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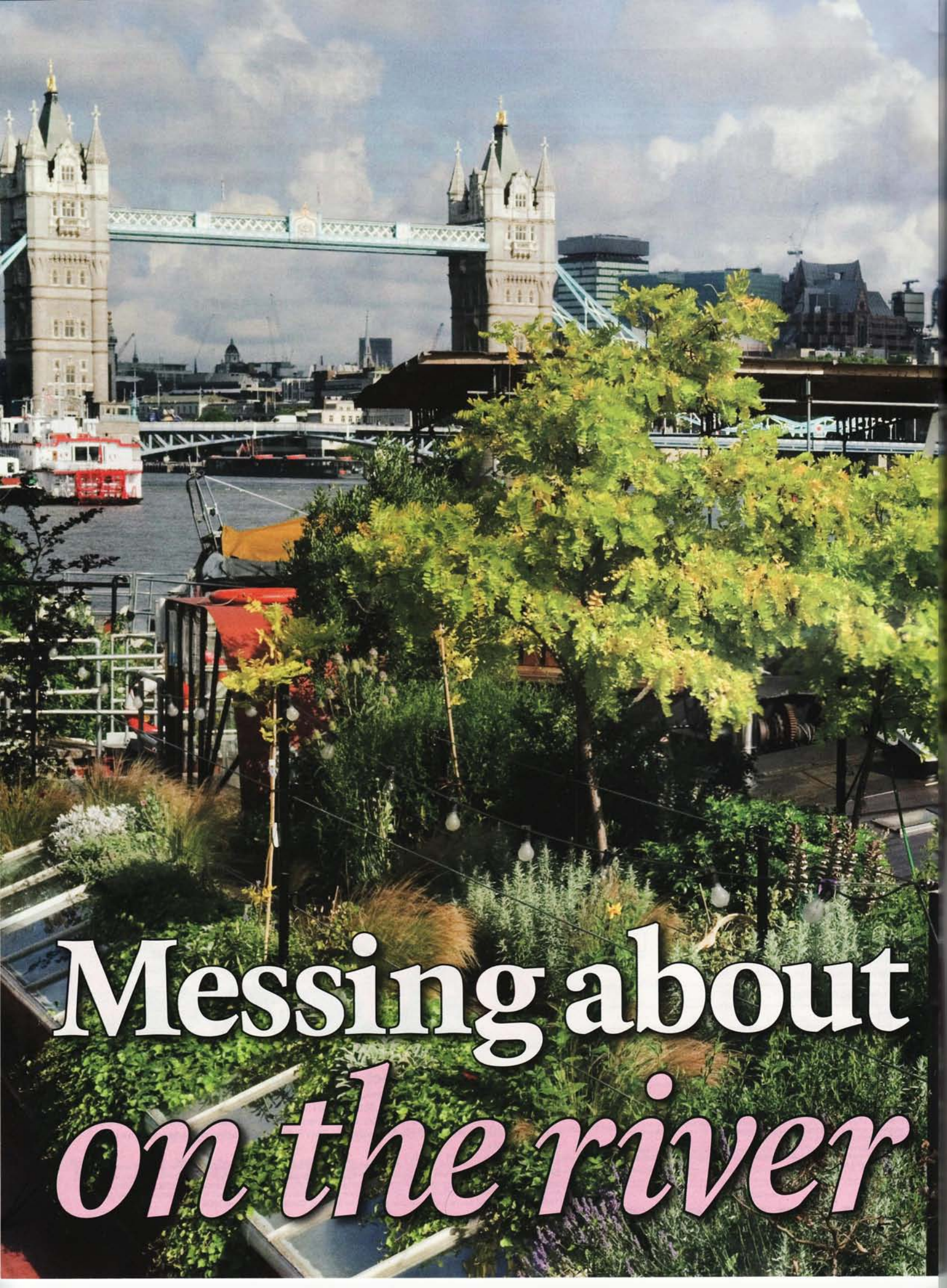
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Messing about
on the river



