brick.
- Use charcoal edging for definition.
- Keep joints even.
- Avoid combining several unrelated reds.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Match undertones, not exact colours: warm brick, warm clay and deep green belong together.

Rescue a sloping garden

Unsafe levels can become the design.

A steep neglected garden often needs retaining, drainage and a clear stair. Break the climb into comfortable terraces. Keep the widest level for dining and use planting to soften retaining edges.

- Survey the total rise.
- Use consistent risers.
- Drain behind retaining walls.
- Protect existing tree roots.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Do not hide a level change; compose it with broad steps and planted retaining walls.

A beautiful two-level result

Make the stair the central piece of architecture.

The completed scheme uses large pale stone steps, warm timber boundaries and narrow planted terraces. Recessed lights define the route without glare. The upper table gains privacy while the lower garden stays open.

- Keep step geometry consistent.
- Align retaining edges with doors and windows.
- Use low planting beside the stair.
- Add handrails where safety requires.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

When the stair is generous, the small garden feels like a sequence of rooms.

What to keep

Maturity is valuable when it is healthy and correctly placed.

Existing trees, brick walls and established climbers can give a new garden immediate depth. Assess condition and root zones before demolition. A good redesign edits mature elements rather than erasing the whole history.

- Keep sound brick and clean it gently.
- Retain useful evergreen screening.
- Prune with professional advice.
- Protect root zones during construction.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

New materials look more convincing when they sit beside something established.

The rescue sequence

Work in the right order so new finishes are protected.

Survey and approvals come first, followed by clearance, drainage, levels, services, structure, surfaces, joinery, soil and planting. Lighting tests and final styling belong at the end.

- Survey before clearance.
- Install sleeves and cables before paving.
- Complete heavy works before planting.
- Keep a final allowance for soil and mulch.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A rushed sequence turns beautiful materials into site protection.

Read the site

Sun, shade, wind, water and overlooking create the real brief.

Record the garden through a full day and, if possible, through the seasons. Note wet corners, heat reflected from walls, wind tunnels and neighbouring windows. The most successful design responds to these facts instead of fighting them.

- Mark sun at morning, midday and evening.
- Identify frost pockets and dry rain shadows.
- Record drain covers and service routes.
- Photograph important views from inside.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Right plant, right material and right activity begin with right place.



The basement courtyard

Design for light, drainage and the view from above.

A lightwell is often seen from several floors. Use a strong specimen tree, shade-tolerant planting and a restrained stone palette. Keep drainage accessible and avoid bulky furniture that blocks light.

- Choose plants for low light.
- Use pale surfaces to reflect daylight.
- Keep outlets and channels maintainable.
- Light trunks and texture, not every leaf.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

In a lightwell, the canopy and floor pattern are the ceiling and carpet of the room.



The roof terrace

Weight, wind and exposure lead the design.

Roof gardens need professional assessment of loading, waterproofing, drainage, guarding and access. Use lightweight systems and plants that tolerate wind and container conditions. Fix screens and structures safely.

- Confirm structural capacity.
- Protect waterproofing during installation.
- Use secure, weighted or fixed planters.
- Provide dependable irrigation.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Never let appearance outrun structural load, wind safety or waterproofing.



Zones without clutter

A small garden needs fewer, clearer functions.

A dining zone, relaxed seat and planted view can coexist when their edges overlap. Avoid dividing the plot into many tiny rectangles. Use planting, paving direction and one level change to suggest rooms.

- Give each zone one primary purpose.
- Keep the main route at least visually clear.
- Let borders shape space.
- Use furniture dimensions in the plan.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Three strong zones feel larger than six weak features.

The brief

Write what the garden must do before choosing its style.

List household needs, maintenance time, storage, children, pets, entertaining, accessibility and seasonal use. Separate essentials from wishes, then set the budget and order of priority.

- Number of daily users.
- Table and seating capacity.
- Storage and bin requirements.
- Planting and maintenance appetite.
- Lighting and power needs.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A good brief prevents expensive features from displacing essential space.

Planning and legal checks

Gardens are not automatically free from controls.

Decking, raised platforms, boundary structures, outbuildings and protected trees can require planning or other consent depending on height, location, designation and property type. Check title restrictions and neighbour implications.

- Review conservation and listed status.
- Check Tree Preservation Orders.
- Confirm boundaries before building.
- Ask the local planning authority when uncertain.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Permission, ownership and safe construction are separate questions.

Protected trees

Roots are part of the tree.

A Tree Preservation Order can control cutting, lopping, uprooting and damage, including root damage. Trees in conservation areas can also require notice. Check before excavation, paving or service trenches.

