



In brief

What L-shaped town garden that encourages biodiversity, with a wild garden, herbaceous borders and a productive vegetable plot on the roof of the shed.
Where Bruges, northwest Belgium.
Size 480 square metres.
Climate Temperate maritime.
Soil Sandy, improved with compost.
Hardiness rating USDA 8.

Go wild

To balance their sleek, carbon-neutral home Leilah Lierman and Martijn De Coster have created a wildlife-friendly garden bursting with colour and packed with clever space-saving ideas

WORDS MARIEKE VAN GESSEL
PHOTOGRAPHS MODESTE HERWIG



Above Leilah Lierman and Martijn De Coster.

Left To the side of the house, Leilah and Martijn have created a wild garden made up of two large, lushly planted borders filled with wildlife-friendly plants, including salvias and knautias. The tall, white phlox in the centre was a gift to Martijn's grandmother and is now one of his most treasured plants.



ARTIFIX/VERONIQUE DE WALSCHÉ



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Left Planting around the natural pond, including marginal plants such as *Ranunculus lingua* and shade-loving *Hosta sieboldiana* var. *elegans*, was chosen largely for the variety of its foliage. The pond was one of the first features Leilah and Martijn installed, and just beneath its surface they have placed a large, flat rock to create an attractive spot for birds to drink and wash themselves.

Below left This striking *Centaurea jacea* is one of the showstoppers in the wild garden. Before it flowers it has the most amazing buds for weeks on end.

Below right This sun terrace, overlooking the pond, is a favourite seating spot where Leilah and Martijn love to eat breakfast on sunny mornings. The decking, like the cladding on the walls is made of Platowood, an environmentally friendly, sustainable, treated wood.

No, we don't have any begonias," says schoolteacher Leilah Lierman, laughing. When she and her partner, architect Martijn De Coster, were looking for a site on which to build an eco-friendly home it was Begoniastraat's proximity to public transport links not its floral name that attracted them. The contemporary-looking house the couple eventually built certainly stands out in this quiet, tree-lined street in the Bruges suburb of Assebroek. Martijn, the co-founder of the ecological architectural firm eA Plus, designed and built it himself, using sustainable building materials, and has made it almost entirely carbon-neutral with solar panels that are linked to a solar water boiler, leaving the couple with heating bills of just €250 a year.

Martijn constructed the house around a timber frame and clad the exterior in sleek black tiles. It's a bold design that was inspired in part by the Serpentine Gallery Pavilion for 2011 – a totally black structure,

designed by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor. The pavilion surrounded an inner garden by the influential Dutch designer Piet Oudolf, and Zumthor's concept was to create a *hortus conclusus* or enclosed garden that would provide a sheltered, contemplative space. And this is exactly what Martijn and Leilah have created in their Belgian suburb.

When the couple started work on the garden about five years ago, the land around the house had only a few plants in it and there was hardly any connection between the house and the garden. "We really wanted a garden that encourages biodiversity and we wanted to be able to enjoy it while we were indoors almost as much as when we were outside," says Martijn.

One of the first things the couple did was to build a pond, to attract wildlife, and constructed what can only be described as 'an insect city'. Made out of 20 or more wooden poles with holes

5 ways to create an ecological wildlife haven

1 Chose wildlife-friendly plants, such as salvias or *Verbena bonariensis*, that attract butterflies and bees, and trees and evergreen shrubs that will provide shelter for birds. Try to leave a patch of nettles, as they are beneficial as food to caterpillars.
2 Use certified FSC wood and re-use old materials. Martijn has used remnants of the timber used for the house to make the trellis for the garden shed. Pruned wood is chipped and added to the paths every year.

