

# GATEWAY TO AN OASIS

To win an RHS Silver medal is very special, but as pre-registered SGLD member Emily Crowley-Wroe tells **Arabella St John Parker**, to see the people of Maindee putting the new community garden she designed for them through its paces is worth its weight in gold



**P**re-registered SGLD member Emily Crowley-Wroe has built show gardens and won medals at RHS Malvern before but winning a Silver medal for her Greening Maindee Gateway Garden at the Show this May was especially important. 'The medal was a moment to celebrate what everyone involved with the garden had achieved,' she explains.

'My sponsor, Maindee Unlimited, had wanted to do the show garden to instil in its local community a sense of pride for the garden that was to be theirs as soon as the Show ended. The charity also wanted to encourage other groups to engage in similar work, and to gather more support from the city council and from politicians, which is happening – one of the councillors at the official opening of the permanent garden has told the charity he's hopeful more of the same can be done across Maindee.'

### New skills

The garden has also been a wonderful personal opportunity for the designer. Until she was introduced to the Maindee team by the RSPB lead for the Nature Neighbourhoods project, Emily had only ever worked on residential garden designs. Her first foray into the world of public realm design, however, has been a hugely enjoyable experience, thanks in no small part she says to the collaborative approach of her sponsor's placemaker, Ruth Essex, and its volunteer gardening arm, Greening Maindee, led by John Stone.

Doing a show-garden version first and trying to please the RHS criteria was tough though, and funding was a big part of the challenge. The team agreed that the grant made available to RHS Malvern show garden designers would be used to pay for the construction of the show garden and some of Emily's fees for the project. All the materials used in the show garden, however, would need to be repurposed in the real garden as these (and the construction of the permanent garden) were to be paid for by the finite pot of money that Maindee Unlimited had been able to raise to build the garden there.

'When the RHS judges gave us the score for the show garden,' Emily reveals, 'they said I was already in a position of compromise because doing a show garden and a relocated public garden meant there'd always be budget constraints; you can't use massive mature trees, your plant density can't be as they'd like it for a show, and so on. But I think it was more important to have something that could be relocated, that could work, and that people could use and enjoy and be proud of, so I'm happy with that compromise.'

Considering the point further, Emily expresses concern that there are currently no judging criteria for relocating (RHS) show gardens.

'There's so much emphasis on making sure that show gardens have a purpose and can be relocated. You're asked, all through the application, to consider the sustainability, to make the show garden as sustainable as possible, but relocation is not actually part of the judging. I find that a little bit frustrating. It could possibly be part of the sustainability criteria, couldn't it?'

Photographs: Jon Egan/Cinevibes



As the garden will be cared for by volunteers and the local community, and without irrigation, the planting has been chosen to be not only drought-tolerant but slow growing, to reduce the need for intensive professional maintenance.



**EMILY CROWLEY-WROE, PRE-REGISTERED SGLD MEMBER** graduated from the Cotswold Gardening School in 2020, and since setting up her

design studio, April House Garden Design, in Gloucestershire, she has applied her naturalistic style to a wide range of projects, from small courtyard gardens to larger countryside gardens, and has won two Silver-Gilt medals, a Silver, and Best Show Garden at the RHS Malvern Spring Festival. She won the Society of Garden Designers' Fresh Designer and Landscapes Award in 2024 and was shortlisted in the SGD's 2025 Awards. [april-house.co.uk](http://april-house.co.uk)

