

ANATOMY OF A GARDEN

Barge gardens, Downings Road moorings, London SE1

STUMPED?

Lia Leendertz

My neighbours feed the birds, which, in turn, feeds a growing local mouse population. Do any bird feeders prevent seed falling to the ground? What about traps that don't harm other wildlife? I currently release mice in a nearby park, but suspect they come back.

This is the annoying thing about feeding wild birds: mice (and rats) love bird food, too. Trapping and poisoning is tricky outdoors: poisoned mice may be eaten by other animals, while traditional traps are indiscriminate. As for your humane trapping and release in a local park, you are just taking the mice out for a jolly, because they have a strong homing instinct. Remove the ready source of food, however, and they may well go elsewhere, or at least not multiply so alarmingly. Your neighbours just need a seed tray under their feeder – get one from the RSPB (go to 'Bird Care Accessories' on rspb.org.uk). It's also an idea to pave under the feeder, and sweep up regularly.

Our daughter is getting married next July, and wants to grow and arrange the flowers herself. The garden is on a steep, south-facing limestone slope in Derbyshire (sheltered from the wind) and watering is not easy. Can you suggest any tolerant plants?

Many hardy annuals thrive in poor soil. Normally autumn sowing is a southerners' game, but with your shelter and fabulous drainage, you can get away with it, and will then have well-established plants that need less watering. Add compost to increase water retention, then sow bupleurum, cerinthe, cornflower (or, even better, dramatic black cornflower 'Black Ball') and *Ammi majus*. Sow sweet peas in pots to plant out in spring. Lilies will be at their peak; I find scented 'Stargazer' and 'Amazing' strong and reliable in pots. Finally, convince your daughter to let someone else do the arranging. I have done it for friends, and it's a job that takes up a long, tiring day – a day when she should be painting her nails. Send your gardening queries to space@guardian.co.uk



During droughts, water is pumped straight from the Thames, yet the salty, tidal water has no obvious detrimental effects

The drainage on the barges is almost too good, so they need a daily soaking in summer. The dry soil means that trees, including these false acacias, do not reach their full potential

Typical seaside and roof-garden planting is well adapted to the desiccating winds on the open Thames, and includes waxy, silver-leaved and evergreen plants such as *Stipa tenuissima* and lavender

The lack of usual garden predators has led to a plague of snails. Walking on the paths at night can be a crunchy experience but a mass snail genocide by torch-wielding residents has sent many to a watery grave

The gardens attract plenty of waterfowl. However, despite the introduction of stacks of rotting logs to attract bugs, this remains something of an unbalanced ecosystem, because of its isolated island nature

Floating on the Thames just downstream from Tower Bridge are the most extraordinary gardens, yet thanks to their illustrious neighbour they're largely unnoticed. The barge gardens at Downings Road moorings were created nine years ago on a series of modified Thames lighters, each one converted into apartments and studios, and with serious roof gardens. Planted in huge, metal trays about 40cm deep, each has

a discernible character. The planting runs mostly on either side of central sleeper paths, with shrubs the dominant forms, among them 2m-tall hebes, cordylines and escallonias, with yellow-leaved *Robinia* 'Frisia' lending extra height and structure. Even so, most taller plants never reach full size because the roots are unnaturally restricted in the trays.

Elaine Hughes, resident and recent custodian of the gardens, created the seventh, and latest, garden.

"Each contains 50% topsoil and 50% manure, so it's quite rich," she says. Shrubs tend to grow too fast and get congested, so she went for swathes of *Euphorbia amygdaloides* var *robbiae* and lots of ferns in a style she calls "broadly woodland", complemented by apple trees and low box.

It's only when the wake from a passing boat hits the barge that you remember all this is floating on a river in one of the most dynamic cities in the world. **Andy Sturgeon**