- Map trunk and canopy.
- Seek arboricultural advice.
- Avoid storing materials in root zones.
- Use permeable, root-sensitive solutions where designed.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A healthy mature tree is an asset; an injured root system can become a liability.

Budget priorities

Spend first on work that cannot be changed easily.

Drainage, levels, foundations, retaining, electrical routes and soil preparation come before decorative furniture. Quality paving installed properly outlives fashionable accessories.

- Protect 10-15% for existing-site risk.
- Price disposal and access.
- Separate construction from furniture.
- Keep planting and soil fully funded.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The hidden base and soil are the two areas that should never be starved.

The drawing set

A garden deserves measured plans and construction details.

Prepare existing and proposed plans, levels, setting-out, material layout, lighting, drainage and planting. Details should show edges, thresholds, steps, walls and water management.

- Dimension from fixed building points.
- Set levels and falls.
- Coordinate outlets and cables.
- Schedule plants by final size.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

If the edge is not drawn, it will be invented on site.

The courtyard composition

One tree, one surface and one reflective element can be enough.

Compact courtyards benefit from reduction. A multi-stem tree provides scale, a dark pool adds depth and pale stone reflects light. Keep planting concentrated rather than scattered.

- Choose one focal tree.
- Hide equipment.
- Use asymmetry with balance.
- Leave negative space around special elements.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Luxury needs breathing room; not every corner needs an object.

The family garden

Keep the centre calm and the edges rich.

A modest lawn or open permeable surface gives flexible play and visual relief. Deep perimeter planting provides privacy and season. Place the main seating where you can see the house and garden.

- Use an open centre only where light supports it.
- Keep routes outside main play space.
- Select non-toxic planting where relevant.
- Integrate toys where relevant.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Open centre, layered edges: a reliable formula for compact family gardens.

Design from the house

The first elevation is the view through the glass.

Align a path, tree or opening with the main indoor view. Extend an interior material tone outside without copying it exactly. Avoid placing bins, sheds or barbecue backs directly in the sightline.

- Stand at each important window.
- Mark eye level and focal lines.
- Continue one colour relationship.
- Design winter views.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The garden begins inside the house.

Make narrow feel wider

Use controlled cross-lines and planted overlap.

Paving laid across the width, broad steps and borders that gently change depth can reduce the tunnel effect. Avoid a thin path exactly down the centre with identical strips on both sides.

- Shift the route slightly.
- Use wider foreground paving.
- Create one cross-garden threshold.
- Repeat plants on both sides without symmetry.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A garden feels wide when the eye travels sideways as well as forward.

Privacy without heaviness

Layer screens instead of building one dark wall.

Combine legal boundary height, open slatted screens, climbers, pleached forms and small trees. Place screening where it blocks the actual sightline rather than raising every boundary.

- Map overlooking windows.
- Use semi-transparent layers.
- Allow airflow.
- Keep screens maintainable from your side.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Block the view, not the sky.

The focal point

Give the eye somewhere intentional to rest.

A specimen tree, sculpture, water bowl, bench or beautifully detailed gate can anchor the plan. It should relate to a view or route. Avoid several competing focal points in a small plot.

- Choose one principal focus.
- Support it with quiet planting.
- Light it subtly.
- Keep its background simple.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A focal point is strongest when the rest of the garden agrees to be quieter.

Curves or straight lines?

Use the geometry that belongs to the house and site.

Straight lines suit terraces and architectural gardens, but gentle offsets can soften a narrow plot. Curves need enough width to look deliberate; small arbitrary waves quickly feel dated.

- Start with building axes.
- Use a radius that can be set out accurately.
- Avoid mixing many geometries.
- Let planting soften hard lines.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Structure can be straight while planting provides movement.

Furniture first

Draw the table and chairs before fixing the terrace.

Allow chairs to pull back without falling into borders or blocking circulation. Built-in benches save depth. Measure the real furniture, grill and storage rather than using symbolic blocks.

- Dining chair movement needs space.
- Keep barbecue heat away from planting and boundaries.
- Plan shade and evening light.
- Provide level, stable surfaces.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A terrace is sized by movement around furniture, not the furniture footprint alone.

Accessible movement

Comfortable routes improve every garden.

Minimise unnecessary steps, keep surfaces firm and predictable, provide safe handrails where needed and design thresholds carefully. Consider future mobility when setting levels.

- Use consistent step geometry.
- Avoid loose gravel on essential accessible routes.
- Light level changes.
- Provide rest points in longer gardens.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Ease of movement is a form of luxury.