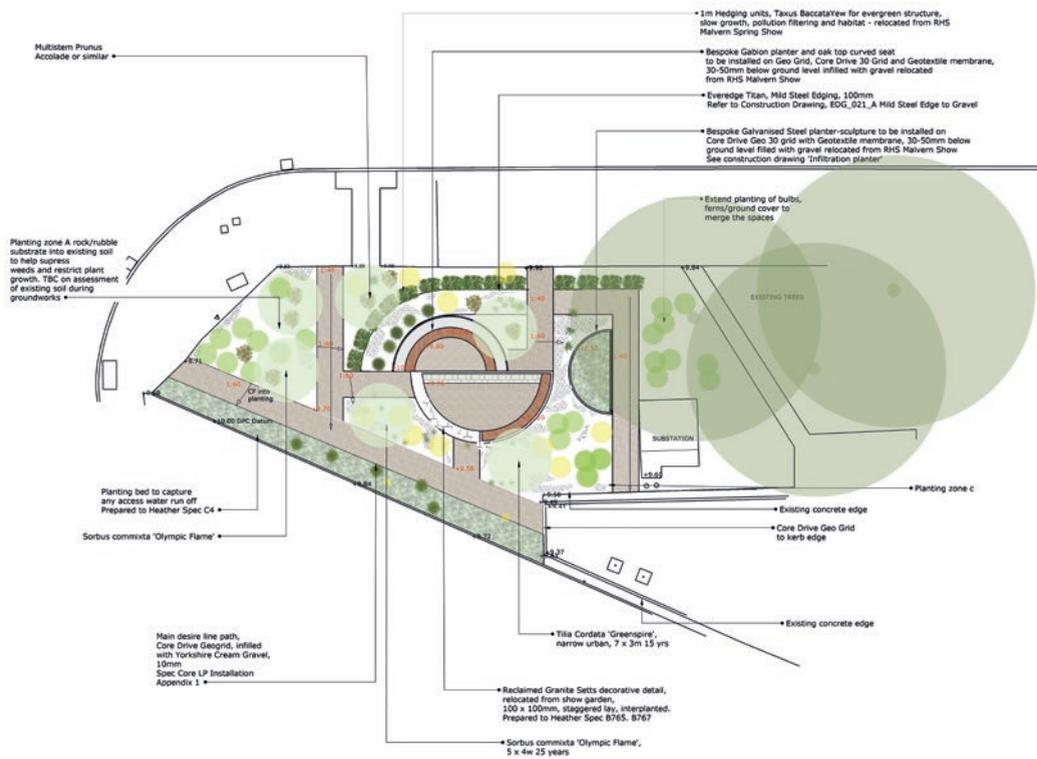


### Greening ambitions

Designed to be built on a junction between the two roads that mark the arrival into the Maindee area of Newport in Wales, the new Gateway Garden is a much-needed small-scale public park of trees and plants amid the streets of terraced houses, shops and small businesses.

'When Ruth and John showed me around in July last year, Ruth said she felt this area of rough grass and patches of concrete had the best potential to become a garden; in years gone by, it had been a place where people met and sat on benches while they fed the birds,' says Emily. 'When I saw it, the heat coming off the ground was so intense it made me want to run for the nearest tree but there were none very close by.' →

**ALL THE MATERIALS USED IN THE SHOW GARDEN WOULD NEED TO BE REPURPOSED IN THE REAL GARDEN.**



needed to be suitable for people of all ages to sit in, to play, socialise, and to look after,' says Emily.

The existing desire-line walkways across the site had to be respected – 'when we walked through my plan on site, Ruth told me that people would simply walk through the yew hedging I planned to put in so we'd need to put in an extra path; the junction is a well-trodden route into Maindee and as I learned, I couldn't hope to change this.'

Ruth also explained that to help limit any anti-social behaviour it was important that the inside of the garden should always be visible from the outside so people can feel safe while they are inside.

'The budget didn't allow for lighting, although that might be put in later, if they can get more funding. In the meantime, the garden is illuminated by the street lighting and the planting needed to be low to medium height. It also needed to be as low maintenance as possible,' Emily adds, 'as the volunteers garden one day a week and they have several gardens to look after in that time. While the garden is establishing, the council has agreed to help water using its bowsers, and the businesses nearby have also agreed to let the volunteers attach a hose to their supply, but after that, the plants will be pretty much on their own.'

On one side of the site, a curved hedge of *Taxus baccata*, chosen for its evergreen structure, slow growth, good habitat opportunities for wildlife, and ability to filter pollution, is a tactile boundary separating the garden from the pavement and road. Along the opposite side, which is the main desire-line pathway, a plant bed alongside the permeable gravel path captures any excess water.

In the central planting zones, which are simply the existing dusty, loamy soil with a locally sourced mulch on top – 'no new soil was brought onto the site at all' – the planting is full of movement and naturalistic atmosphere. The matrices of evergreen grasses including *Carex* will have just one cut a year, and among the perennials that run through them are pollinator-friendly *Eryngium planum* 'Magical Blue Lagoon', *Verbascum phoeniceum* 'Flush of White', and *Euphorbias*.

*Phlomis* adds further structure to the mid-storey – 'I've told the volunteers to leave the seedheads so they →

## THE PLANTING IS FULL OF MOVEMENT AND NATURALISTIC ATMOSPHERE.

Today, the concrete has gone and in its place are beds filled with planting chosen for resilience and tree-lined gravel pathways running through the almost rectangular space and around a central curved, bespoke gabion-based seating area. The backdrop mural in the show garden was a version of the one that local artist Andy O'Rourke had already painted on the wall of the pizzeria that forms a boundary in the Maindee garden, as part of the Colouring Maindee Festival.

The circular and linear aspects of the garden are a riff on the architectural details of two much-loved Art Deco buildings nearby that had originally housed the swimming pool and the cinema, and the planting approach was inspired by larger public projects by Nigel Dunnett.