3 Create a water feature or a pond and collect rainwater to refill the pond, which helps prevent flooding. Make sure small animals can get out of the pond easily by creating a boggy area around it.
4 Enhance biodiversity. Don't tidy your garden too much. In autumn, Martijn and Leilah leave all plants and leaves that have died off and don't start cleaning them up until February. The dead plant material offers protection against frost and shelter

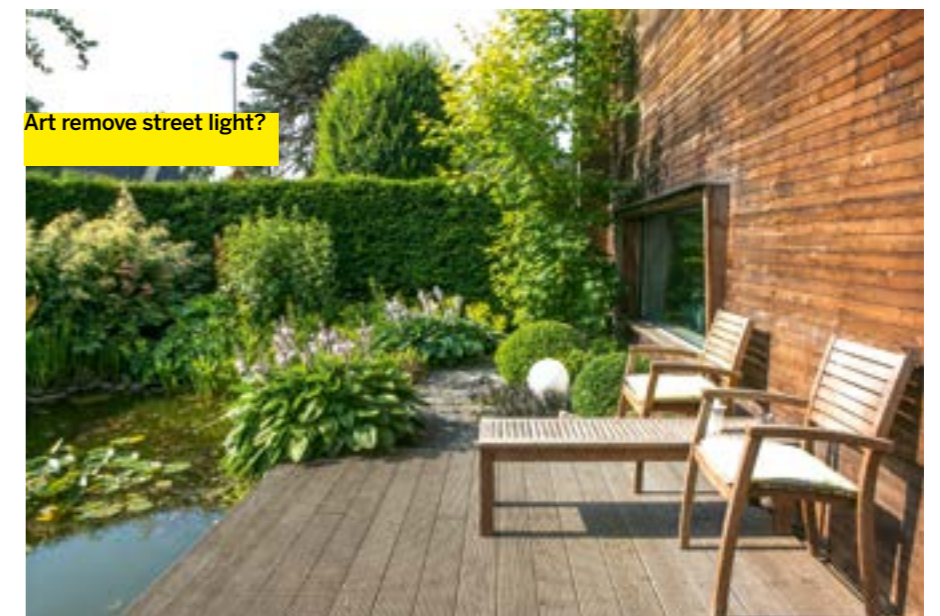
for insects and other small animals. Most insects like cool, moist conditions, but bees prefer a sunny spot. Never use pesticides.
5 Grow some fruit and vegetables. By producing your own food you eliminate any food miles and help cut down on CO₂ emissions. You can maximise space by using walls and even roofs to grow edible plants. And if you're feeling very generous, leave some cabbage in your vegetable plot as food for the cabbage white butterfly.

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Above left Black ceramic tiles on the front of the house create a dramatic backdrop to the effective planting, combing the tall, fluffy heads *Thalictrum* 'Elin' and the dark-green foliage of *Sanguisorba officinalis* 'Red Thunder' and *Buxus sempervirens*. A band of *Salvia nemorosa* 'Ostfriesland' at the front edge provides a burst of rich-purple colour and is a magnet for butterflies and bees.

Above right Timber cladding, made from sustainable platonised wood, helps to insulate the house, while a large picture window affords Leilah and Martijn a front row seat for "some of the best nature documentaries".

Right A neat lawn enclosed with *Taxus baccata*, hedging and a mix of shrubs including the rounded *Elaeagnus x ebbingei*, borders the wild garden.



Art remove street light?



Left page

Top left Cool plantings of pale-pink asters and *Astrantia major* 'Star of Royals' line either side of a brick path. The blue-and-white *Lupinus* 'The Governor', a rich-red hollyhock add spots of colour. A *Buddleja davidii* supplies more vibrant colour later in the year and sustenance for visiting butterflies.

Top right In the vegetable patch near their shed Leilah and Martijn have created an 'insect city' out of wooden poles drilled with holes to provide homes for many different species of insects and bees.

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Left Ornamental grasses, such as *Stipa tenuissima* 'Pony Tails', provide movement in the borders and interest in autumn and winter.

Below left The roof of Leilah and Martijn's shed provides ample space for the couple to grow vegetables and collect rainwater.

Below right Trellises on the side of the shed, up which fruit bushes grow, were made using recycled wood.

▷ drilled into them, the 'city' attracts an impressive list of insects, which thrive alongside various other small birds and animals.

"We have salamanders, frogs, toads, bee beetles, solitary bees, bumblebees, dragonflies, butterflies, a hedgehog, bats and many birds, including a kingfisher," says Martijn.

By constructing large windows and by placing lots of plants near the house, the garden has become very much part of the home. "We don't have television, but we have a widescreen view of the garden and the pond, so we see the best nature documentaries – in real time," says Martijn. "One of our house guests said he felt as though he was inside an observation hide. Leilah and I thought that was a great compliment."

