

IN BRIEF

What Container-planted roof garden. **Where** Milan, Italy. **Soil** Topsoil in raised beds. **Size** 300 square metres. **Climate** Continental. **Hardiness zone** USDA 9.

This image A small ornamental cherry tree is surrounded by a lush mix of grasses, sedges and herbaceous perennials. Unusually for a children's garden, Cristina has kept the colour palette calm and muted using mainly green and white as here with *Stipa tenuissima* and *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Sturburst', with only *Rudbeckia hirta* 'Herbstsonne', which forms umbrella-like structures above the heads of the children, providing a burst of yellow.



Above (from left)

Miscanthus sinensis 'Kleine Silberspinne' is one of many grasses used in the raised beds of the garden. It is placed in the middle of a flower bed where its fluffy appearance gives lightness, movement and a touch of wildness. Throughout, Cristina has used plants that will change with the seasons.

Many of the plants were chosen for their tactile and sensory qualities. At the edges of the beds within easy reach, Cristina planted lamb's ear, *Stachys byzantina*, for its velvety foliage that encourages the children to reach out and touch it, as well as scented Mediterranean plants such as rosemary.

To cover the metal arches that dominate the roof area, Cristina has used self-clinging, small-leaved Virginia creeper, *Parthenocissus tricuspidata* 'Veitchii', which over time will cover the metal adding to the green feel of the space.

CHILD'S PLAY

For the roof garden of Clorofilla Kindergarten in central Milan, designer Cristina Mazzucchelli has used a range of wonderfully tactile plants to engage the curiosity of young minds

WORDS LIA LEENDERTZ PHOTOGRAPHS MATTEO CARASSALE / GAP PHOTOS

The Italian phrase for kindergarten, *nido scuola*, translates as 'nest school', which sweetly captures the sense of nurturing and care that a school for children, from babies up to six years old should encompass. It was certainly a phrase that was at the forefront of Cristina Mazzucchelli's mind when she was asked to design a garden for Clorofilla Kindergarten in central Milan, a nursery which, as its name implies, has put nature and an understanding of plants and botany as a central feature.

"The brief was to make a garden where children could freely move and play and where above all they felt safe and were safe," says Cristina. "But also to make it a place where the kids could be stimulated by plants, and where the plants were to be the interface for play and learning." The space is the roof terrace of a building that has been

a nunnery, a theatre and a cinema in previous incarnations, and is surrounded by private apartments on all sides and dominated by a series of arches. "I immediately thought that I wanted to create a green circle that would envelop the children in plants."

To this end Cristina has designed a ring of greenery around the whole garden, and planted up the arches that span the site. "The arches are a major part of the architecture and when I first visited the site they dominated it," says Cristina. "But they also suggested a rhythm. I planted them up with self-clinging *Parthenocissus tricuspidata* 'Veitchii', which will eventually turn them green all over."

The garden was created by a series of raised beds, with pastel-coloured wooden paths between and little steps for the children to sit on. The height of the beds is important for inquisitive little people, and was carefully calculated. "The raised beds prevent the plants from being



Creating privacy screens with raised beds

"Private apartments surround the garden, and the children needed privacy from them, just as the residents needed privacy from the kids," says designer Cristina Mazzucchelli. She created a ring of raised beds all around the outside of the garden, and then filled them with shrubs and small trees, including *Osmanthus*, *Phillyrea*, *Rhaphiolepis*, *Philadelphus*, *Cotinus coggygria* and *Escallonia*. She purposely looked to the Mediterranean, where many of these plants grow on its shallow soils and in very dry conditions, which meant that they would thrive on a shallow depth of soil in the garden's raised beds. "But they are also large shrubs, and so they have been able to create exactly the level of privacy we needed, as well as adding to the sense of a circle of green surrounding the children. At the base of these she has added other smaller plants including sedges, agapanthus and *Stipa tenuissima*. "They all need very little soil to grow in, but adding them in has created the illusion of depth, where in fact the beds are fairly narrow."

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Clockwise from above left

The steps were necessary as a result of a difference in ground level but covering them in wood and surrounding them with planters meant Cristina created multiple small, green, welcoming and protected niches that small children could navigate. The children feel "embraced by plants" when in these areas, she says.

The massed flowering stems of *Calamintha nepeta* 'Blue Cloud' provide a joyous scented and sensory experience for those small enough to be enveloped by them.

Agastache foeniculum 'Alabaster' has liquorice-scented pale flowers that fit in with the delicate pastel-coloured theme. The children can watch the flowers develop, bloom and die down over the course of the year.

▷ trampled by the kids, and they create a depth of soil that we wouldn't otherwise have. But they also bring the plants up to children's height." Into those beds Cristina planted a selection of plants that will draw the children to interact with them.

"Some of the plants are in there for texture: we have *Stachys byzantina*, which feels like velvet. There are also flowers in these beds and scented plants such as rosemary and sage that the children can rub and sniff. And then there are beds of edible plants, which the kids pick and take to the nursery kitchens, and so they teach them how the food they eat grows."

The teachers at Clorofilla make full use of the plants in the beds, often using them for teaching about how seeds are formed and using the leaves on light tables that illuminate them from below, showing the children the veins. Cristina's design has created many intimate nooks where children can sit and talk, but it also has a maze-like quality and when their energy is high, the children can zoom safely around the beds.

The atmosphere of the garden and planting though is very green and very calm, a deliberate choice by Cristina. It was important to the brief that it not be planted entirely with evergreens and that it changed through the year. "I have put in lots of flowers, and plants that change with the seasons," she says. "The children spend lots of time out there and so they are in contact with this reality. It becomes integral."

However, Cristina was very controlled with her colour palette. "Traditionally, when a garden is made for kids, the colours are very strong – full reds and full pinks," she says. "When I created this garden I had two young kids of my own, and I had the feeling that kids really don't need to be over stimulated, so I chose lots of green and pastel-coloured flowers, lots of white, pale blue and some pink. The only bright colour is the rudbeckia, which I put in as a contrast."

The result is a garden that is educational, interesting, nurturing and beautiful. "Above all else I am always interested in harmony," says Cristina. "I wanted to create a place where the nursery's teachers could easily pass on their passion for plants to the children, and I am confident I have done that. But in addition to this the garden is harmonious, tranquil, even poetical, and the kids really enjoy being in it." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Cristina's work at cristinamazzucchelli.com