

Hedges give the house a sense of privacy and shelter, but towards its margins the garden seems to merge into the surrounding farmland.



**IN BRIEF**

**WHAT** Nursted Barns, a private, contemporary garden surrounding converted stone farm buildings.  
**WHERE** Hampshire, overlooking the South Downs.  
**SIZE** About 2½ acres.  
**SOIL** Poor, chalky, well-drained.  
**CONDITIONS** Windy, exposed.  
**FEATURES** Pond, sculpture, hedges, winter planting.  
**GARDEN PLAN** See page 41.

# Rural bliss

Once nothing but open fields lay beyond the back door of Ann Black’s new home – but now there’s a family garden perfectly in keeping with its South Downs location.  
Words James Alexander-Sinclair, photographs Leigh Clapp

country garden

**LEFT** Beech and box hedges divide the large garden into more intimate spaces, in this view over the lake towards mature trees on the northern boundary.  
**BELOW LEFT** The dark-stemmed dogwood *Cornus alba* 'Kesselringii' stands out against bright stems of *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire' in the Sculpture Space, where the planting is designed for winter appeal. In the same area, Ruth Moilliet's stainless steel allium is encircled by a ring of the grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldschleier' (**BELOW RIGHT**).

The South Downs are pretty impressive in a rather restrained, English way. They roll voluptuously across Sussex and Hampshire, sometimes covered in short, sheep-cropped grassland and other times by ancient woodland. Above them the sky is expansive and, on a good day, gleaming blue. Hills have always cast a spell on people: the urge to climb them or to run pell-mell down their grassy slopes is a temptation to which we have all succumbed. Sometimes, however, when gardening in the shadow of extreme natural beauty it is tempting to give up and say “OK, nature, you win, we’ll just look at *you*.” The skill is to make a garden that enhances the seemingly unimprovable: tricky, but possible, as is shown in the gardens of Nursted Barns in Hampshire.

In the beginning it was the blankest of blank canvases; a set of farm barns with fields stretching away for miles towards the lumbering Downs. Ann and Tom Black moved into the newly converted barns about six years ago and, after staring at the view for a while, Ann realised that they needed some help and turned to Debbie Roberts at Acres Wild. “I spoke to a few designers but she

was the one who was most interested in how we would use the garden,” explains Ann. “Once we had decided that Debbie was the best person for the job we let her get on with things.”

**Spaces for entertaining**

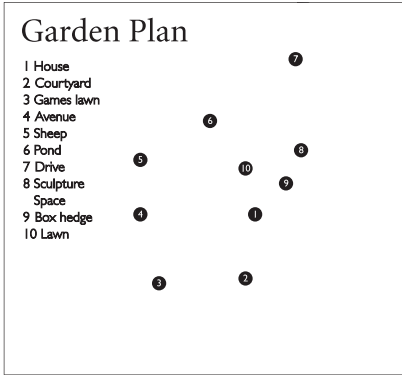
The garden consists of a series of “ripples”. Immediately surrounding the house are the entertaining areas: a big terrace facing the view surrounded by large swathes of planting. A garden by the kitchen encircled by *Quercus ilex* – “the central holm oak was the first thing we planted – before anything else was built,” remembers Debbie. “Ann wanted something to make the house a little less exposed.” A relatively minimal entrance court consists of subtle lines of stone (which discourages cars from edging too close), rolls of *Hebe rakaiensis* against the walls and four Callery pears, *Pyrus calleryana* ‘Chanticleer’.

A bit further out is a large circular lawn edged with deep late-summer borders – “the fun part of the garden, for running around and parties” – as well as some transitional areas whose planting varies from long grass to swathes of winter barley and a series of little seating

areas, each enclosed by planting. Ann wanted places throughout the garden where she could display sculptures – including one of Ruth Moilliet’s stainless steel allium heads (pictured below right) and a pair of fabulous ceramic sheep made by Jon Barrett-Danes (opposite, below). There are also a number of good benches: it is important to realise that you are going to spend much more time looking at garden furniture than sitting on it, so they should always be beautiful. Ann has commissioned individual pieces including a wave bench (pictured overleaf) and seats by David Savage and Alison Crowther.

**Places to explore**

The next ripples consist of sweeps of sculptural box hedge in which each plant struts independently of its fellows: less like a clipped hedge than a slightly disorderly queue. These are followed by a wide arc of water: each end is cunningly concealed by a flick of hedge so it looks as if it sweeps through the garden like a bend in the river. An elegant deck edges into the water, providing another viewing point. The final ripple before the eye canters off into open country is a deep and ▶



**ABOVE LEFT** Southeast of the house lies the Avenue, in which parallel rows of cherry trees are surrounded by a beech hedge, sheltering a long lawn.  
**ABOVE RIGHT** Copper-coloured leaves remain attached to the beeches throughout the winter.  
**RIGHT** Ceramic sheep by the sculptor Jon Barrett-Danes ruminant over an oak bench by Gaze Burvill, which Ann says is perfect for family photos.