Storage disappears

Practical items should be designed into the composition.

Create ventilated bin stores, waterproof cushion storage, tool cupboards and hose points within benches or boundary joinery. Match them to the main material palette.

- Measure bins including lid movement.
- Ventilate and drain storage.
- Keep meters and drains accessible.
- Use durable hardware.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Hide clutter, never access.

The warm London palette

Limestone, stock brick, oak, bronze and honey gravel.

Warm materials flatter London brick and feel established. Keep the stone pale but not yellow, use timber with a natural tone and select gravel that shares the same undertone. Deep green planting provides contrast.

- Choose samples outdoors.
- View materials wet and dry.
- Limit the palette to three main finishes.
- Use bronze or dark metal as a thin accent.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Match undertones across different materials; do not chase an exact colour match.

The cool modern palette

Charcoal, porcelain, dark brick, steel and silver gravel.

A cool palette produces a crisp architectural mood. Prevent it feeling harsh by adding generous green foliage, timber or warm light. Keep blacks slightly varied so the scheme has depth.

- Add slip-resistant finishes.
- Pair charcoal with deep green.
- Use many blue-grey shades.
- Illuminate scene with low-colour-temperature light.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Cool materials need living texture and warm light.

Warm materials in practice

Use proportion to stop the palette becoming busy.

The main limestone surface carries the design, clay pavers form a smaller inset and golden gravel acts as a soft transition. Timber screens repeat the warm family without competing.

- 70% main surface.
- 20% secondary texture.
- 10% metal or colour accent.
- Repeat each material at least twice.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The 70/20/10 rule keeps a small garden luxurious rather than decorative.

Cool materials in practice

Dark surfaces can make planting appear richer.

Charcoal paving and black vertical screens create a quiet frame. A single panel of pale granite gravel prevents the floor becoming heavy. The foliage becomes the main colour.

- Keep grout and edging coordinated.
- Use pale gravel as controlled contrast.
- Avoid glossy black finishes.
- Let planting overlap hard edges.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Dark boundaries can recede when they are matt, consistent and planted.

Choosing stone

Texture, frost resistance and slip matter as much as colour.

Natural stone varies. Inspect a representative range, confirm intended external use and use the correct installation and sealing system. Consider how the surface ages and how joints will be maintained.

- Test a wet sample.
- Approve colour range, not one tile.
- Specify edge finish and joint width.
- Keep spare units from the same batch.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The beautiful sample must also be safe in rain and cleanable after winter.

Porcelain paving

Precision can suit compact contemporary spaces.

External porcelain offers consistent tone and low water absorption, but installation requires the correct full-bed system, bonding treatment and skilled cutting. Thin units cannot bridge an inadequate base.

- Use external-rated slip performance.
- Avoid spot bedding.
- Plan cuts around drains.
- Protect edges during construction.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Porcelain is a finish, not a shortcut around proper ground preparation.

Clay pavers

A timeless match for London brick.

Clay pavers bring warmth, small scale and rich variation. Herringbone adds movement; stretcher bond feels calmer. Use a strong edge restraint and check finished levels carefully.

- Select frost-resistant paving units.
- Blend packs during laying.
- Use restrained joint colour.
- Keep patterns aligned to the house.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Clay looks expensive when the setting-out is precise and the colour variation is controlled.

Gravel that looks expensive

Size, colour and restraint decide the result.

Choose angular gravel for stability and a tone related to adjacent stone. Use proper edging and a prepared, permeable build-up. Pea gravel moves more and can feel unstable on frequent routes.

- 10-14 mm angular gravel suits many paths.
- Use stabilisation where required.
- Keep gravel below thresholds.
- Avoid mixing decorative colours.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

One natural gravel tone is more luxurious than a decorative mixture.

Self-binding gravel

A softer appearance for paths and secondary terraces.

Self-binding aggregates compact into a firm natural-looking surface when correctly laid, watered and rolled. They still need drainage, edging and occasional maintenance, and may not suit every accessible route.

- Follow supplier build-up.
- Provide positive falls.
- Compact in controlled layers.
- Repair local erosion early.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Natural appearance still depends on engineered preparation.

Timber and screens

Use wood where touch and warmth matter.

Select durable species or modified timber, detail ventilation and keep end grain away from standing water. Narrow slats can modernise boundaries, but full black screens need planting to soften them.

- Use stainless or suitable coated fixings.
- Allow movement.
- Create replaceable boards.
- Keep soil away from vulnerable timber.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Timber fails first at trapped water and unprotected cut ends.

