

# Reference points for a country life

*Norney Wood,  
Godalming, Surrey*

In the wooded Surrey Hills, a new garden has been made with remarkably faithful references to the area's *grande dame* of gardening, Gertrude Jekyll, reveals Kathryn Bradley-Hole

Photographs by Marianne Majerus

CREATING a garden more or less from scratch while carrying out extensive alterations and refurbishments to the house has certain advantages. The two can be planned and made together, for their mutual benefit.

This is what has triumphantly happened in recent years at Norney Wood, a substantial early-20th-century house, which the owners bought in 2006, having discovered it through an advertisement in *COUNTRY LIFE*. As keen gardeners, much of their attention was focused on the grounds from the outset and their interest in recycling and taking an ecological approach could be fully incorporated into the works. So, for example, a mile and a half of pipework has been laid under the new garden to provide ground-source heating in their home; rainwater off the house roof is channelled directly into huge, underground cisterns, offsetting much of their water requirement.

You wouldn't know all that by looking at it today, however. As the photographs show, the garden is of fresh and accomplished design, and, at the owners' request, draws inspiration from the much admired Arts-and-Crafts designs of the Lutyens and Jekyll partnership, >

The upper storey of the 'Thunder House', which terminates a path lined with *Nepeta racemosa* Walker's Low, *Stachys byzantina* and the David Austin rose named Cottage Rose







The roses include *The Generous Gardener* (on the obelisk), and *Eglantyne*, planted with *Nepeta racemosa* Walker's Low and *Geranium nodosum*

which itself had emerged and flourished in this part of Surrey a century ago.

Moreover, the COUNTRY LIFE book *Gardens for Small Country Houses*, by Gertrude Jekyll and Lawrence Weaver (1912), provided photographic reference points for the owners, which they discussed in detail at the outset with garden designers Ian Smith and Debbie Roberts of Acres Wild, whom they had engaged many years earlier to make their previous, smaller garden, in nearby Pyrford. The approach has been to reinforce the old-fashioned feel of this traditional area, drawing on the Surrey vernacular with its use of local sandstone pavings and dark ironstone.

From the Elstead road, a driveway cuts through mature trees to reach the house, where parking and courtyard areas were broadened and remade, leading round to the south-east-facing rear elevation, where an apron of smooth lawn provides a clean, open setting, sheltered by old-oak and Scots-pine woods. Down the lawn's western side, a generous turf path runs through an avenue of pleached limes, halfway down which a rustic path with railway sleeper steps leads westwards in a gentle incline up to the main woods.

East and south of the lawn, the land drops away dramatically, helping to conceal a tennis court (to the east) and adjacent small kitchen

garden, and making a surprise of a series of steps leading down to a centrally aligned water garden, complete with Lutyens-ey rill. Most of these areas are beautifully bordered with traditional English country garden plants, particularly shrub roses, lavenders, cranesbills, alliums and catmint. The effect is as soothing and fragrant as any garden has a right to be.

'At the far end of the kitchen garden, where the north and west walls join at an uneven angle, stands a little building—a raised gazebo,' wrote Gertrude Jekyll in *Gardens for Small Country Houses*. 'From inside the garden its floor-level is gained by a flight of steps that wind up with one or two turns. Its purpose



Above: Just west of the main lawn is the striking lime avenue, with underplantings of hellebores, cranesbill geraniums and *Allium x hollandicum* Purple Sensation



Above: A view down the lower garden with its formal rill and terminating loggia, which includes a fireplace and chimney stack. Below: The south-east-facing terrace beside the house provides dining opportunities and an invitation to explore the garden further



is partly to give a fitting finish to a bare-looking piece of wall and partly to provide a look-out place over the fields and the distant range of chalk hill to the north; for the region of the house and garden is so much encompassed by woodland that there is no view to the open country. The little place is most often used when there is thunder about, for watching the progress of the storm, and an incised stone on the garden side bears its name of "Thunder House".

The charming 'Thunder House' idea so enchanted the owners that, having a similarly wooded and enclosed outlook, except where the land drops away to the south, it became imperative to them that a similar sort of loggia in the Jekyll style should be built at the end of the garden path running along the east





side of the lawn. And further flourishes in the Lutyens/Jekyll idiom are seen in the stairway, water rill and a distant loggia in the lower garden, all carefully made by local craftsmen to Acres Wild's specifications.

Around such formal areas, rough grass and tree-dappled glades are the haunt of woodpeckers, nuthatches and owls, and an informal wildlife pond has been excavated at the lowest level, replacing what had become overgrown thickets of laurel and rampant rhododendron. Being fairly recently dug over, this is also where it's easy to spot the little pieces of ironstone that regularly surface whenever a spade or fork is plunged into the ground.

Jekyll, again, has been the guiding light in how to make best use of them. 'Some of the most interesting methods of paving are those that are peculiar to a district—that grow directly out of the employment of some local product that has stimulated inventive use from past ages,' she wrote. 'There are a few square miles in West Surrey where the hard sandstone called Bargate stone is quarried. A quite different kind of stone, largely composed of iron, also occurs in small pieces close to the ground-level. Many of these, weather-washed for ages, are of a form that presents one or two sides or ends with a flat surface. A typical stone would be three to four inches in length, an inch wide and three inches deep. For hundreds of years they have been used by the

**Above: The 'Thunder House' and the pond of the lower garden, looking back towards the house. Right: A shady courtyard on one side of the house has been redesigned to include a square tank and a bank of mature rhododendrons runs behind the wall**



country people, set on edge, as a "pitched" paving, often with a deeper kerb of the hard sandstone... Sometimes they were set in patterns and are so used now, with guiding lines of the yellowish sandstone and a filling of the purplish black iron-stone.'

Her guidance in these matters can be seen in numerous parts of the garden, on patterns bedded into the terraces and in the floor of the 'Thunder House', which reveals a partial copy of an ironstone floor that Jekyll laid in her own summer house at Munstead Wood, just four miles away, as the crow flies.

Ironstones easily lift out of the soft, sandy topsoil of the area but, although it's a pleasure to handle as far as spadework goes, the ultra-free-draining nature of sand, which so rapidly leaches nutrients and

moisture, is a drawback, says the designer, Ian Smith. 'What topsoil was available was retained and lots of organic matter needed to be added—largely 'green waste' compost to bulk up the soil and aid water retention. We also specified a water-retaining polymer (broadleaf P4) to help retain moisture, and, of course, there is irrigation from the water-harvesting system to help things get established.'

*Norney Wood, Elstead Road, Shackleford, Godalming, Surrey. There are no National Gardens Scheme open days for the garden this year, but there will be in 2014. Private group visits can be arranged by writing to the head gardener or emailing [norney.wood@btinternet.com](mailto:norney.wood@btinternet.com). For more about Acres Wild, visit [www.acreswild.co.uk](http://www.acreswild.co.uk)*