1 A view across the barges shows their proximity to London landmarks such as Tower Bridge to the left and the famous "Gherkin" building in the City. In the foreground, Arts Ark provides a floating platform for cultural and arts events

2 Lighting along the central walkway helps guide residents returning to their boats at night. Despite the shallow soil, planting is dense, with cardoon thistles and nepeta providing ground cover, and trees such as birch and copper beech



Garden notes

GARDENER:

Elaine Hughes

LOCATION:

Downings Road Mooring
 Barge Gardens, 31 Mill Street,
 Southwark, London SE1 2AX

GARDEN SIZE:

25yd. x 4yd. (23m x 3.7m)

SPECIAL FEATURES: A series of unique floating gardens on the River Thames that have been planted on top of seven residential barges providing walkways which connect the boats in dock with the shore.

Each garden has an individual character all of its own and the planting includes vegetables and herbs as well as trees, shrubs, fruit trees, and herbaceous perennials



It's well worth walking the plank to see how Elaine Hughes has decked out seven Thames barges in the heart of London

ELAINE HUGHES has one of the best gardening jobs you could imagine. Not only does it offer fantastic views of Tower Bridge but, even better, it allows her to work from home for up to three or four days a week in the summer.

Elaine lives on a boat moored on the River Thames at Southwark. And it's here that she has created and now maintains a unique medley of floating gardens on top of seven barges. They act as walkways for up to a dozen boats at a time, while also providing

living accommodation below. Central pathways run along the top of each barge, lit in some places by strings of fairy lights. In fact there's nothing like the Downings Road Moorings Barge Gardens anywhere else in London.

Created on the top of old Thames Lighters, and at 25yd. (23m) long x 4yd. (4m) wide, the garden presented Elaine with a unique opportunity. Although she is a landscape architect more used to designing public spaces, she has found her professional skills just as helpful here. "I had to take into account the same





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While there are plants common to all the barges (also known as Thames Lighters) each still has its own distinct personality. They have also kept their old working names such as *Scrip*, *Medrain* and *Ethel Ada* (after the builders' wives)

considerations as my other job," Elaine explains.

"I had to consider the depth of soil available, as well as the aspect and climate and think about how all these conditions would affect the plants. This is an exposed site with a specific

deck on all fours and hanging off the edges of the boats," she says.

"I was absolutely terrified at first, especially when the tide was high and passing boats created a swell! But I got used to it, even though I'm still wary about going round the edge of the

"I'm still wary around the edge of a boat – but I used to be terrified!"

climate – plants dry out very quickly here so I needed to pick things that would cope."

But there were certain problems that were different from any other type of gardening. "It's much harder to get access to the plants and I've had to get used to crawling around

boat – there's quite a strong current."

Elaine also grows vegetables for residents. But there's also an area for herbs and even a barge for social get-togethers. It sounds like an idyllic life

"There's a real mix of people and a strong sense of community," Elaine confirms. And by doing



Elaine bags up all garden rubbish for collection by Southwark Council. When she first started the job she cleared 15 bags in the first week just by cutting back the plants. "Living and working on a barge is a wonderful experience and there's a real sense of community among residents," she says

Maintaining barge gardens

BARGE GARDENING is high-maintenance stuff so be prepared for the following:

- **IN SUCH** a confined space expect to cut back and divide regularly to control the growing area
- **ESTABLISH** A good watering regime. With such a shallow depth of soil – 16in. (40cm) in this case – it dries out quickly. But don't water too much at any one time because this will simply make the soil overflow onto the deck
- **FEED REGULARLY.** Elaine uses homemade compost, manure, liquid seaweed and chicken pellets
- **CULTIVATE** A good pair of sea legs – gardening at the edge of a boat can be precarious, especially where there is choppy water, tides and the swell of passing boats to contend with
- **GIVE** A warm welcome to visiting waterfowl. Elaine has provided a first home to a family of ducks and regularly has moorhens and geese nesting on the boats
- **EXPECT TO crunch snails underfoot** when returning to your boat at night! These are one of the most annoying pests, says Elaine. She has more trouble with snails than any other garden insects and thinks they breed in the compost
- **BAG UP** any rubbish and put it out for green collection



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4 Elaine finds the popular perennial *Verbena bonariensis* (in the foreground) a useful plant on the boats and it is one of many, including marigolds and poppies, that she allows to self-seed, giving the barges a common link.

