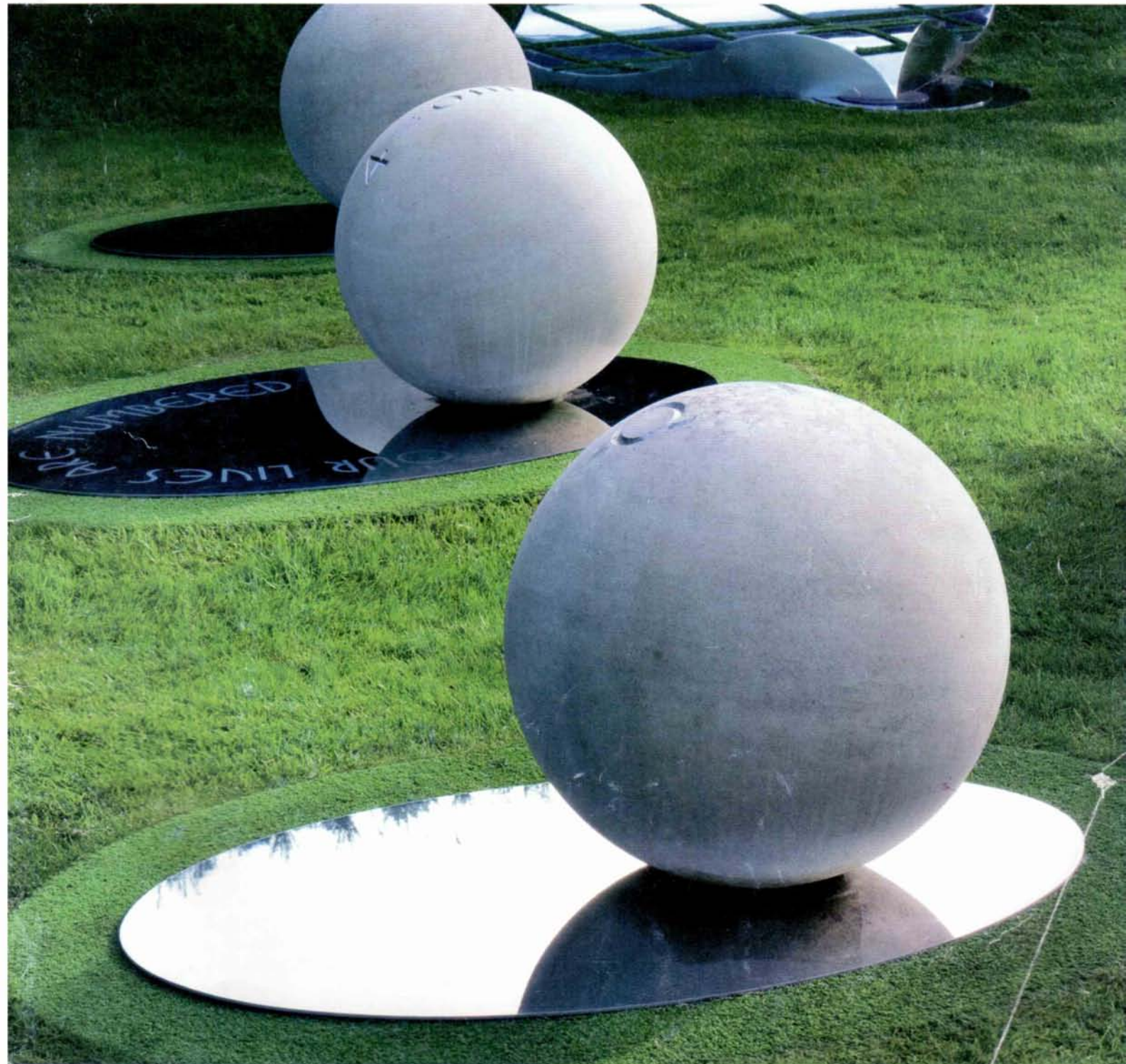


THE GARDEN



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OLD GARDEN, NEW IDEAS
DAYLILIES: DELIGHT AND DRAMA



Moored in Southwark on a reach of the River Thames known as the Pool of London, the garden-topped barges at Downings Roads Ancient Moorings provide homes and studios to more than 70 adults and children

IT IS EASY TO BECOME rather complacent after two decades of designing, visiting, judging and commenting on gardens. But an email from a former student grabbed my attention with a collection of astonishing images and an invitation to visit a set of linked barges on a mooring in the Pool of London, Southwark, on the River Thames near the Design Museum.