### The brief

'It needed to be a place of nature, with seasonal colour and plants and habitats for birds and pollinators, and it

Masterplan, Emily Crowley-Wroce; Visuals, Magda Pelka/The Planting Studio



Emily's masterplan for the small-scale park needed to accommodate desire-line pathways long used by the community to cross the junction that leads into Maindee.



can enjoy them throughout the autumn and winter too' – while, for height and much-needed shade, Emily spent a lot of time thinking about which trees would work hardest for the community and the situation, and for the budget. 'I also chose multi-stem varieties so the gardening team can let them grow to the size they want before they need to start pruning.'

The blossoms of *Prunus 'Accolade'*, *P. 'Ichiyo'* and *P. x yedoensis* and flowers of *Sorbus ulleungensis* 'Dodong' above *Narcissus poeticus* var. *recurvus* Haw will herald the spring, while the foliage and barks of *Pyrus calleryana*, *Acer 'Orange Dream'* and *Amelanchier canadensis* will be fiery flames of colour as autumn fades to winter.

While she was unable to change the desire-line walkway, there was one local habit that Emily raised as a concern during the planning process. It involved an area where people would park their cars while they went to the Wetherspoons nearby. 'The parking was just along the edge of the site so to stop drivers from ramping their cars up onto the verge, John liaised with the council to have three massive Welsh boulders positioned there and there are no cars there now.'

A different kind of solution was required for the seating. 'Ruth said that while it needed to be comfortable to sit on, it needed to be robust,' Emily explains. 'It also needed to be fixed so it can't be lifted or moved.'

A huge curved bench with a stone-filled gabion-style base and oak tops appealed as a robust but artistic, sociable and wildlife-friendly solution. In one final conversation with Ruth before sculptor Simon Probyn set to work making the feature, which was designed to fit both the show garden and the actual site without any changes being made, the experienced placemaker recommended that, to make it as multi-functional as possible, a second layer of smaller seats be added on top of the main seat. Then, if children want to jump up and sit, 'atop o' the mountain', they can.

Emily welcomed Ruth's public realm experience again when finessing the design of the sculpture. 'Initially, I wanted to create a rainwater planter so they could harvest the water run-off from the roofs around the site, but as they couldn't get permission to fix it to the buildings, Ruth wondered if it could be designed as a sculptural feature that would also encourage children to climb up and put their faces through.'

### Afterthoughts

In May this year, by the end of the same day that the show garden had been broken down in Malvern, loaded into cars and vans and driven the short distance to the Maindee site, which had been prepared by a local landscaper, the gravel grids and paths had been laid and the seating had been installed.

## THE CURVED BENCH WITH A STONE-FILLED BASE IS ROBUST AND SOCIABLE.

Photographs, Jon Egan/Cinevibes



Fellow garden designer Sue Kent (pictured far left) with Senedd constituency member John Griffiths and Newport City Councillor Yvonne Forsey were among the local community to welcome the opening of the garden in July.



### WHO'S WHO

Landscaper and co-ordinator for Greening Maindee, John Stone, [maindee.org/greening](http://maindee.org/greening)

Show garden contractor, JG Landscaping, [jglandscapingltd.co.uk](http://jglandscapingltd.co.uk)

Maindee contractor, WM Garden Services, [wmgardenservicesltd.co.uk](http://wmgardenservicesltd.co.uk)

Placemaker and project lead for Maindee Unlimited's Renewal Strategy, Ruth Essex

Muralist, Andy O'Rourke, [andyorourke.com](http://andyorourke.com)

Steel seating, Simon Probyn Sculpture, [simonprobyn.co.uk](http://simonprobyn.co.uk)

Planting, (trees) Barcham, [barcham.co.uk](http://barcham.co.uk); Hillier, [hillier.co.uk](http://hillier.co.uk); Rosara at Nicholsons, [nicholsonsgb.com](http://nicholsonsgb.com); (perennials and grasses) Hortus Loci, [hortusloci.co.uk](http://hortusloci.co.uk); Winrow Nurseries, [winrownurseries.com](http://winrownurseries.com); Wyevale Nurseries, [wyevalenurseries.co.uk](http://wyevalenurseries.co.uk)

Timber preparation and cutting, Reseciclo, [reseciclo.co.uk](http://reseciclo.co.uk)

Gravel (Yorkshire Cream), Stone Warehouse, [stonewarehouse.co.uk](http://stonewarehouse.co.uk)

'All twenty of my sponsor's volunteers came back two days later, to help us put the plants in – that was a challenge in itself for me as I'd never managed such a huge team as that before – and when I went up for the official opening this July, it was thrilling to see how they'd been looking after the garden; the planting had really come on and the local community was using it and very proud of it,' says Emily.

When asked if she would like to do more public realm gardens she says 'Yes, although without the added pressure of building one as a show garden first.

'I've learned so much from the collaborative process though and I think the Maindee team enjoyed working with a garden designer from a residential background because they got a different sort of creative input. John has asked me to attend some meetings with Newport City Council this September, to discuss further opportunities, and I'm really looking forward to that.' ●