The L-shaped garden is divided into six parts. One of the most striking features is the way the different shapes and colours of

foliage and flowers stand out against the dark background of the house and the garden shed. In the generously planted 'wild garden' there are large groups of the couple's favourite plants and special cultivars, such as *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Lavendelturm', *Rhaponticum centaureoides*, *Agastache cana* 'Heatwave', *Astrantia major* 'Star of Royals' and *Eurybia radula* 'August Sky'. The plants are allowed to spread across the narrow, brick garden paths.

Spontaneous seedlings are positively welcomed in this ecologically maintained garden. "Quite a few wild helleborine orchids have popped up, and we don't mind the occasional nettle, because it is beneficial to several butterfly species," says Leilah. Next to the wild garden is a more formal garden made up of a lawn with a seating area, surrounded by hedges and clipped blocks of *Taxus baccata*, *Elaeagnus x ebbingei* and

Viburnum tinus 'Eve Price', which provide a green structure in winter. "That was the only mistake we made and had to correct: we needed more evergreen plants and shrubs," admits Leilah.

A hand-made trellis against the shed is covered by fruit bushes, and the even more ingeniously the couple's food production has now extended to the roof shed. "We've filled 20cm-deep boxes with a mixture of fresh soil and compost," says Martijn. "Our cabbage, celery, pumpkins, courgettes, strawberries, potatoes and lettuce are doing well up there – they're certainly benefitting from lots of rainwater."

Luckily, the couple are both still relatively young and fit, because they spend a lot of time climbing ladders to reach their crops, and carrying plants and crops from garden to house in numerous baskets and sieves. Rainwater, which they collect from

the roof, supplies the pond, around which are plants mainly selected for the variety of foliage. Most of the plants in the garden come from two nearby nurseries: Epimedium (epimedium.be), which specialises in grasses and shrubs, and Jan De Busschere (tuinplantendebusschere.be), which has a large collection of salvias, many of which have found their way into Leilah and Martijn's garden. "To be honest," laughs Leilah. "I would much rather we lived on Salviastraat than on Begoniastraat." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

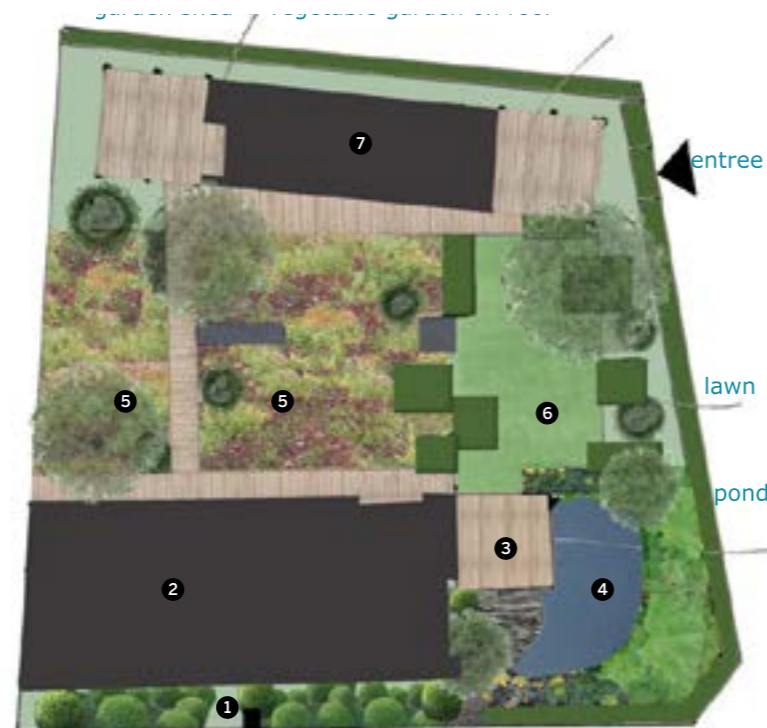
Address Begoniastraat 2, 8310 Assebroek, Belgium.

Email martijn@eaplus.eu

Open Sunday, 2 July, 10am-6pm, and at other times by appointment.

GARDEN PLAN

- 1 Front garden
- 2 House
- 3 Decking area
- 4 Natural pond
- 5 Wild garden
- 6 Lawn
- 7 Shed with vegetable garden roof



HANNAHMCVICAR