As barges go, this collection is not spectacular, but their gardens certainly are. In a dramatic arena created by the sheer banks of loft-style apartments and converted warehouses – and barely a stone's throw from Tower Bridge – it seems incredible that these floating gems have been virtually ignored by Londoners and tourists alike. Were it not for the familiar landmarks, I might have imagined myself in Hong Kong Harbour. And these are not simply a few pots scattered across boat roofs and decks, but serious roof gardens, supporting trees, fruit and vegetables, all bobbing on the wakes of passing boats.

Getting under way

Elaine Hughes, the present gardener, eagerly took over the reins in February 2007 when she moved in to one of the barges; part of her tenancy agreement is to look after the planting on each barge. The gardens were started about 10 years ago when Nick Lacey (who owns the moorings) designed the first roof garden to accommodate soil and drainage on a boat called *Silo*.

As more barges were converted into



GREEN HAVENS The 'floating gardens' occupy the rooftops of seven interlinked barges. The gardens are managed by Elaine Hughes (above). Pot marigolds add a splash of colour to the timeworn steel decks (left)

homes and studios, so roof gardens were installed on them and the floating gardens came into being. There are now seven planted boats on the historic moorings, each with a planting area of around 60sq m. They all offer a seasonal succession of interest, from the older, more-established barge gardens to a brand-new fruit and vegetable barge, designed and planted by Elaine. It billows with *Verbena bonariensis*, above which tall bean-poles and young apple trees pierce the sky.

Each boat garden has a simple format of a central timber path with borders on either side. Plants spill over the windows that light the cabin spaces beneath. The walkways provide access for residents and hide the services routed beneath. New handrails make walking much easier, giving something to grab onto when the barges suddenly lurch or shift as river traffic goes by. Elaine says, 'My assistant gardener and I use the central paths for most of the maintenance, but

there's also a rather more precarious parapet around the edges of the boats. It gives access for pruning and weeding, but it's not for the faint-hearted.'

