



The path that leads down Mona Abboud's long, narrow London garden reveals many-layered foliar delights.

Sunny SIDE UP

Winter is here, but step into Mona Abboud's wonderful North London back garden and you'd never know it. This joyously exotic space indulges her passion for plants from the Mediterranean, South Africa and Australasia – corokia in particular

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Above Winter greenery abounds here, from spiky *Pseudopanax ferox*, *Phormium tenax* 'Sundowner' and clipped *Rhamnus alaternus*.

Right Purple *Corokia buddlejoides* 'Coco'.

Below right *Corokia x virgata* 'Welsh Whiskey'.

Below *Corokia* devotee, Mona Abboud.

It is a short stroll from Highgate tube station to Mona Abboud's home in North London. As you approach her 1930s terraced house on a quiet residential road, a huge grevillea and a parasol-pruned phillyrea in the small front garden signal a horticultural treat in store. You might also spot some olearias, a topiarised corokia and a *Pistacia lentiscus* before Mona herself appears at the door, bursting with energy and keen to show you the main garden at the back.

Mona, who is of Lebanese extraction, is a classical singer by profession. She has gardened in the south of France and lived in Italy, which, along with a trip to Australia, fed an abiding passion for Mediterranean climate plants. Back in 2001, the year after she had begun her Highgate garden, Mona spotted a large shrub resembling an olive tree in a friend's seaside garden. The plant that appealed to her 'Mediterranean soul', as she puts it, was a *Corokia x virgata* 'Red Wonder'. This proved to be the beginning of a love affair with the genus *Corokia* and she now holds the National Collection, which she has woven into a broader framework of complementary shrubs, perennials and grasses.

The view from the back of Mona's house across her long narrow garden is quite breathtaking. On a cool winter's day with a low sun bathing the plants in a gentle light, one is transported to the great gardens of Cornwall that rely on exotic



Equisetum hyemale fills the circular pond centrepiece here, with *Corokia x virgata* 'Sunsplash' marking each corner.



introductions from all around the globe. The impact is almost entirely created by individual plant forms and the colour and texture of foliage rather than flowers. The hard landscaping plays a part too. By the back door is a Corten steel screen with a bamboo design cut out to reveal a painted, blue-grey backdrop. The colour contrast between the red-rust tone and glaucous grey is significant.

Mona likens it to a 'leitmotif', a musical term associated with the composer Wagner that describes a short, constantly recurring musical phrase that runs through a production. "It is the balance between red and purple hues and bluey-greys that makes my garden sing," Mona insists. Next to the path is a perfect example. A low edging hedge of *Corokia buddlejoides* 'Coco' with its bronze winter colouring gives way to the grey of *Corokia* 'Geenty's

Above left Pink *Cordyline australis* 'Charlie Boy' contrasts with grey *Senecio* 'Silver Dust'.

Top right A rust-coloured Corten steel screen is set off by its pale blue-grey background and planters painted to match.

Above right *Corokia x virgata* 'Sunsplash'.



Ghost', which in turn stands out against the rich burgundy tones of *Lophomyrtus x ralphii* 'Magic Dragon' and 'Kathryn'.

A circular stone basin filled with water and displaying the upright growth of equisetums is a focal point in this part of the garden. Four *Corokia x virgata* 'Sunsplash' mark the corners and add a touch of formality amid the abundance of winter foliage. A clever ploy in this narrow and closely planted space has been to prune back the middle section of shrubs like *Rhamnus alaternus* 'Argenteovariegata' to a framework of branches, but to leave a ball at the top and a skirt near the base. This allows you to see through to the shrubs behind and gives visual depth while still 'losing' the boundaries of the garden.

Mona is not shy about pruning. Crown lifting her larger shrubs not only allows more light through the mostly evergreen canopy and thereby lets her grow more at ground level, but also shows off the bark of individual subjects. A cloud-pruned *Luma apiculata*, a myrtle cousin from Chile and Argentina, proudly displays its framework of cinnamon-coloured branches topped with balls of glossy dark green leaves kept crisp with an autumn and spring clip.

Much as Mona loves corokias, she also has a soft spot for another New Zealander: pseudopanax.



Star TURN

Mona Abboud
shares her tips on
growing *Corokia*

Good drainage is most important. I have incorporated many tons of grit and gravel into my garden, which is prone to flooding, and I've also used gravel setts to build low retaining walls to raise the level of borders.

Corokias are an excellent choice for a seaside garden and can withstand salt-laden winds.

Most perennials, grasses and other shrubs work well with corokias, but these plants have a particular affinity for fellow New Zealanders. Give them sun or dappled shade.

"They look so prehistoric, as if they've come straight out of a dinosaur movie!" she remarks. *Pseudopanax ferox* towers over the path like a chimney sweep's brush. Lancewoods, as they are commonly known, undergo a fascinating transformation when they reach around 3m in height. They lose their downward pointing 'sawblade' foliage and replace it with upward pointing and much broader adult leaves. The younger foliage may have evolved to avoid being eaten by the now extinct flightless Moa bird or to thrust through the forest canopy.

Mona's pseudopanax jostle for space with the equally architectural but more commonplace *Cordyline australis*, which exemplifies another feature of this surprising garden. Botanic rarities such as *Olearia odorata*, the scented daisy bush with its mass of interlaced narrow branches, and the only Australian restio, *Baloskion tetraphyllum*, rub shoulders with the familiar: camellias, euphorbias and a bay tree. The spherical crown of a topiarised leptospermum, or tea tree, stands guard over a *Pittosporum* 'Tom Thumb'. A thuja, the heart of so many suburban hedges, acts as the backdrop to the tight winter fists of *Tetrapanax papyrifer* 'Rex', which in early spring will unfold into massive lobed leaves.

Mona makes good use of grasses and grass lookalikes. *Libertia peregrinans* runs in drifts,

Above left A multi-stemmed specimen of *Luma apiculata*.

Above right Corokias here, with *Libertia peregrinans*, include 'Coco' and silvery 'Geenty's Ghost'.

the orange tints it takes on when the mercury drops perfectly picking out the same shade in the leaves of *Corokia x virgata* 'Welsh Whiskey'. *Uncinia rubra* is treasured for its coppery leaves that glow brightly in the winter sun along with tawny orange *Chionochloa rubra*, each

providing the red in Mona's trademark colour combination balanced by the silver of an olive, brachyglottis or *Phlomis italica*.

Towards the end of Mona's garden is a hedge made up of eight different corokias, including *Corokia cotoneaster* 'Wanaka' and *Corokia x virgata* 'Pink Delight'. "These are all perfect substitutes for box in areas troubled by blight and the box tree caterpillar," Mona explains. "Many have the bonus points of interesting winter tints, berries and flowers in spring."

Mona Abboud is an engaging advocate for the genus *Corokia*. Her desire to create not a museum but instead the perfect showcase for them has led to something truly extraordinary: an English garden that delights the senses as much in midwinter as it does in June. ■

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Mona intends to open for the National Garden Scheme on 18 April 2021 and by appointment at other times. Visit monasgarden.co.uk or ngs.org.uk for information and updates.