

Dense planting and cedar decking give the garden around the house an intimate and relaxing feel



A touch of the tropics

Nearly 10 years ago the owners of this East Sussex garden commissioned a garden design team to create a tropical planting style using hardy plants. How has it fared in that time? **Chris Young** pays a visit. Photography by Ian Smith

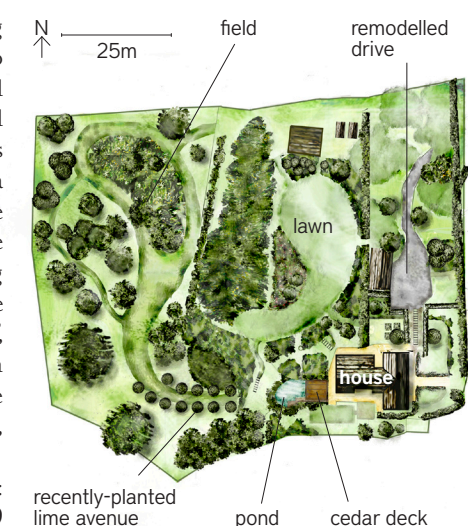
TO CHANGE A GARDEN substantially takes quite a leap of faith: to say 'yes' to the excavators coming in and digging up part of your lawn; agreeing to move an existing pond and have a new one built; sanctioning the removal of some healthy, but ordinary shrubs and conifers to make way for a far more exciting planting scheme.

But it was exactly this sort of large-scale vision that Colin and Gerry Webb (below) needed for their 1ha garden in East Sussex.

"There was nothing inherently wrong with the garden when we moved here 10 years ago," says Colin, "but it had a few beds

dotted among areas of lawn. It wasn't anything exciting." Colin (the keener gardener, who has recently completed the RHS Advanced Certificate in Horticulture) particularly wanted to have a vibrant garden: large-leaved plants giving a tropical feel near to the house, with a more natural, woodland-type planting palette spreading out into the further parts of the plot. As a hobbyist gardener, and enjoying retirement in this new house, Colin knew he could not undertake such a change by himself, so in 1999 enlisted the design services of Ian Smith and Debbie Roberts of Acres Wild, one of the country's leading garden design teams, based in West Sussex.

The design focused on three main areas: making a new front garden and drive; ►749



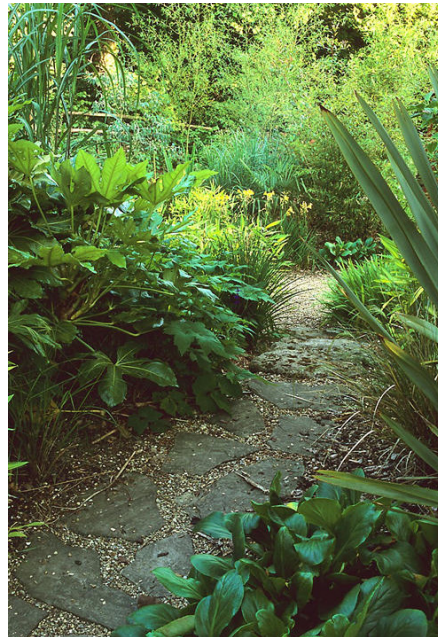
COLIN WEBB

Looking back to Colin and Gerry Webb's East Sussex house, the lush green fronds of *Matteuccia struthiopteris* in the foreground give contrast to *Gunnera tinctoria*, different hostas, *Phormium* and rhododendrons

▽ 'CAPTURING' AND USING LIGHT

One of the most charming traits of this garden is the way light constantly changes the overall view. The whole back garden is surrounded by oak, beech and birch woodland, but as the sun rises and filters down into the site, shards of light play and add their own dimension to the space.

In early evening (below) the sun highlights swaying bamboos and lower-level planting on the left, which then contrast with purple-bronze spikes of *Phormium tenax* Purpureum Group, behind it large-leaved *Gunnera tinctoria* and, by the deck, *Hosta fortunei* var. *aureomarginata*.