5 A box hedge and weeping ash dusted with late frost provide a formal atmosphere. Light bulbs illuminate the walkway for residents returning at night.



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6 Barges are roped together, with bridges in between to provide access for the residents. Gardening on the edge of a barge is risky and something Elaine only does when feeling confident! *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Frisia' overhangs most of the barge while *crocosmia* provides a dash of floral colour amongst the greenery.

but there are plants common to all and I also let things self-seed as much as they like," Elaine explains.

Organic food

"As we don't have deep soil here I go for shallow-rooted plants such as *Robinia pseudoacacia*, ilex and even oak because it grows so slowly.

"Some plants, such as lavender, just

don't seem to work so I'm still experimenting to see how well things grow and how quickly.

"All the plants are fed with organic plant food – I garden completely organically," Elaine says. "I try to encourage an eco-system whereby the bugs control themselves."

These really are gardens it's worth walking the plank to see.

◀ the gardens I have got to know all the residents and we often meet up for a drink."

The gardens were first planted nine years ago. In order to provide a safe planting environment each one was fitted with a waterproof deck, drainage to prevent waterlogging and a membrane to keep the soil in place. Before planting began, 30 tons of soil had to be lifted into place by crane from another barge.

Today they are still going strong with a huge selection of plants, ranging from robinia, ilex, apple and quince trees to herbaceous artemisia, marigolds, poppies and ornamental grasses. "Each garden is quite different

Garden open

THE BARGE gardens are open as part of the Open Garden London Squares Weekend, 7-8 June (2-5pm). They open in aid of the National Gardens Scheme on 27 July (2-5pm). For details see *The Yellow Book* or email elaine.hughes@googlemail.com.

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“As we don't have deep soil here I go for shallow-rooted plants”

7 A wigwam of runner beans in flower looks ready to produce a good crop. Elaine aims to use colourful vegetables which are also attractive, either for their flowers or foliage. Asparagus, rhubarb and globe artichokes are among the veg she favours

Plants for floating gardens

- **IT'S WISE TO** choose plants that can tolerate exposure to the elements and drought conditions
- **GIVEN THE** small growing area, slow growers or dwarf varieties make for easier maintenance, particularly where cutting back and dividing is concerned
- **TO CREATE** structure go for slow-growing trees, dwarf shrubs and those that don't put down big roots. Good examples include robinia, ilex, birch, dwarf buddleja and euphorbia
- **SUITABLE ANNUALS** and perennials to grow beneath trees include nepeta, artemisia, hardy geraniums and grasses such as carex and *Stipa tenuissima*
- **LOOK FOR** self-seeders that grow easily, such as *Verbena bonariensis* (left), nasturtiums, marigold, poppies and sunflowers
- **SALAD VEGETABLES** like rocket, tomatoes and lettuce will grow just as easily in the shallow soil of a floating garden as on a land-bound plot
- **ROOT VEGETABLES** don't do so well here – but they're not that pretty to look at anyway. Instead, go for vegetables with decorative appeal such as asparagus, beetroot, rhubarb, artichokes, French beans and runners

Yellow Book noticeboard

“WATER'S been used down the ages to add beauty and interest to gardens,” says Valerie Caldwell at the National Gardens Scheme.

“Many NGS gardens are located in very beautiful settings and the owners have used what Nature provided to create wonderful environments. Haldon Grange in Devon is a 12-acre well-established garden in a

river setting featuring water cascades which are at their very best this month.

“The riverside Island Hall garden in Cambridgeshire is not to be missed. Restored to a mid-18th century formal design, it features a Chinese Bridge over a Saxon mill race to an embowered island with wild flowers.” All details in *The Yellow Book 2008* or visit ngs.org.uk.