



Making the most of a basement area; hostas, right; variegated vinca, below right

Clive Nichols/Stephen Woodhams/Andrew Lawson



Wood and slate surfaces by Sam Joyce at The Plant Room

## Bright ideas for a basement garden

That dark, awkward space where nothing seems to grow needn't go to waste — with the right plants and clever use of materials, it can be turned into an asset. JOE SWIFT lifts the gloom

Many houses in town or city settings have only small, dark and rather awkward areas of outside space, such as side alleys and basement wells. On the whole, these were built by the Victorians and Edwardians to let more light into the house and basement areas, and to provide easy access to the cellars for storage.

As houses have become subdivided into flats, these areas are now a bonus to those who own them. They may seem like a harsh environment in which to create a garden, but as long as the limitations are accepted, with a little imagination and some careful planning, these spaces can be transformed into somewhere that is attractive to view from the interior and a pleasant place to sit.

The biggest consideration when

working on a dark basement area is what the space can be used for. Will you be able to sit in it? Do you need to store things in it? If this is your only outside space, you will probably want to keep it as flexible as possible, but the smaller the space, the more important it is to decide on its central function. If you put too many demands on it, you may well end up failing to make it work effectively.

If the space has a door leading into it from the interior, consider which way this opens, and try not to block the central area with pots or features, which will make it feel cramped. If the main aim is to maximise sitting areas, consider building seating, perhaps an L-shaped bench in the corner with storage underneath. Soft cushions can help to decorate the garden and be carried out from the

house or stored under the seats themselves.

As the garden will be small, the walls and boundaries will dominate it and be the first things that visitors see. Old brick walls are often dirty from pollution, absorbing the light and adding to the uninviting and gloomy feel. A quick fix is to clean the walls with a hired pressure washer (try your local building merchant). They will soon get dirty again, but once cleaned, brick walls can be primed and painted with a masonry paint, which will help bounce around as much light as possible. As well as the obvious white and off-white, think about using other light colours, as it is the overall tone that is important.

For a slick, contemporary look, the walls can be cement-rendered or clad with an exterior-quality ply board and

painted. Alternatively they could be clad with materials such as bamboo screening, timber slats, sheet metal or trellis.

Mirrors can increase the feeling of space and mystery in a dark basement. Their placement is critical to the illusion, so make sure that the first thing you see in a mirror is not yourself (unless you want it to be, of course). Rather than installing a small wall mirror, consider covering a whole wall with mirrored Perspex, which is safer than glass, and planting around the edges to blur it.

Wall-mounted decorations such as water features, wall mosaics and candle holders will add interest and style. When fixing them, make sure they are high up — at least at eye level — so as not to draw the eye down, which will make the garden seem smaller.

High walls or fences will usually dominate a basement area and create plenty of shade, so choosing climbers that will do well in these conditions is important. Evergreen climbers are limited and many get quite straggly,

but there are some that have the necessary qualities to help the design along.

Ivy is often perceived as a rather boring plant, but the variegated varieties with white or cream margins are perfect to help keep the composition light, and will thrive in this setting. *Hedera canariensis* 'Gloire de Marengo' may sound like a nightclub in Ibiza but is an ivy with a crisp white margin, as is the smaller-leaved 'Glacier', which has attractive, triangular green leaves with silvery-grey and cream variegation. Other good variegated plants for shade include hostas, euonymus and vinca. They may not be the most glamorous of plants, but it is more important that they will thrive. How you put them together is a key factor — think about the overall effect when you decide where to place them.

*Fatsyhedera lizei* is a cross between an ivy and fatsia, so it has large, glossy, sculptural leaves but will self-cling and stay flat against the wall. A wonderful must-have climber for this spot is the evergreen *Trachelospermum jasminoides* — it will usually say "full sun" on the label, but will thrive in the protected microclimate of a basement well. It is neatly clothed to the ground with glossy green foliage and has small white flowers that will fill the space with a sweet jasmine scent in the summer.

Sculptural plants such as tree ferns

can work well as they command their own space all year round without relying on their flowers for interest. They also look great when viewed from above and can help to create privacy if the space is overlooked.

Most of the plants will have to be grown in containers. In tiny gardens a few large containers with plenty of height will have much more impact than lots of small ones below knee level. Think how the pot and plant will work together, and don't be afraid of repeating a successful partnership to help formalise and add rhythm to the garden.

If you are building seating areas, consider building in planting areas at the same time, or making up containers in the same material and in proportion to the other structures. This will bring smartness and harmony to the space.

■ Gilbert Curry Industrial Plastics sells mirrored Perspex from £95 a 2440mm x 1220mm sheet, 02476 588 388, [www.gcip.co.uk](http://www.gcip.co.uk); The Plant Room, 020 7700 6766, [www.plantroom.co.uk](http://www.plantroom.co.uk)