△ LIVING WITH THE DESIGN

One of the main successes of this Acres Wild garden design is the interaction that people have with the planting. Not only can visitors walk across the pond, on the cedar decking, but as they continue the path turns into a mixture of random paving slabs with gravel infill (above). Further down, it becomes just gravel and then, through the archway (left), a simple grass path continues into the more informal, natural-looking part of the garden.

The designers were also aware of Colin's eagerness to learn from, and develop, the garden himself – a strong sense of ownership they are keen for clients to embrace. As a result, Colin has planted some of his favourite plants, 'including *Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy', *Catalpa bignonioides*, *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Frisia', and *Daphne bholua* 'Peter Smithers' – the latter smells wonderful in winter as we step out of the back door into the garden,' he says.

△ CREATING DENSE PLANTING

To ensure that the desired tropical style was fully realised, Ian and Debbie planted densely, and used a variety of leaf shape, form and colour to make a definite impact.

Nowhere is this more evident than along the side and back of the pond (above): in the foreground, the whites of *Hosta fortunei* var. *aureomarginata* and flowering *Astilbe* 'Diamant' link together; yellow-flowered *Hemerocallis* 'Golden Chimes' and *Primula florindae* harmonise with the yellowy leaves of *Phormium* 'Duet'; and at the back the bold, wide leaves of *Gunnera tinctoria* contrast with the taller, flowing foliage of grass *Miscanthus sinensis* cultivars 'Gracillimus' and 'Morning Light'.

As many of these plants are herbaceous perennials, this summer view is substantially different in winter; but for Colin and Gerry, such seasonal change is an essential part of enjoying and experiencing the garden.



As you walk through the array of textured and shapely foliage, an archway leads you into a more natural and open part of the garden

replanting the side garden; and transforming the main garden at the back of the house. 'Colin was keen to use lots of large-leaved plants that give a tropical feel,' says Ian, 'so it was important to establish the areas for the plants and the hard materials that would work with them.' By removing a small existing pond, and creating a much larger one with a deck overhanging it (and adjoining bog area), dramatic plants such as *Phormium tenax* and *P. cookianum* cultivars, *Gunnera tinctoria*, *Trachycarpus fortunei*, *Paulownia tomentosa* and *Fatsia japonica* have been used to strong effect. Seasonal additions include bright red *Crocsmia* 'Lucifer', glossy *Canna* hybrids and ornamental gingers.

As well-known staples of tropical-type planting, the plants have enjoyed successful growth since they were planted in February 2001. With Colin's passion and interest, maintaining the garden has been relatively simple; indeed his enjoyment from it has meant that he has added many new plants since, and started to develop this style further into other areas. The result is a garden nestled in, and hidden from, the East Sussex countryside, giving a lush and planterly feeling to a private corner.

Perhaps the biggest compliment to both designers and owners is the fact that this in no way feels like a 'designed', bought-in garden. It is a real garden, loved and cared for by owners with passion and an interest in making it what they want. Using the talents of Ian and Debbie to get them started was probably the best decision Colin and Gerry ever made. ■

Chris Young is Deputy Editor of *The Garden*

i Colin and Gerry Webb's garden is not open to the public

DESIGN OVER TIME

The main part of the back garden that changed was the bank of conifers, rhododendrons and azaleas **1**. Everything was removed (except for the existing steps) and a new pond was dug **2**. Designers Ian and Debbie have a strong belief in using local materials where possible, so sandstone boulders were chosen from nearby Midhurst.

The planting plan was agreed with clients Colin and Gerry Webb in February 2001, and by summer that year all plants were in and establishing **3**. Just seven years later, the profusion of foliage shape, colour and texture is clear to see **4**.



1 Summer 1999: the original, conifer and shrub border



2 Late winter 2000: pond is dug and new border set out



3 Summer 2001: planting finished and starting to flower



4 Late spring 2008: established dense planting