The material schedule

Decide every junction before ordering.

List product, size, finish, supplier, batch, laying pattern, joint, edge and maintenance. Prepare a physical sample board and view it beside the house in sun, shade and rain.

- Approve three-material palette.
- Keep a signed sample.
- Order realistic wastage.
- Record cleaning products and sealers.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A sample board is the garden's colour contract.

The invisible foundation

A beautiful garden begins below the finished surface.

Excavate unsuitable material, establish formation, compact the specified sub-base in layers and protect drainage. Build-up varies with soil, load and product; follow the designed specification.

- Check final levels before digging.
- Compact in layers.
- Keep edges restrained.
- Do not bury soft organic soil beneath paving.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Never reduce the base because the paving is expensive.

Falls and threshold drainage

Move water away from the building.

Set finished levels and falls before laying the first slab. Linear channels can protect door thresholds, but they need a confirmed outlet and maintainable access. Coordinate damp-proof levels and manufacturer details.

- Survey door and internal floor levels
- Provide positive fall.
- Test the outlet.
- Keep channel covers removable.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A channel without a dependable outlet is only a decorative slot.

Retaining walls

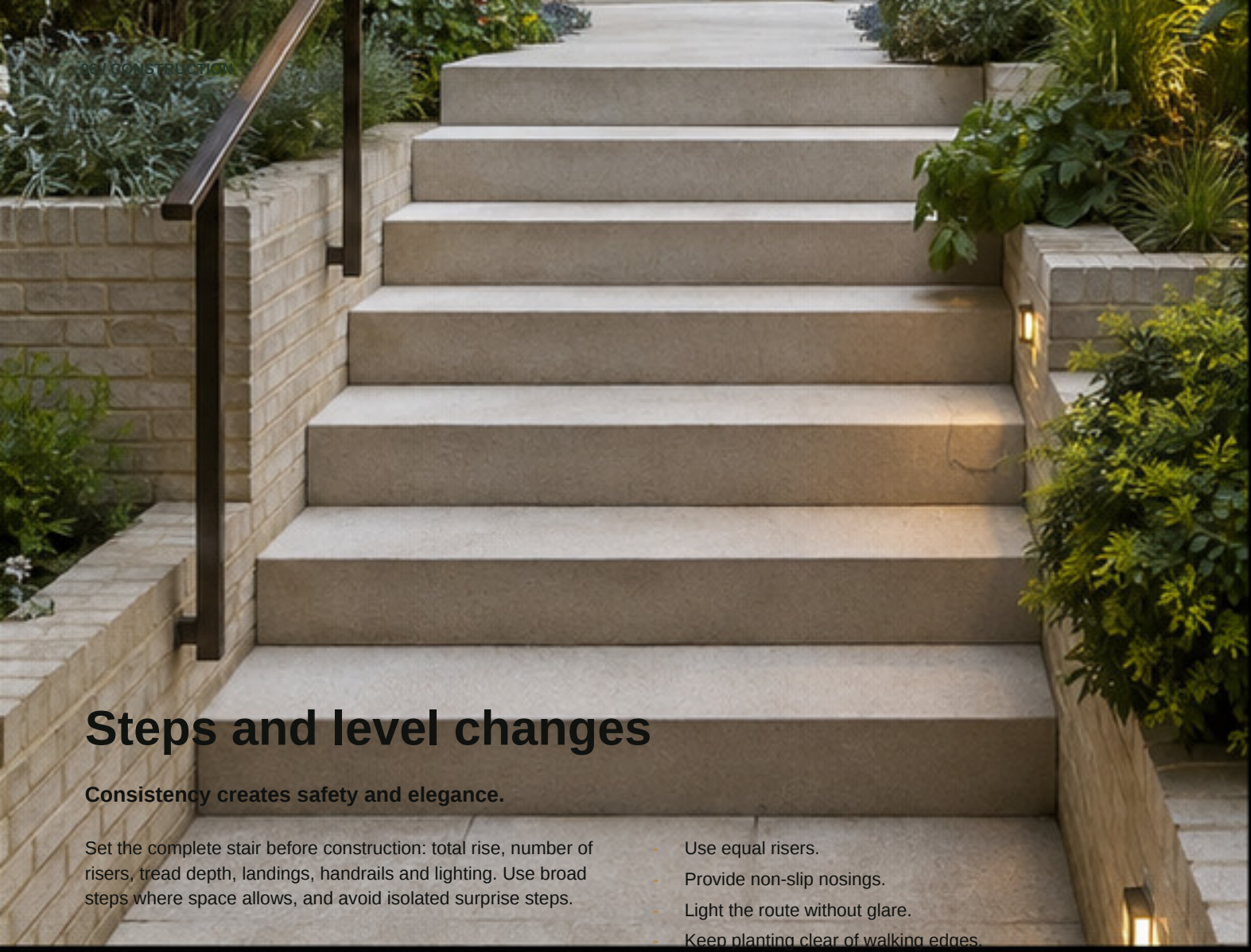
Soil pressure and water pressure must be designed.

