

Sussex-based designers Acres Wild have divided this large expanse of garden into a series of different areas without obscuring the overall view. A modern-looking pond is bordered by lush planting of grasses and tall perennials, while its flowing lines are echoed elsewhere by hedges of box, beech and holly

Having converted a group of barns into a home - in a large, featureless setting - its owner asked her designer to forge a sense of connection with the South Downs views, and make a garden in which she and her family could relax and party

CHARACTER FORMING



Five years ago, Debbie Roberts of design practice Acres Wild was invited to design a new garden in Hampshire. On her first visit she was struck by two things. First, the South Downs backdrop was extremely beautiful. Secondly, to call the site a blank canvas would be to underestimate the attractively textural quality of canvas. It was clear that the project was going to be a challenge. 'There really was nothing here,' recalls Debbie. 'Not only that, it was a very big bit of nothing, and the client wanted it all done in one go.'

The property was a newly converted cluster of barns, including a main house, two guest cottages, a pool barn, stables and assorted other small buildings, all set in three acres of flat, mown grass. 'When I first got here, even working out where to park your car and which door to knock at was a major challenge,' recalls Debbie.

Serendipity had led the client to Acres Wild – she typed 'garden designer' into Google and followed its leads. But when she interviewed the designers on her shortlist, she knew instantly that Debbie was the one. 'So many of the others wanted to tell me about their vision for the space,' she explains. 'Debbie wanted to know how I was going to use it.'

The brief was to produce a modern country garden for the client, her family, dogs and horses, with plenty of outdoor entertaining space. 'It was always clear that this garden was going to be thoroughly used, not just looked at,' Debbie says. 'So it was really important to develop something that worked practically.'

Taking the sweeping perimeter of the paddock as her starting point, Debbie set to work dividing the space into a series of distinct but interconnected

THE BRIEF WAS TO PRODUCE A MODERN COUNTRY GARDEN WITH PLENTY OF SPACE FOR OUTDOOR ENTERTAINING

ANTICLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

An unstructured meadow contrasts with the hummocks of a cloud-pruned box hedge. A sinuous wooden bench by Tom Smith is enclosed by ornamental grasses, lavender and perovskia. Near the house, a series of circular, brick seating areas is surrounded by a romantic mixture of white 'Winchester Cathedral' roses, box balls, nepeta and *Stipa gigantea*. Under its transparent plumes sits a large 'Beehive' water feature from Pots and Pitthoi

gardens. An intimate private garden was tucked between the main kitchen and a glorious, stilted granary. An orchard was laid out in front of the stables, and a games lawn and party terrace were earmarked for the area in front of the pool barn.

Today, visitors to the house are guided up a long drive lined with cherry trees, past a sweep of lavender, into the main courtyard. The entrance to the house is heralded by a quartet of *Pyrus calleryana* 'Chanticleer', each growing out of a square, brick-edged bed. Four crisp box balls in large terracotta planters stand sentinel outside the front door.

'That's the thing about this house,' says Debbie. 'Everything has to be on a grand scale. In most places you'd have two box balls, but that wouldn't have done here. We needed much, much more.'

The 'more is more' philosophy can, in less skilled hands, lead to an exhaustingly bity planting scheme. Here, although there are huge numbers of plants (5,000 went in during the first phase of planting alone), the plant palette is relatively restricted.

Holm oaks were used for evergreen screening, with cherries, rowans and whitebeams for avenues, borders and feature trees. Each garden area around the house was given a distinct character. Roses and scented plants fill the area just outside the family kitchen. Small 'fields' of lavender and barley make an unusual but effective seasonal feature to the south of the house. Elsewhere, willow and dogwoods, ornamental grasses and tall perennials provide year-round interest.

The obvious choice for the necessary half kilometre of hedging would have been yew, which is cheap and long





lived. However, the client is a keen rider and, as yew is highly toxic to horses, Debbie had to go back to her plant catalogues. 'In the end, we used a combination of box, beech and holly that worked really well,' she says.

The choice may have been dictated by practical requirements, but the result is artlessly stylish. The earth berms at the perimeter of the property are another example of this. Installed to screen a footpath beyond the boundary, these grassy ridges were flat and featureless before Debbie took them in hand.

'Our landscape contractors, The Outdoor Room, used diggers to resculpt the earth, using what they could see over there as their guide,' she says, indicating the purple-tinged mass of the rolling South Downs. Now the berms are a positive element, keeping the perimeter soft and reinforcing the garden's links with the exquisite views beyond.

Sculpture of a more conventional type is another distinct feature here. The client is a great enthusiast and part of the original brief included provision for her growing collection. Pieces range from the sublime simplicity of a sinuous timber beam, by local sculptor Alison Crowther, that rolls along the grass of the games lawn, to the delicate prettiness of a giant silver allium by Ruth Moilliet that rings and ripples when you touch it. There is also a touch of humour in the form of two ceramic sheep by Jonathan Barrett-Danes that stare balefully in the direction of a secluded garden bench.

Essentially, fun is the key to this design. The garden adjacent to the swimming pool is designed specifically for high-summer parties when the client's three daugh-

THE SPACE IS DIVIDED INTO SEPARATE BUT INTERCONNECTED GARDENS, EACH WITH A DISTINCT CHARACTER OF ITS OWN

ANTICLOCKWISE FROM TOP Two holm oaks (*Quercus ilex*) frame the circular dining area, viewed through a mass of hazy *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire' and *Stipa gigantea*. A spacious deck hovers over the 50-metre-long pond, surrounded by a mixture of grasses. It provides a tranquil view over the water to the rest of the garden. A band of native bulrushes, *Typha latifolia*, screen one end of the pond

ters are home from university. There's plenty of grass for dancing; the tractor barn doubles up as an outdoor bar; and on a silvered teak recliner by the door to the pool, a forgotten bottle of Ambre Solaire lies as a testament to the pleasurable good use this garden enjoys.

The planting scheme here is a 'hot' combination of oranges and reds, shot through with yellow, designed to peak in high summer. Dahlias, helianthus and *Kniphofia* 'Alcazar' sizzle in the twilight of warm summer evenings.

In contrast to this riot of colour, the rest of the garden is rather more subdued. A 50-metre-long pond in the main garden to the west of the house is backed by an expanse of reeds, *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Rosea' and rosy pink plumes of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Nippon'. From the water, an uninterrupted sweep of grass leads back up to the main dining terrace by the house. Here, wedge-shaped beds are crammed with a dense mass of low ornamental grasses, caryopteris and lavender, above which a triumphant plume of *Stipa gigantea* sways gently in the breeze as an edging of mounded thyme struggles to contain this exuberance.

'This is the grown-up end of the garden,' says Debbie, 'so we very much wanted to focus on the surroundings. I think that's something to do with having been trained in landscape architecture. It is drummed in to you that what you are doing is creating a setting.'

Within this garden, she has certainly achieved that sense of geographical context, but she has also created the perfect setting for the life of one particular family as well □
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