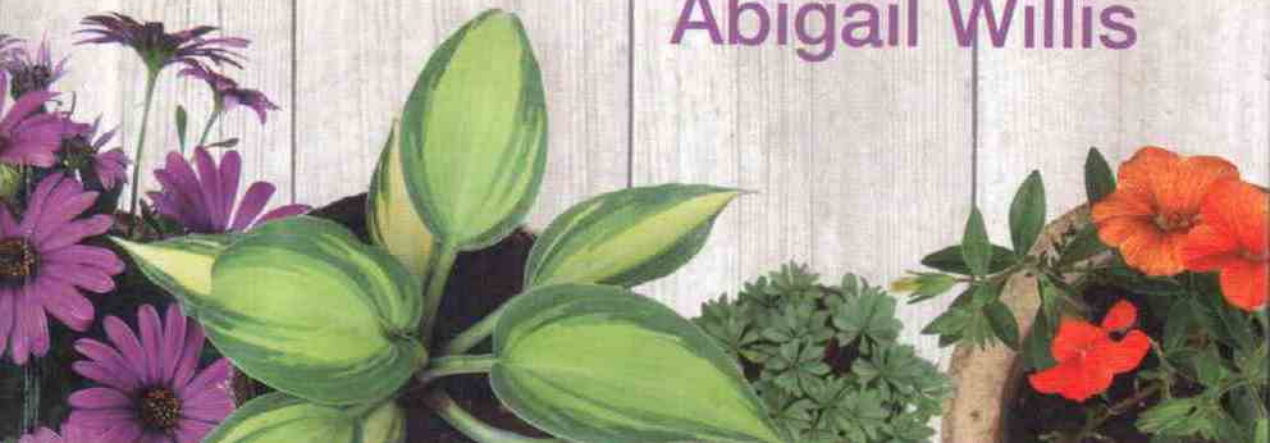


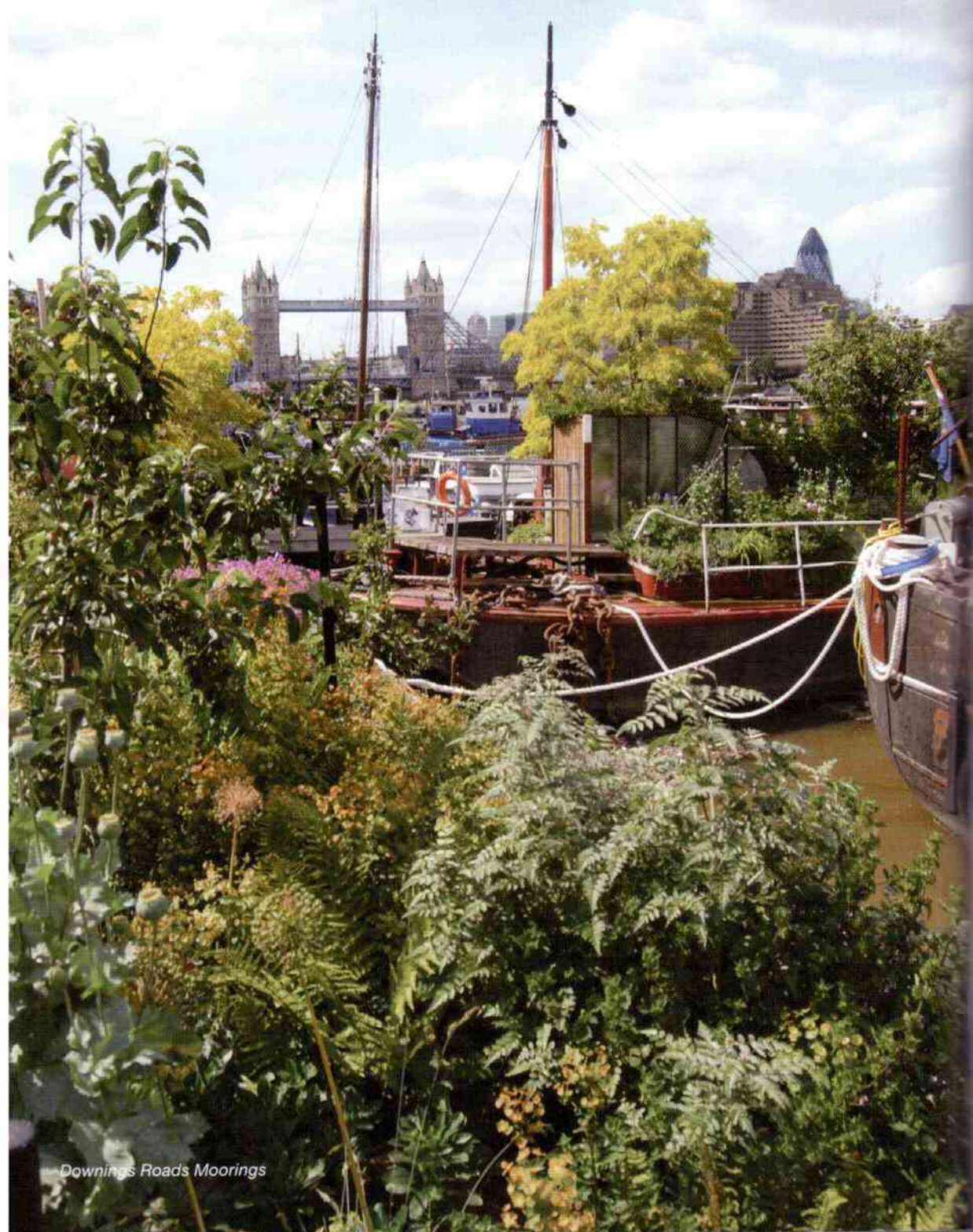
THE

'What a great book' Joe Swift

LONDON  
GARDEN  
BOOK A-Z

Abigail Willis





*Downings Roads Moorings*

## B Barge Gardens



Garden designers often talk about getting 'movement' into their creations, but on the floating gardens at Downings Roads Moorings the movement is for real, generated by the twice-daily ebb and flow of the Thames and the swell of passing river traffic. For those used to terrestrial gardens the gentle sway can be disconcerting and visitors are advised to wear suitable footwear, and to exercise care when aboard.

The oldest surviving commercial river moorings in London (dating from at least the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), the Downings Roads Moorings are home today to some 30 river vessels converted to residential or mixed use. Some berth holders tend small gardens on their own boats but the barge gardens themselves are the main attraction, and are constructed on seven Thames lighters (flat-bottomed vessels used for unloading larger vessels). Connected by ingeniously designed bridges, the

garden barges are not just a decorative after-thought: they act as walkways to the individual houseboats as well as accommodating studio apartments.

Architect Nick Lacey is the man behind the Moorings' evolution into a floating garden square (and indeed the gardens do take part in the Open Garden Squares Weekend as well as opening for the NGS). The owner of the moorings, Nick was inspired back in the 80s by seeing a profusion of self-seeded plants growing in a silt-filled lighter and the idea of the barge garden was born. Construction is simple: the lighters are decked over with a steel deck which produces a planting 'tray' about a spit (roughly 25cms) deep; the studio quarters are housed on the lower deck.

