

"Our vibrant acers  
catch the eye"

This leafy garden is a fusion of Japanese style and Belgian formality. The garden's designers, Ian Smith and Debbie Roberts, explain their approach

COLOUR POP Startling red acer 'Bloodgood' leaps out against the evergreen backdrop. These slow-growing trees have been strategically placed round the garden, enticing you to explore





**IN THE GARDEN WITH...**  
Ian Smith & Debbie Roberts

**NEAR** Ightham Mote, Sevenoaks, Kent  
**GARDEN SIZE** About 2 acres  
**SITE** Shaded woodland  
**SOIL** Free-draining sand; acidic  
**FEATURES** Mature beech woodland; informal and formal lawns; swimming pool; rose garden with pleached lime trees and box-edged beds; Japanese zen garden with water feature and lantern  
**CONTACT** Ian and Debbie for design commissions by email at [enquiries@acreswild.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@acreswild.co.uk)



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**A**s woodland gardens go, this chic and shady example in Kent is particularly enticing. Rather than let the garden become overrun by trees and brambles, owners Kym and Olivier Herregods called on the services of Acres Wild to create a woodland garden with a number of stylish twists.

"The garden took three years to create, in three main phases," explains Ian Smith at Acres Wild. "The clients loved the unusual setting and wanted us to work with it to enhance its woodland character, but at the same time make a usable garden space for a growing family with three young boys. In particular they wanted a paved terrace that could act as an overspill dining area, a swimming pool where the boys could camp out, a veg plot with composting area, and paths to link the whole garden together."

One complication came from the fact the property lies in a unique geographical area

*"The tall trees and mossy carpet form a soothing green backdrop for the acers"*

**SOOTHING SCENES** (clockwise from top left) A cottage-style gate and stepping stones lead past laurels to views of scarlet acer 'Bloodgood'; the pleached limes add height above white roses and silvery lavender; hedges have been topiaried using Japanese niwaki techniques; the Japanese garden; a *tsukubai* basin; the rose garden with Lutyens bench

called the Greensand Ridge. "It means the soil here is very sandy, free-draining and acidic. Plants such as acers, ferns, azaleas and rhododendrons all thrive.

"Another thing that affected the design were all the lovely mature beech trees, which create a lot of shade. Under the trees, the grass struggles for want of light and is full of moss. Luckily the clients really love the atmosphere of their shady woodland and weren't at all worried about the moss."

In late summer the tall trees and mossy carpet form a soothing green backdrop for a series of vivid scarlet acers. "The high tree canopy casts dappled shade that's perfect for the acers," says Ian. "These lend their







*“The acers create vistas and catch your eye, drawing you around the garden”*

sculptural shapes to the garden and help to give the garden a focus, otherwise it could be quite minimalist. The acers create vistas and catch your eye, drawing you around the garden and encouraging you to explore.

“Owner Kym had lived and worked in Japan for a time and loved their approach to garden design,” says Ian. “She was keen for us to bring in some Japanese elements here, so we created a special, contemplative space with a granite lantern, tsukubai water basin, rocks and a meandering gravel path like a dried-up riverbed. We planted black ophiopogon, acers, evergreen azaleas and

ferns too. Ferns are a real favourite for a shady garden like this. They’re so easy to look after and always look lush and green. We often use our native hardy fern *Dryopteris filix-mas*, evergreen *Polystichum setiferum* and Japanese fern *Dryopteris erythrosora*, which takes on fabulous bronze tints in autumn.”

Japanese elements have been woven into other parts of the garden too – as stepping stones across the lawn and the shallow steps that lead up the gently sloping garden. “The stepping stones are rectangular, which isn’t strictly the Japanese way, but we like to pick up an idea like that and Westernise it to get a more sculptural form that blends well with the natural shapes around it.”

Closer to the house, Ian and his design colleague Debbie Roberts have created a formal rose garden. “Kym’s husband Olivier

**EYE CATCHERS** (clockwise from top left) The terrace leads onto a handsome ‘posh’ lawn, as opposed to the gloriously mossy sward in the foreground. The niwaki tree was bought from a specialist; limes frame views of raised veg beds; a sculptural sphere; the Japanese garden with mossy rocks and gravel; white rose ‘Iceberg’ **INSET** *Acer palmatum* leaves (L-R) ‘Sango-kaku’, ‘Viridis’ and ‘Bloodgood’

is Belgian and they’re huge fans of lawn, clipped box and herbaceous planting,” says Ian. “It’s actually quite a minimalist style, so it goes surprisingly well with the Japanese area and natural woodland.

“This formal part of the garden is aligned with the kitchen window,” says Ian. “For paving we chose Belgian Vande Moortel clay pavers, which are a nice, slim brick shape, with the rose beds framed by low box hedging. This is about the only area of the garden that enjoys sufficient sunlight to plant white roses, lavender and Japanese anemone ‘Honorine Jobert’.

“I think the key to any successful garden design comes from the creation of a ‘journey’. It’s good to identify views and think of ways to enhance them. I try to think about creating destinations within the garden. You can use plants to draw the eye and make it a more exciting experience.” 🌸

