

A scenic landscape photograph of a pond. The pond is filled with water, reflecting the sky and surrounding greenery. In the foreground, there are tall grasses and a large green plant. The middle ground is dominated by a dense row of purple flowers, likely Salvia, growing along the edge of the pond. In the background, there is a green field with a wooden fence and two cows grazing. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

The world at your feet

Hyde House, Buckinghamshire

Steven Desmond explores a modern country garden that combines elements of the Orient and the Continent in an intuitively English way

Photographs by Marianne Majerus



Preceding pages Through a haze of grasses and herbaceous perennials, the eye is led across the rectangular pond to the pastoral world of the park.

Right The flowing shapes of the planting in the herb garden spread across intricate path surfaces



THE traveller to Hyde House trundles up the hill from High Wycombe, lifting his hat to Disraeli's ghost walking in his German Forest at Hughenden, on past Great Missenden and onto the plateau approaching Chesham. The house is fleetingly spotted from the road at the end of its straight drive. Turning in, we draw along this drive, lined with young limes, with the poorly horse chestnuts of an earlier avenue behind, and the nascent splendour of a huge young wildflower meadow behind them. It does seem that we are witnessing the beginning of the end of horse chestnuts in Britain, failing under the twin-pronged attack of weeping canker and overwhelming leaf-miner attack.

Hyde House is a neat Georgian box with a columned portico and balustraded roofline, and a three-gabled wing dated 1929 extending away to the east in quite a different style. Our friend Mr Disraeli, the personification of political ambition, was here for a short time before he settled at Hughenden. For a while after the Second World War, the place was used as a school, before the dismal spectre of divided ownership descended in 1965. The present owners, arriving in 2000, have made it back into a family home, with a developing garden to suit.

Most of the action is to be found on the south side, where a broad, paved terrace, framed in herbaceous planting, looks out across a big lawn

‘The lawn is separated from the pasture by a modern ha-ha. They’re making a comeback,’

sloping barely perceptibly down towards a little park of pasture flowers with specimen trees still young enough to be in their timber guards. The whole view is framed in a thick woodland edge, so that this encloses the entire view, with little suggestion of anything beyond—a private world. The lawn is separated from the pasture by a modern ha-ha, gently curving and faced in brick, only visible, of course, from without. The ha-ha, it seems, is making a comeback.

Returning to the core of the garden, we come next to one of the more recent features, a large, rectangular pool, again framed in herbaceous planting of flat-headed *Sedums*, swathes of *Nepeta* and that plant of magnetic mystery *Perovskia atriplicifolia*. When this plant is happy, it's wonderful, forming tall, blue and grey clumps of considerable elegance and dignity. Quite often, I find it performs erratically, but, here, it is used to great effect, and seems content. It looks especially graceful among the tall grasses in the heath (rather than prairie) style invented by that unfailingly imaginative German giant Karl Foerster of Potsdam, whose

name really should be so much better known in this country, given that we see his influence everywhere without acknowledging it.

This style of planting, extensive and grouped for rhythmic effect rather than plantaholic fervour, often betrays the hand of the landscape architect rather than the horticulturist, so it's no surprise to learn that the project has been masterminded by Acres Wild, a Sussex-based partnership from a landscape background, turning their many skills to garden-making. I have always felt that the gardener and the landscape architect were two separate species of human being, inhabiting parallel worlds and certainly speaking mutually unintelligible languages, but, now and again, as is the case here, I hear a fruitful conversation taking place and see harmonious results. It can be done if the vital spark is present.

Beyond the pool, in a little world of its own, is the Japanese garden. It is, however, not at all like those typically Edwardian examples, laid out in the wake of the Anglo-Japanese exhibition at White City in 1910, and often tediously superficial. The Japanese garden here is not trying too hard to be 'authentic', but achieves a quiet respect for Oriental calmness and ritual form with sufficient nods to key ideas. Its star feature is certainly the pavilion, by Oliver Morgan architects, intended for swimming-pool accompaniment rather than tea ceremonies. This is a delicious structure with a broadly overhanging roof ➤

Facing page
The return view across the pond to the 1929 wing of the house, framed in drifts of *Salvia* and *Perovskia*



invisibly supported by largely glass walls, as if Walter Gropius were still among us.

The pavilion is fronted by a footpath of uncommon loveliness, paved in granite and basalt—it will be here in 1,000 years, when all else is dust—finished with a lovely grippy surface that must give confidence to wet-footed walkers. The square slabs break out prettily where they meet the adjacent lawn to a scattered chequerboard effect. The level lawn is framed and shaded by ingenious beds of clipped evergreens evoking a Japanese effect, without the usual slavish imitation of the half-understood, which is the downfall of so many ‘Japanese’ gardens. Drifts of



Above Selections from an orderly palette of form, texture and colour surround the pavilion. *Left* A scattering of pavers let into the lawn leads to the shelves and domes of greenery under taller trees and shrubs. *Below* Serving the swimming pool and its surroundings, the elegant, glass-walled pavilion by Oliver Morgan Architects, framed in planting with a nod to the Japanese

Sarcococca sail above low platforms of *Pachysandra* in green architecture of refreshing calmness. Some people think *Pachysandra* is boring. I’m not among them—I like plants that form neatly elegant evergreen ground cover, often in difficult conditions. But a reputation for dullness is hard to shake off, however convincing the evidence to the contrary.

On one side of the Japanese garden, ‘flowing’ away down the gentle slope, is the inevitable River of Life, crossed as ever by the broken bridge and studded with glittering boulders representing islands in the stream. All this, entirely free from the twin curses of earnestness and tweedom, forms a coolly restful setting for the admirable pavilion. All is carefully maintained by the two gardeners: a patient apprentice-trained Scotsman called Danny McGregor—no rabbit, surely, would venture into his domain—and

‘All this, entirely free from earnestness and tweedom, forms a restful setting,’

Portuguese Carlos. The collective result is first class.

Back at the entrance, we revisit the new meadow. This is on a grand scale. I welcome this, as ancient meadows are typically big enough to fill the field of vision, and I have many times had the pleasure of observing the scene in the third week in May in the Durham dales. The meadows are brand new from seed, and are still at the typical early stage of being almost completely white with ox-eye daisy, but a closer inspection reveals the greater delights yet to come in the form of the first flowers of the knapweeds, and the little rosettes of seedlings that will gradually assert themselves. All that will only come to pass, of course, if things are managed properly, but that can be expected at Hyde House if past form is any guide.

www.acreswild.co.uk
www.omarchitects.co.uk