Retaining work needs suitable foundations, structural design where required, drainage behind the wall and durable waterproofing or separation. Decorative masonry alone should not be expected to retain saturated ground.

- Confirm height and load.
- Use drainage gravel and outlets.
- Protect membranes.
- Can walls to shed water.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Drain behind the wall before decorating the face.



Steps and level changes

Consistency creates safety and elegance.

Set the complete stair before construction: total rise, number of risers, tread depth, landings, handrails and lighting. Use broad steps where space allows, and avoid isolated surprise steps.

- Use equal risers.
- Provide non-slip nosings.
- Light the route without glare.
- Keep planting clear of walking edges.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

One irregular riser can spoil an otherwise perfect garden.

Setting out

Transfer the drawing from fixed points, not fences.

Boundaries and old paving may not be square. Establish a reliable baseline from the house, set axes and levels, then check diagonals. Small errors accumulate across long gardens.

- Use building corners as references.
- Record datum level.
- Dry-lay key paving lines.
- Approve first bay before continuing.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The first line controls every line that follows.

Paving patterns

Pattern changes apparent width and length.

Large units calm a small space, while clay pavers add scale and texture. Set the pattern around thresholds, steps and focal lines to avoid thin cuts. Use border courses only when they strengthen the geometry.

- Prepare a setting-out drawing.
- Balance cuts at visible edges.
- Align joints through connected areas.
- Mix natural stone packs.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A centred pattern is often worth more than an extra feature.

Edging details

Every loose surface needs a controlled end.

Metal, brick or stone edging prevents gravel migration and protects planting lines. Choose a profile strong enough for the use and set it to the finished level without creating a trip.

- Restrain paving and gravel.
- Allow mower or cleaning access.
- Avoid sharp exposed corners.
- Continue material lines through gates.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Edges are where expensive gardens reveal cheap workmanship.

Boundary walls and fences

Check height, ownership and condition first.

Do not attach heavy screens to weak fences. Inspect posts, walls and foundations; repair structure before cladding. Planning limits can apply, especially near highways or listed property.

- Confirm the legal boundary.
- Use wind-permeable design where appropriate.
- Keep timber clear of soil.
- Coordinate neighbour-facing finish.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A new screen is only as strong as the boundary behind it.

Garden electrics

Design power before surfaces close.

Lighting, pumps, sockets, kitchens and studios require safe circuits, protection, cable routes and suitable external equipment. Use competent electrical design and installation, and keep joints accessible where systems require.

- Create a load and circuit schedule.
- Use correct external ratings.
- Separate controls by zone.
- Record cable routes.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Install spare ducts now; opening paving later is always expensive.

Irrigation sleeves

Future-proof beneath paths and terraces.

Place labelled sleeves for water, drip lines, lighting and data before hard surfaces. Keep valves accessible and protect pipes from frost and physical damage.

- Map sleeves on as-built plan.
- Use gentle bends.
- Provide draw cords.
- Keep irrigation separate from electrical design.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

One empty sleeve can save an entire finished terrace.

Quality hold points

Inspect what will disappear.

Check formation, sub-base, drainage, wall reinforcement, waterproofing, ducts and soil before covering. Photograph each stage against a location plan.

- Approve levels.
- Test drainage with water.
- Record cable and pipe routes.
- Check paving adhesion and joints.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The time to inspect drainage is before the stone is beautiful.

Layered planting

Build structure, middle layer and groundcover.

A luxurious border is composed like an interior: a permanent framework, repeated mid-height forms and a soft lower layer. Seasonal flowers are the final accent, not the entire scheme.

- Start with trees and evergreens.
- Repeat key plants in groups.
- Cover soil with plants and mulch.
- Limit the colour story.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Use fewer varieties in larger groups for a calm modern garden.

Planting for shade

Texture and leaf shape replace constant flower.

Ferns, hostas, hydrangeas and shade-tolerant groundcovers can create depth where lawn struggles. Vary leaf scale and green tone, then add pale flowers to lift darker corners.

- Improve soil with organic matter
- Protect tender foliage from harsh wind
- Use evergreen structure sparingly
- Water deeply during establishment

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Shade becomes luxurious when texture is deliberate.