Off-shore gardening presents unique challenges and simply getting the soil (a rich 50/50 mix of top-soil and farmyard manure) onto the barges was a major

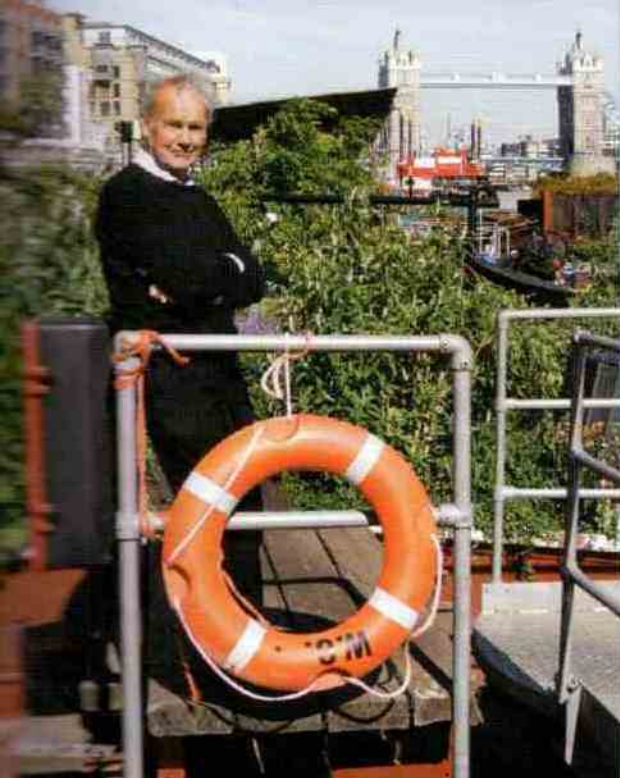


operation involving a crane and a lot of spadework. Although the river enjoys a mild microclimate, its desiccating winds make watering a constant concern; drought-friendly plants are helpful but nonetheless in dry weather the gardens need watering every other day. During hosepipe bans the gardens are sustained with water pumped from the river which, being silty and full of nutrients, the plants relish.

The barges are planted for year-round interest, with an eclectic mix of trees and shrubs, softened by informal groupings of perennials and self-seeded annuals such as poppies. Trees such as the golden leaved *Robinia frisia* do surprisingly well here, obligingly miniaturising themselves to adapt to the shallow planting depth, and fruit trees such as medlar, apple and plum also thrive. Soil fertility is kept high by regular compost mulches and the odd seaweed dressing.

Attracting a bohemian community of human residents, the barges also appeal to London's wildlife, with ducks, coots, moorhens and geese also making their homes here. Nick is keen to get some bee hives on to the moorings but in the meantime wildlife friendly plants such as nepeta and buddleia keep visiting bees and butterflies in nectar. For their creator, the appeal of the barge gardens lies in their fundamental difference from buildings – for architect Nick, 'what is so wonderful about a garden is that it's organic, it develops, it grows, it changes in a way that buildings find more difficult!'

*Downings Roads Moorings*  
31 Mill Street, SE1 2AX  
[www.towerbridgemoorings.org](http://www.towerbridgemoorings.org)  
[www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk)  
[www.opensquares.org](http://www.opensquares.org)



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