All aboard

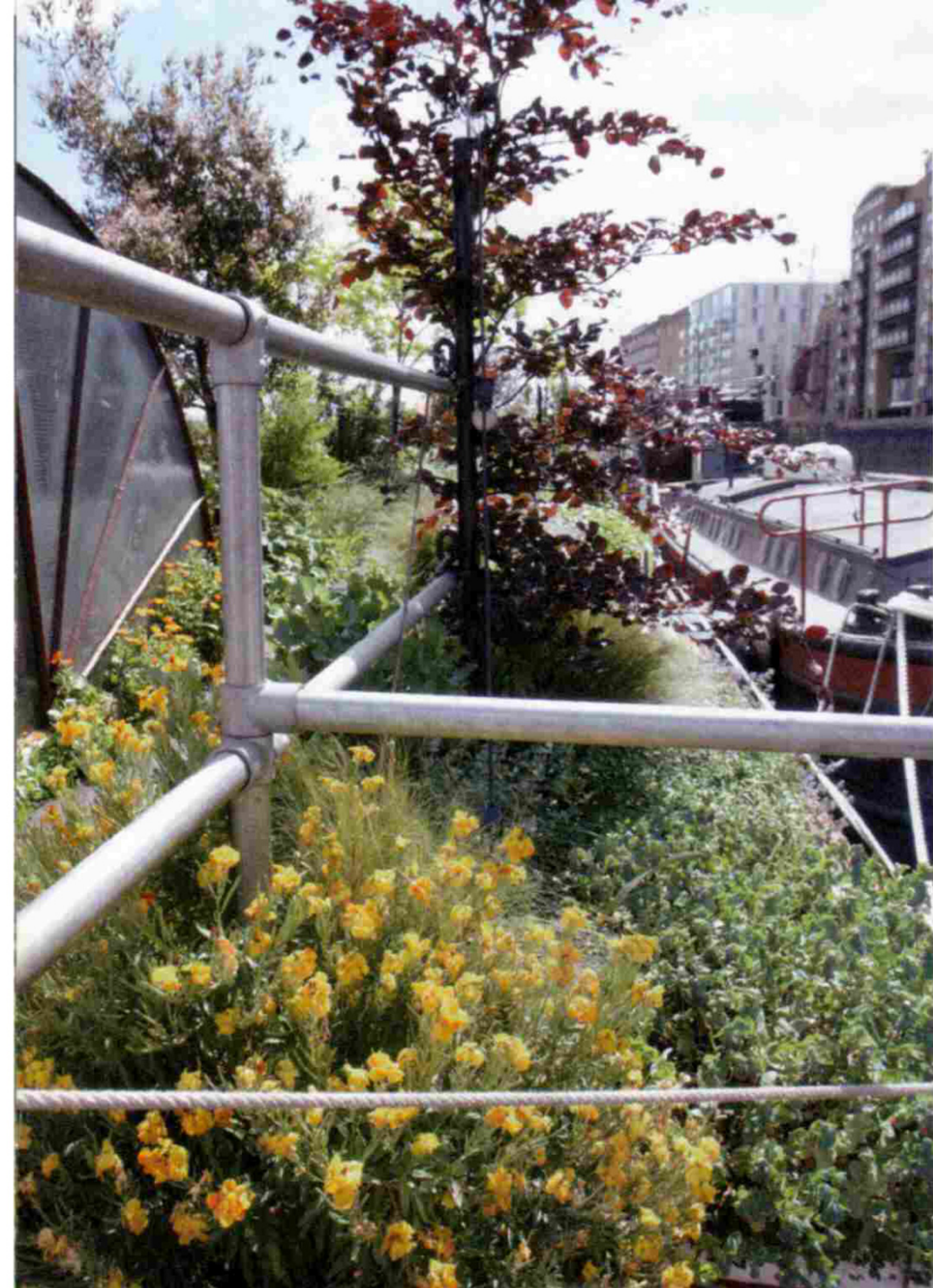
The plants and their growing medium, a mixture of topsoil and manure, are contained in shallow trays no deeper than 30–40cm. Soil, approximately 30 tonnes per barge, is delivered by boat whenever new gardens are established, or topped up with smaller amounts of bagged material. The sheer practicalities of moving soil and plants around, however, takes some logistical planning and physical effort, as the walkways are so narrow and the access routes in particular are not wheelbarrow-friendly. 'When possible,' says Elaine, 'I top up with organic matter, although the main feed is seaweed – as a liquid foliage drench, or as a powder, scattered over the borders and hoed in.'

Collecting green waste from fellow residents and introducing effective composting are high on her agenda, both to save money and to reduce the chore of taking most of the domestic rubbish to the tip. Each garden has a wormery and compost bin and, where possible, Elaine leaves the odd nettle patch and rotting wood piles to encourage a more diverse insect population.

Soil levels have slipped in some places where the built-in drainage system has proved too effective. Added compost would bulk up the growing medium and help to retain moisture, in the short term, at least. Watering is one of the most time-consuming and urgent tasks, yet the water escapes almost ►

Offshore account

Finding his sea legs, **Andrew Wilson** visits Elaine Hughes, gardener to London's most unusual collection of borders. Photography by Matt Anker



immediately through the various weep holes and drainage pipes. Elaine is experimenting with partially blocking the holes to reduce the flow. The wet summer of 2007 was a blessing for her; by contrast, during the hosepipe ban of 2006, water had to be taken directly from the Thames. A drip-irrigation system is in place, but until the drainage is slowed down, or the soil quality improved, it seems to be having little effect.