Drought-tolerant silver and blue

Choose plants adapted to sun and free drainage.

Silver foliage, aromatic leaves and grasses create a refined palette. Match the plant to soil and exposure; drought tolerance develops after proper establishment, not on planting day.

- Prepare soil for the chosen plants.
- Avoid over-rich feeding.
- Water deeply while roots establish.
- Mulch appropriately.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Drought tolerant does not mean no establishment watering.

The winter garden

Design the skeleton before the flowers.

Evergreen forms, bark, seedheads and grasses hold the composition through winter. Leave selected stems standing, and use frost as part of the texture.

- Include one strong evergreen rhythm
- Choose attractive bark or stems.
- Retain seedheads safely
- Place winter interest in key window view

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A garden that works in winter will look generous in summer.

Right plant, right place

Match light, soil, moisture and final size.

Test soil texture and pH where useful, observe drainage and choose plants suited to the conditions. Constantly correcting the site for an unsuitable plant increases water, feeding and maintenance.

- Read mature dimensions.
- Check toxicity where relevant.
- Group plants with similar needs.
- Allow air movement.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Healthy plants look more luxurious than rare plants in the wrong place.

Trees for small gardens

Choose canopy, roots and season with discipline.

Multi-stem trees can provide screening and sculptural form without a heavy trunk. Consider final height, spread, root behaviour, fruit, shade and neighbour impact.

- Choose a realistic mature size.
- Keep access for pruning.
- Stake and water during establishment.
- Avoid planting directly over services.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The best small-garden tree earns its place in every season.

Pleached and espalier forms

Create privacy in a narrow vertical plane.

Pleached trees and trained fruit can screen upper views while preserving floor area. They require support, irrigation and annual training. Position them with boundary and neighbour considerations.

- Set a straight support line.
- Allow trunk growth.
- Choose species for light and soil.
- Plan ongoing pruning access.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Formal screening is a maintenance commitment, not a one-time purchase.

Evergreen structure

Use enough for winter, not so much that summer feels static.

Evergreens define corners, screen practical areas and maintain rhythm. Mix clipped and natural forms carefully. Too much dense evergreen can darken a small garden and compete for water.

- Place structure at turns and views.
- Repeat one or two species.
- Allow mature size.
- Combine with deciduous movement.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Evergreen is punctuation, not every word.

Perennial rhythm

Repetition creates confidence.

Select a limited set of perennials with overlapping seasons and repeat them through the border. Vary height and texture while keeping the colour family coherent.

- Plant in groups, not singles.
- Use 3-5 recurring key plants.
- Mix vertical, mound and airy forms.
- Plan gaps for bulbs.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A repeated plant becomes a design language.

Climbers

Use vertical space without losing floor area.

Climbers soften brick and screens, provide scent and improve privacy. Choose suitable support and avoid species that overwhelm small structures. Keep ventilation and inspection access to walls.

- Match support to mature weight.
- Keep growth clear of gutters.
- Train early.
- Combine flowering and evergreen types carefully.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A climber should dress the wall, not hide a maintenance problem.

Pollinators and wildlife

A modern garden can be beautiful and useful to nature.

Provide varied flower shapes and seasons, shelter, water and connected planting. Avoid treating every fallen leaf or seedhead as untidy. Use hedging and groundcover to create habitat.

- Flower from spring to autumn.
- Reduce pesticide use.
- Include a shallow water source.
- Leave selected stems through winter.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Biodiversity is strongest when it is built into the composition.

Soil preparation

Improve the living foundation before planting.

Remove perennial weeds, relieve compaction where appropriate and incorporate suitable organic matter. Imported topsoil should be appropriate, consistent and free of debris. Avoid smearing wet clay during cultivation.

- Test drainage.
- Protect soil from machinery.
- Use correct planting depth.
- Mulch after watering.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Plants cannot compensate for buried rubble and compacted subsoil.

Planting and establishment

The first two years decide the long-term result.

Set plants at correct depth, water thoroughly, mulch and monitor. Newly planted trees and borders need dependable watering through dry periods while roots extend. Adjust stakes and ties as plants grow.

- Create a watering schedule.
- Check moisture below the surface.
- Top up mulch annually.
- Replace failures early and investigate cause.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The design is not finished when planting day ends.

Lighting a small garden

Create depth with darkness, not floodlight.

Light the route, one or two trees and selected textures. Conceal sources and aim away from windows and neighbours. Warm, low-level light usually suits brick, timber and planting.

