Winter greens

In her sheltered North London garden, Mona Abboud has spent 22 years mixing northern and southern hemisphere plants. She has combined Antipodean rarities with the more familiar for an exuberant garden that looks magnificent, especially in winter

Author: **Janice Shipp,** garden writer who serves on the RHS AGM forum for herbaceous plants.
Photography: **Marianne Majerus**

Magical medley

An inventive mix of northern and southern hemisphere plants creates a splendid vista of shape and colour that relies almost entirely on foliage for its success. *Equisetum hyemale* adds vertical structure In the central pond. It is hard to imagine that this is late winter in a North London suburb.

Precious metals

This large Corten-steel wall panel in Mona's signature colours of warm bronze and contrasting silver-grey is complemented by silvery-leaved *Astelia chathamica* 'AGM'. Jay Cockrell, a landscaper with a background in product design, helped Mona with the design and organised its construction.



If ever a garden was created by the force of a single person's enthusiasm and willpower, surely it is Mona Abboud's garden. Her plot lies behind a 1930s terraced house on a quiet street in Highgate, North London. The garden's long, narrow proportions are usual for this type of house, although it is anything but a typical suburban garden in almost every other way.

A musician by profession, Mona's approach to horticulture has been influenced by her Lebanese heritage and time spent living in Italy and the south of France, combined with visits to many Cornish gardens. At first inclined to use the Mediterranean style employed in her previous gardens in Suffolk and East Sussex, Mona's discovery of New Zealand native shrub *Corokia* led her to the flora of the Antipodes, particularly the extraordinary plants endemic to New Zealand. She felt these often had the look of Mediterranean plants but were better suited to the temperate British climate.

Mona wanted to create a garden that would be exciting to see all year round, and these plants proved to be a crucial part of realising that ambition.

Structure and architecture

When Mona bought the house 22 years ago, the garden offered the blank canvas she sought – although the transformation into this wonderfully individual garden has not been easy. Heavy clay soil, a tendency to flood in wet weather and a lack of any direct access (except via a neighbouring path leading to the far end of the garden) have presented challenges. Mona admits that some early plant choices weren't ideal, either, citing as one example six willow cuttings that took off all too well that five later had to be felled. The successes, though, are happily still in evidence. »

Textural foliage

From the vantage point of the house, the huge range of leaf shapes and textures can be fully appreciated. The lines of *Corokia* on each side of the path have replaced rows of box plants that succumbed to a combination of box blight and box tree caterpillar damage.



She created structure in the form of a central brick path with Italianate fountain, leading to a meandering gravel path further along. Mona has had to improve the soil throughout, especially the drainage, and on one side of the plot built a 30m (99ft) long raised bed with granite edging on one side to help with this. Over the years she says 350 tonnes of materials have had to be barrowed in to achieve this work.

As to the plants, *Corokia* are a passion but form only a small proportion of what is grown here. Mona's plant choices are eclectic; the comfortably familiar shapes of *Heuchera*, *Phlomis*, willow and camellias share the garden with more alien silhouettes such as the pendulous New Zealand rimu pine, *Dacrydium cupressinum*, as well as the attention-grabbing, other-worldly forms of 13 different selections of *Pseudopanax*.

That the whole space works so beautifully is testament to Mona's ability to use leaves to provide the range of shapes and textures that give the garden substance, and also the hues she favours. Against a rich green background, touches of colour are added by the purple-bronze leaves of plants such as *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Tom Thumb' AGM, *Lophomyrtus* x *ralphii* 'Pixie', *Phormium* 'Sundowner' AGM, *Corokia* x *virgata* 'Welsh Whiskey' and *C. buddlejoides* 'Coco'. Flashes of blue-grey light are provided by *Cassinia* 'Ward Silver', *Jacobaea maritima* 'Silver Dust' AGM, *Corokia* x *virgata* 'Silver Ghost', *C. cotoneaster* and spectacular blue fan palm, *Brahea armata* AGM.

In late winter the colour palette is intensified by glowing stems of *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire' pruned into elevated pompons, the cinnamon bark of *Arbutus* x *andrachnoides* AGM, bright red *Cordyline australis* Charlie Boy ('Rico1') and the bright yellow flowers of a magnificent mimosa. The eye sees a lush and exotic setting, even if damp ground and a chill in the air might suggest otherwise.