Elaine's other main battle is with snails. They proliferate, especially in the older gardens where ivy covers the ground and prevents regular inspection and hoeing. 'Fleshy plants only survive for a few days unless I stand guard,' she says. I wondered if ad-hoc plant introductions by residents and visitors might have brought in more of the pests. 'It could be a problem,' she says, 'but I don't want to discourage people from planting things.'

She promotes the enjoyment of the gardens by residents on many levels, inviting them to pick and eat the herbs and vegetables. Some of the children help her with gardening and watering. Community spirit is strong on this semi-

RIVERSIDE VIGNETTES

(Above, left to right) Self-seeding *Cerithe*, calendula and wallflower carpet the decks beneath a purple beech

Euphorbia, *Papaver somniferum* and *Phygelius* find a firm mooring

A well-established garden, complete with trees, provides green relief from the high-rise flats alongside

Annual cosmos and tall verbena brighten the barges in summer

isolated 'floating island'; residents often walk around each other's gardens, to enjoy and share their varied ambience.

Safe harbour

Elaine and I sat at a rooftop picnic table as we chatted. Out on the Thames, in full view of the high-rise neighbours, this could have felt uncomfortable, yet an harbour of quince trees made it a surprisingly private retreat. Elaine calls this barge 'the orchard'; 'The blossom is a great attraction in spring,' she says, 'but the fruit struggles, probably as a combination of exposure and the rapidly drying soil.'

On the most recently-planted barge, however, apples are thriving, and there is a good sense of planted structure, with sunflowers, *Salvia* and *Euphorbia*. Elsewhere, low box-hedged pockets of herbs form fascinating vignettes, with an occasional marigold or geranium dropped in with casual charm. Wind-blown invaders such as mallow or *Buddleja* are tolerated if Elaine feels that they contribute to the character of the place. She seems to be achieving a good balance between designed structure

and loose informality. *Choisya* has done well on the older boats, together with *Cordyline* and *Lavandula*. *Stipa tenuissima* edges some walkways, adding a softer sense of movement and vitality, and complementing the tall, tawny spikes of *Digitalis ferruginea* that wave alongside.

Some of the most dramatic planting is provided by *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Frisia'. The trees, although small, are densely branched, and they bring a good sense of scale to the layout. The constant movement of their foliage in the river breezes enlivens the scene, a dynamic quality that Elaine echoes when she describes the gardens as being 'all about succession and seasonal change'.

Wind of change

Nick Lacey remains supportive and protective of the gardens; they certainly help him attract tenants. He is happy to invest in the planting maintenance and renewal, in a measured way, to ensure the future of these dynamic gardens.

After the success of her vegetable barge, Elaine now has her sights set on some of the older gardens with their opportunities for renewal. Though she



'THE CONSTANT MOVEMENT
OF FOLIAGE IN THE RIVER
BREEZES ENLIVENS
THE SCENE'

describes herself as a control freak, the sense that this is gardening for a community, not just for herself, has made her far more relaxed and accepting. 'It has helped to prevent the gardens from being over-designed,' she says.

Elaine is also well aware of the special nature of her work in this idiosyncratic floating garden; its spectacular setting, the sunrises and sunsets, night-time panoramas and changing riverscape would tempt almost anyone to join her. Tides, unpredictable weather conditions and restricted access can turn a trip to the gardens into an expedition, but do not miss the opportunity to visit this jewel; it might just change your view of gardens and gardening for good. ■

Andrew Wilson is a Surrey-based garden designer, writer and lecturer, and Chief Assessor for RHS show gardens

i **Open days** The gardens are closed to the public but open for the London Open Squares Weekend (in June) and for the National Gardens Scheme on Sunday 27 July (2–5pm); access via 31 Mill Street, London SE1 2AX; see: www.ngs.org.uk

LANDMARK LOCATION On the south bank of the Thames near the Design Museum, opposite St Katharine Docks and downstream of Tower Bridge, the residents of Downings Roads Moorings enjoy a prime position in the capital