- Use separate circuits or zones.
- Avoid glare at seated eye level.
- Keep some areas dark for wildlife.
- Test fittings at night before final fixing.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The most luxurious garden lighting leaves much of the garden unlit.

The rain garden

Make water part of the landscape.

A planted depression can slow and absorb runoff where soil and site design permit. Use overflow routes and plants tolerant of changing moisture. Keep water away from building foundations.

- Calculate catchment and outfall
- Use permeable surfaces
- Choose wet-dry tolerant plants
- Keep overflow safe and visible

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Sustainable drainage must still protect the house.

A narrow water feature

Reflection can double a small space visually.

A slim rill or dark pool creates movement and depth without dominating the plan. Design safe edges, filtration, access, top-up and winter operation.

- Keep geometry simple.
- Hide equipment but retain access.
- Control splash and evaporation.
- Use suitable electrical installation.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The quieter the water detail, the more architectural it feels.

Rainwater and irrigation

Store water and deliver to plants efficiently.

Rainwater collection can supplement water and/or other watering. Drip irrigation reduces waste via a root-activity zone, and maintained, provides filters, isolation, drainage and wiring procedures.

- Water early in the day where possible.
- Use mulch to reduce evaporation.
- Check emitters regularly.
- Use mains water only as necessary.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Deep, less frequent watering encourages stronger roots than constant surface sprinkling.

Lighting layers

Use path, feature and ambient light as separate tools.

Path lighting supports safety, feature lighting reveals trunks or walls and ambient light makes seating comfortable. Do not make every fitting equally bright.

- Keep colour temperature consistent.
- Use dimming where appropriate.
- Shield neighbour views.
- Allow plant growth around fittings.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Light the effect, not the fitting.

Cables and controls

A simple control system is easier to live with.

Group lighting by use: everyday route, entertaining and feature scene. Provide accessible transformers and connections, and record locations. Timers and sensors should never create nuisance glare.

- Label circuits.
- Use weather-appropriate equipment.
- Provide manual override.
- Keep controls intuitive.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Three useful scenes are better than twenty confusing settings.

Drainage maintenance

Design access before the first autumn.

Leaves, silt and roots can block channels and outlets. Use removable covers, rodding access and inspectable traps. Clean before heavy winter rain and after construction dust.

- Map all outlets.
- Test annually.
- Keep soil below drainage openings.
- Do not conceal inspection points.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Accessible drainage is beautiful because it keeps the garden working.

Water-wise maintenance

Use soil, plants and timing to reduce demand.

Choose plants suited to conditions, improve soil with organic matter, mulch and water the root zone. Early morning watering reduces evaporation. Containers need more frequent attention than established borders.

- Collect rainwater.
- Water slowly and deeply.
- Group containers by need.
- Repair leaks immediately.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Water the roots, not the whole garden surface.

The compact outdoor kitchen

Keep function tight and heat safely controlled.

A small run of durable cabinetry can provide prep, grill, sink and storage without consuming the terrace. Coordinate utilities, ventilation, appliance clearances and covers.

- Confirm gas and electrical requirements.
- Use external-grade materials.
- Provide task light.
- Keep smoke away from doors and neighbours.



DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

A small outdoor kitchen should look like architecture, not collected appliances.



The pergola dining room

Use a light frame to define, not imprison.

A slim pergola creates scale and supports climbers or controlled shade. Check planning, structure, wind and boundary relationships. Keep the frame aligned to the paving and table.

- Size around real furniture.
- Control rain runoff.
- Choose climbers with manageable growth.
- Integrate lighting before planting.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The pergola should frame the sky, not replace it.



Built-in lounge seating

Combine comfort, storage and boundary design.

An L-shaped bench uses corners efficiently and can hide cushions or logs when detailed for drainage and ventilation. Use removable seat components and protect timber from soil.

- Set comfortable seat height and depth.
- Angle backs or use cushions.
- Provide ventilation.
- Keep fire features safely separated.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Built-in seating makes a small garden feel designed rather than furnished.



The garden studio

A destination at the end of the garden.

A compact studio can create work, gym or retreat space while anchoring the view. Planning and Building Regulations depend on size, position and use. Separate living accommodation is not automatically incidental.

- Check permitted development limits.
- Design foundations and insulation.
- Coordinate power and data.
- Use a planted approach and green roof where suitable.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The studio belongs to the garden when the path and planting lead to it.

Dining comfort

Shade, wind and circulation decide whether the table is used.

Place dining where evening sun, kitchen access and neighbour impact are balanced. Use planting or open screens to filter wind. Keep routes around chairs clear.