Keeping it light

In this relatively narrow space it would be easy for so many large trees and shrubs to block out too much light, but Mona has found a way to avoid that by lifting the »



Winter colour

There's plenty of colour in Mona's garden, even in late winter. Deciduous shrubs play a part and here the vibrant stems of *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire' vie with mimosa blooms for attention.





Catching the sun

The charms of *Corokia* are subtle, but the red berries of *Corokia* x *virgata* 'Sunsplash' (far left) help to enliven the creamy-yellow variegated leaves, while the luminous yellow flowers of mimosa *Acacia dealbata* AGM (left) add a splash of early spring colour.

Mona's National Plant Collection of *Corokia*

Mona was smitten after first seeing a *Corokia* in a friend's garden in 2001 and began collecting them herself. Feeling that these versatile shrubs deserved to be more widely known and grown, she decided to establish a National Plant Collection.

Registered with Plant Heritage conservation charity, National Plant Collections aim to conserve diversity in garden plants. Collection holders often provide a source of expertise on their selected plants as well as making them available for the public to see.

Mona has written a book, *Corokia, My Adventure*, which describes how detective work and charm were needed to track down and secure the plants of all 40 selections over the next 14 years. She was granted National Plant Collection status in December 2015.

More recently, a new cross has appeared in Mona's garden with distinctive, arrow-shaped leaves that turn bronze in winter. It has been named *Corokia* x *virgata* 'Mona's Magic' by Paul Boosey, grandson of plantsman and *Corokia* breeder Graham Hutchins.



Let there be light

The 8m (26ft) wide garden feels much broader thanks to Mona removing lower limbs from trees and spacing the planting on the southern side, allowing light to flood through – particularly noticeable when the sun is low in winter and early spring. On the right is *Arbutus* x *andrachnoides* and an old apple tree supporting a *Campsis* vine. On the left is *Salix* 'Americana' bearing a froth of stems at the bottom and top of the trunk, a similarly pruned poplar as well as *Lagerstroemia indica* AGM (crape myrtle).

crowns of larger specimens and topiarising shorter shrubs to create gaps through which the eye is drawn. This technique also gives a feeling of light and space that belies the size of the garden.

There is also artistry and a sense of fun in the way Mona creates eye-catching shapes. Pompons, parasols and cloud pruning are her favourites and the experimental touches include one sizeable, broad bamboo plant that has been cut into three distinct tiers. Mona refers to this as the wedding cake.

Preserved for the future

Mona would like to develop the garden further by expanding it, possibly by buying some adjacent land. This would give her the space to fit in more southern hemisphere rarities, and a larger greenhouse so that she can propagate her corokias. While she is thinking about how that might be achieved, Mona has formalised plans to ensure her work will survive by arranging for the house and garden eventually to be taken over by the gardener's charity Perennial. It is good to know that Mona's imaginative style and her garden full of treasures will continue to thrive long into the future. ❍

The details



Mona Abboud

33 Wood Vale, Highgate, London N10 3DJ

Size: 90 x 8m (300 x 26ft), widening to 20m (66ft) at the far end.

Soil: Heavy clay.

Age: 22 years.

Open: on 24 April for the National Garden Scheme (ngs.org.uk) and by appointment: monaabboud@hotmail.com **monasgarden.co.uk**

Standout plants: National Plant Collection of *Corokia*, *Pseudopanax*, *Arbutus* x *andrachnoides*, *Lophomyrtus* x *ralphii* 'Pixie', *Brahea armata*, *Dacrydium cupressinum*.

Pruning and maintenance: most plants are pruned once a year: evergreens in spring and deciduous plants in late autumn to winter. Specialist nursery Architectural Plants advised Mona on pruning and shaping shrubs and trees. She lifts the crown of trees such as *Luma apiculata* to let in light, allow views through bare branches, show off attractive bark and create a feeling of space in the garden. Mona also enjoys topiarising *Corokia*, *Rhamnus alaternus* 'Argenteovariegata' AGM and other shrubs, sculpting growth into interesting forms. By pruning some *Pseudopanax crassifolius* stems she has achieved both the long, downward-pointing juvenile foliage and the palmate leaves of a mature specimen on the same plant.

Mona mulches with a layer of bark chips in winter, but there is still much weeding to do and self-seeded plants to reposition. She doesn't protect plants and temperatures have dropped to –7°C (–4°F) with few losses, which she attributes to the improved drainage.