

Front garden

Eric Overall's front garden in Ipswich is a flamboyant splash of flowers and bold foliage.

Tear up the tarmac

Lavish summer planting provides a distinctly exotic feel to a front garden near Ipswich, which also features innovative touches using unusual living sculptures

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Hedychium x moorei 'Tara'.

Lophospermum and *Fuchsia* cascade with Eric's roof felt masks.

Succulent *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop'.

A vibrant planting combination (below) with bold-leaved *Ricinus*, *Dahlia* 'Bishop of Llandaff', *Canna* 'Phasion', *Hedychium x moorei* 'Tara', scarlet alstroemerias and pink bedding begonias.



Front garden

The garden on this corner plot wraps round two sides of Eric's house.

Front gardens are becoming something of an endangered species. Walk down any suburban street and the pressure on space caused by increased car ownership is clear to see: most front gardens are now mere concrete slabs. Despite this, you can still see the occasional bastion of horticulture from the days when keeping a front garden well maintained was important to many owners. Last summer, I visited a quite remarkable example in Kesgrave, on the outskirts of Ipswich.

Flair-filled plot

This large and rather awkwardly shaped front garden, with its central strip of lawn, is the creation of Eric Overall, a retired decorator. Most of his 500sq m (5,400sq ft) corner plot



Succulents spill from a home-made driftwood planter.

wraps around two sides of the modest bungalow – the back garden is considerably smaller. What makes the front remarkable, however, is the range of plants he grows, and the flair with which he combines them.

Added to this, and used as focal points, are the curious features he constructs – some glorified planters, others closer to living sculpture. Several are made from driftwood, held together with chicken wire, glue and cement. Many are encrusted with carefully planted succulents, both hardy and tender, such as *Sempervivum*, *Echeveria* and *Aeonium*. Some are themed; one that stands out has beach pebbles and is planted with *Eryngium* (sea holly) and silvery, serpentine *Euphorbia myrsinites* in a distinctly maritime composition.

Tropics of Suffolk

Much of what Eric grows is tender – a spare bedroom in his house is used as a 'plant room' over winter. Some structural planting stays in place all year, such as the various phormiums, unusually variegated *Fatsia japonica* 'Spider's Web' and a pollarded *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea' with large golden leaves that flutter in the breeze. The biggest foliage of all, though, is from two *Tetrapanax papyrifer* 'Rex', with vast leaves 90cm (3ft) across – these are also hardy outdoors.

In summer the planting really comes together. When I visited in September the display was nearing its peak. Many combinations caught the eye, but one of the most impressive elements was black-leaved and white-flowered *Dahlia*

VISITING DETAILS
Eric Overall's garden is not open to the public.

'Twynning's After Eight' teamed with a purple-leaved *Eucomis comosa*, green *Eucomis bicolor* and, behind, a purple canna spearing through a green-tasselled *Amaranthus*.

Eric uses annuals widely: some bold, as with sultry but sculptural *Ricinus*, other pretty fillers such as *Zinnia* with their bright-coloured, crepe-paper blooms. These were once standard fare for front-garden bedding but are now seldom seen, yet here are used with great panache below glaucous *Melianthus major*.

Permanent home

Some of the most exciting plants are perennials. Eric has impressive clumps of ginger lily *Hedychium x moorei* 'Tara' with its exotic orange blooms, as well as smaller *Hedychium densiflorum*. Everywhere there is

attention to detail; on one corner is a pool with carnivorous *Sarracenia* and floating water lettuce, while at the front door, Eric's dramatic 'Art-Deco planters' are filled with contrasting black *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop', silver-leaved *Senecio* and trailing purple *Tradescantia pallida* 'Purpurea'.

This garden is the antithesis of the featureless melds of concrete and stone chippings that fill many front gardens these days. If gardens are to become recognised as important parts of the built environment, let's hope that passers-by will be inspired by efforts such as Eric's. ●

www.rhs.org.uk For advice on growing and displaying annuals and bedding plants, search 'Bedding plants and display' at RHS Online