- Test the table at full extension.
- Allow serving route.
- Provide warm task light.
- Avoid placing dining under messy fruit.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

The best dining terrace is the one that is easy to use on an ordinary evening.

Styling without clutter

Finish with a few large, durable choices.

Select cushions, pots and accessories from the established palette. Large planters look calmer than many small pots, but need drainage and irrigation. Keep seasonal decoration easy to remove.

- Repeat one pot family.
- Use outdoor-rated textiles.
- Leave surfaces clear.
- Store cushions close to seating.

DAVID'S TECHNIQUE

Style should complete the design, not compete with it.

Transformation cost plan

Model budget for a 5 m x 11 m messy London garden.

ELEMENT	MODEL ALLOWANCE	KEY VARIABLE
Clearance + access	£4k-£8k	Waste and long carry
Drainage + levels	£6k-£14k	Ground and outlets
Paving + gravel	£12k-£25k	Stone and build-up
Walls + joinery	£8k-£20k	Structure and timber
Lighting + water	£4k-£10k	Circuits and features
Soil + planting	£6k-£15k	Maturity and access
Model total	£40k-£92k	Before design / risk

DESIGN NOTE

Illustrative August 2026 London range, not a quotation. Access, levels, drainage, specification, VAT and professional inputs can materially change cost.

Eight-week build sequence

Model programme after design, approvals and procurement.

WEEK	MAIN WORK	HOLD POINT
1	Protection, clearance, setting-out	Existing levels
2	Excavation and drainage	Outlet test
3	Foundations and retaining	Structure check
4	Sub-base, ducts and services	Pre-cover record
5	Paving, steps and edging	Falls and joints
6	Screens, benches and lighting	Electrical test
7	Soil, trees and planting	Depth and watering
8	Finishing, snagging, handover	Maintenance plan

DESIGN NOTE

Weather, access, structural work, bespoke joinery and protected trees can extend the programme.

David's design formula

A repeatable method for small London gardens.

STAGE	QUESTION	DECISION
1. Subtract	What creates noise?	Clear, repair, retain
2. Frame	What is the main view?	Axis and focal point
3. Zone	How will it be used?	Two or three rooms
4. Match	What belongs to the house?	Warm or cool palette
5. Build	How will water move?	Levels and drainage
6. Layer	What holds each season?	Trees, structure, groundcover
7. Reveal	What deserves light?	Three simple lighting scenes

DESIGN NOTE

The sequence is deliberate: solve space and water before decoration.

The final checklist

Confirm the garden is ready to build.

AREA	READY WHEN	STATUS
Survey	Boundaries, levels and services recorded	[]
Permissions	Planning and tree checks complete	[]
Layout	Furniture and routes tested	[]
Materials	Outdoor sample board approved	[]
Drainage	Falls, outlets and access designed	[]
Lighting	Circuits, routes and scenes agreed	[]
Planting	Soil, sizes and watering scheduled	[]
Contract	Scope, cost and programme documented	[]

DESIGN NOTE

Do not start because the old garden has been cleared. Start when the design, water strategy, materials and critical orders are ready.

Official guidance

RHS - Watering plants wisely

rhs.org.uk/garden-jobs/watering

RHS - Sustainable planting by soil

rhs.org.uk/garden-design/sustainable-planting-combinations/soils

RHS - Wildlife-friendly plants

rhs.org.uk/garden-design/design-with-plants/wildlife-friendly-garden-plants

Planning Portal - Decking

planningportal.co.uk/permission/common-projects/decking

Planning Portal - Fences, gates and walls

planningportal.co.uk/permission/common-projects/fences-gates-and-garden-walls

Planning Portal - Outbuildings

planningportal.co.uk/permission/common-projects/outbuildings

GOV.UK - Protected trees

gov.uk/guidance/tree-preservation-orders-and-trees-in-conservation-areas

Guidance and local rules change. Check the live source, local authority requirements, title restrictions and project-specific professional advice before relying on any general route described in this book.

DAVID DELAVEGA

THE REAL LUXURY



Design that feels calm, useful and complete.

David Delavega brings 25 years of experience across property design, construction and renovation. His garden method applies the same discipline used inside a luxury home: clear circulation, controlled materials, hidden practical functions and details that are designed before they are built.

GARDENS, TERRACES & BEYOND shows how even a messy, compact London garden can become a refined extension of the home.

- Founder, Foxter.
- London property design and renovation.
- Design-led, buildable and commercially aware.

DAVID DELAVEGA

A small London garden can feel luxurious when every line, material, plant and light has a purpose.