



## INSPIRED BY THE ALHAMBRA

The Alhambra, a region set against the backdrop of the Sierra Nevada mountains, is the location of the remains of some of the most famous and beautiful late medieval castles in Europe. When both designer and client discovered that they had visited the region in the past, it was their shared love of the gardens they had seen there which led to the creation of this spectacular garden near Manchester.



**T**he problem for garden designer David Keegan, star of the BBC's "Garden School", was how to translate the vast scale of those gardens in the Alhambra into a contemporary, workable design in the suburbs of Manchester.

"The clients were primarily looking for a garden to entertain and relax in," David revealed. "They had initially allocated a budget of £4,000, but they took a giant leap of faith in going for the garden they now have." His clients eventually spent £150,000 on creating the garden of their dreams. The result is clearly worth every penny, as what started out as little more than a pile of rubble and debris has now been transformed into an impressive combination of castle garden elegance and contemporary style.

From the outset, the intention was to transform the view from the patio doors at the rear of the house. The original garden had few features that appealed to the clients' new scheme and in fact, only one tree survived the clearance operation. David commented: "There were quite a few large trees which I had taken out as I felt they did not add to the scheme. However, there is a beautiful old twisted cherry tree which I am very glad to say we were able to save, but apart from that it was a completely blank canvas." As preparations began, it became obvious that it would take considerably more than the original budget to create the kind of garden the clients wanted, so it was important that the relationship between client and designer remained a good one.

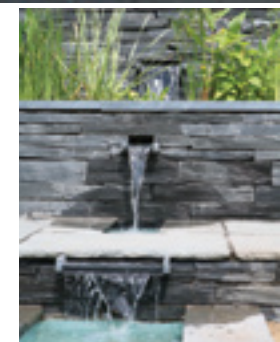
"I feel that the most important aspect of the client/designer relationship is to develop a feeling of mutual trust," explained David, "and it is my job to draw out of my client a series of likes and dislikes. For instance, they did not want any metal or steel in the garden. Little things like this provide the clues towards building a more defined picture. The two main things were»

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formality and water. Although they were not sure of what they wanted, a pond was crucial. I wanted to create a garden that had a sense of serenity and elegance.” As David summed up the project: “I guess ultimately it’s a romantic garden and personally I am very pleased with the results. I would say my approach was classical/contemporary.”

Much of the layout is formal and geometric in style, with clearly demarcated sections contrasting with the free-form of the water pouring from the fountain at its centre. Rather than traditional dry-stone-walling, David chose slate to add a contemporary edge to the scheme. Viewed from the house, the effect is particularly dramatic as the eye follows the course of the water through a tree-lined avenue towards the fountain, framed against the striking grey of the slate wall. The slate was sourced from a quarry in Snowdonia after a consultation with contractors Ecorenovation and built on-site.

Most gardens begin with a plan that places emphasis on hard landscaping followed by planting, but in this case the process was different. David explained: “On a job of this scale the two have to work together and around each other.” In terms of planting, the seasons dictated when certain plants could be introduced. The yew trees, for example, were brought in during April because they could only be purchased root-balled, meaning they needed to be planted in the winter or early spring. Another problem that David and his team encountered was the unpredictable weather. As David summed it up: “The weather has been so strange this year. Back in May we lost time in the schedule due to torrential rain which lasted for about a week. This had a knock-

on effect for everyone. Then we had the blistering heat in July which was extremely difficult for all the men working in the garden.”

There were also other unexpected setbacks. David said: “Every time we excavated an area, we kept finding remnants of a Victorian garden, including a cobbled terrace one foot down, underpinned with sheets of steel. This all had to come out because it was directly under what was to be a new planting bed. In fact, out of the entire garden we were hard pressed to find a bucket-full of decent soil. In the end we had to bring in something in the region of 250 to 300 tonnes of topsoil.”

With the topsoil in place, David was able to start thinking about incorporating his client’s favourite plants into the scheme, including palms and figs in the tropical garden and the tree ferns that have been planted at the side of the house. Other plants have been added for certain effects, which David described: “Some of the trees I have planted in the garden have been planted specifically to provide areas of shade as they mature and also to create areas of shadow in the sun, for example the pleached hornbeam avenue cutting across the garden. I chose the other trees for their changing colour throughout the seasons.”

Amongst many beautifully designed and carefully considered features of the garden, a yew tree room will be clipped into a formal hedge and archway as it grows. This should provide a quiet retreat from which to sit back and admire the progress of the garden as it matures – and perhaps also to reflect on the extraordinary process which has brought it to this stage, thanks to the efforts of its designer and owners.

To find out more about DK Garden Design, visit [www.dkgardendesign.co.uk](http://www.dkgardendesign.co.uk), or tel. 0161 224 4020 for enquiries. ■

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