



Acres Wild

When garden design duo Acres Wild received a brief for a wild garden in Sussex, they were delighted; untamed gardens are the type this team like best. Pam Brown discovers a wonderful, atmospheric garden full of shimmering movement.

Photographs by Peter Anderson



OPPOSITE: A GLIMPSE OF THE DOWNS FROM THE SITTING AREA THROUGH A CURTAIN OF PEROVSKIA, FENNEL AND BUDDLEIAS. ABOVE, LEFT: 'THE LOOKOUT' SEATING AREA PROVIDES A FOCAL POINT OF THE DESIGN – WHOSE THEME IS 'PROSPECT AND REFUGE'. ABOVE, RIGHT: GOLDEN PAMPAS GRASS *CORTADERIA SELLOANA* 'AUREOLINEATA' HAS BEEN USED TO GREAT SUCCESS THROUGHOUT THE GARDEN.

High above the flint-walled village of Rottingdean in Sussex, with the waters of the English Channel to one side and the rolling South Downs to the other, lies a windswept garden. Its setting presented the garden design team Acres Wild with more than the average mix of opportunities and challenges. The garden offers magnificent views over the surrounding countryside, but is itself highly visible from all around. "So," explains Debbie Roberts of Acres Wild, "it was especially important that it should connect with the landscape." Finding ways of making this connection work was crucial.

Acres Wild, alias landscape architects Debbie Roberts and Ian Smith, was commissioned by the owners in 1996 to create a garden on the upper part of the steeply sloping plot. The lower, flatter area next to the house already contained a traditional lawn and flowerbeds. Above, though, stretching nearly up to the windmill that stands at the top of the hill, was a wilderness. "There was nothing here at all, just a couple of sycamores and a hawthorn," says Debbie, "but the atmosphere was terrific." And the atmosphere – untamed downland overlaid with the mew of seagulls – was exactly what Debbie and Ian wanted to keep: the magic to weave into their

design. "That's what a garden is all about," explains Ian. "It's got to have a sense of place."

The design brief was minimal. Essentially, it was to be a wild garden, and wildness, as you might suppose, is what Acres Wild like to do best. Ian and Debbie are thoughtful and passionate advocates of working with the environment, using local and recycled materials, vernacular building styles and plants that cope happily with the conditions in which they are expected to grow. They have been working together ever since they graduated in 1988, after studying landscape architecture at Leeds Polytechnic.

"We didn't set out to do a native planting, but the conditions – chalky and coastal – gave us a distinct palette to work with," says Debbie. In turn, this palette naturally produced the colours and effects they were after. Echoes of the downland landscape are everywhere – waves of ripening corn in the honeyed, oaty tones of *Stipa gigantea* and *Cortaderia selloana* 'Aureolineata'; grey-green gleams of the sea in the foliage of euphorbias, lavenders, sages and santolinas, and the blue of a butterfly wing in the flowers of perovskia and caryopteris. "The grey-washed leaves of the sea buckthorn (*Hippophae rhamnoides*), which we planted as a first line of defence



ABOVE, LEFT: DENSE PLANTING OF *ALCHEMILLA MOLIS* AND *EUPHORBIA AMYGDALOIDES* VAR. *ROBBIAE* KEEP GARDEN MAINTENANCE TO A MINIMUM. ABOVE, RIGHT: *LAVANDULA ANGUSTIFOLIA* 'HIDCOTE' EDGES THE PATH TO THE WILD GARDEN. OPPOSITE: GREY-GOLD PLANTS BORDER THE GARDEN STEPS MADE FROM OLD RAILWAY SLEEPERS. NEXT PAGE: A VIEW OVER THE GARDEN TAKEN FROM THE TOP OF THE HOUSE.

against the salt winds, help to give the garden a shimmering quality. The grasses, too, give movement and that hazy, gauzy feel we wanted," Debbie says. At its peak in July and August, drenched in sunlight, the garden takes on a wonderful pale and sea-bleached look. Among the stipa and pampas grasses, they have planted buddleias with flowers of intense purple and blue, and mixed in with them the feathery plumes of bronze fennel. Hummocks of fleshy sedums commingle with the perovskias. "Those two have a very good relationship," says Debbie, "very pally."

On their first visit to the site, it struck Ian and Debbie that as well as giving glorious views, the hillside was also a place of shelter. They decided to work their design around the theme of 'prospect and refuge' and built, as its focal point, a seating area dubbed 'the lookout', another element which, like the planting, makes an important connection with the landscape. The shape of the lookout's clay-tiled roof not only perfectly matches the roof of the tall, narrow house but also the roof on the tower of St Margaret's church just beyond.

The designers did not want to alter the lie of the land, the shape of the slope. Rather than put in terracing, "we just flattened out small areas, the

places for sitting," says Debbie, "and put up retaining edges of oak to hold back the earth where necessary." The sitting and planting areas are linked with gently curving paths, incorporating reclaimed railway sleepers as steps, with a surface of pale limestone chippings. These produce the same soft sparkle as the chalky hillsides around. "The chippings are of mixed sizes. Just one size," says Ian, "would look unnaturally neat." At the sides of the paths, to give shape and structure, are rounded pillows of *Hebe rakaiensis*, *H. pimeleoides* 'Quicksilver' and that seaside stalwart *Brachyglottis* 'Sunshine', punctuated with occasional narrow pillars of yew and a columnar hornbeam, *Carpinus betulus* 'Fastigiata', which also help to define the space.

However carefully conceived a design may be, any new garden needs careful nurturing. At Rottingdean, Ian and Debbie found a like-minded spirit in gardener Judith Galloway, a wildflower enthusiast and poet in her spare time. She had just started working there one day a week when the garden was being planted. Captivated by the whole mood of the place, her one day soon stretched to five (or seven, you could say, since she has now also moved into a flat at the top of the house). "As designers, you feel as



though you have given birth to a garden," says Debbie. "But it's never your own. You leave it to someone else to take care of, and sometimes you go back with trepidation. But this garden has been brought up just the way we hoped."

After the initial planting and watering in, everywhere was heavily mulched to retain moisture on the free-draining slope, and mulching with home-made compost is still one of Judith's major jobs. She finds that by and large it precludes the need to water in summer. The soil does, however, quickly leach nutrients, and where necessary she uses seaweed extract or dried blood as a feed. With the excellent shelter provided by the buckthorns and some gorse bushes, the salty breezes do little damage. If the occasional shrub does show signs of scorch,

Judith prunes away the affected shoots, and new growth is quickly made.

Plants are renewed if they are ailing in any way or getting too long in the tooth. Longevity, unfortunately, is not a characteristic of some of the silver-leaved Mediterranean natives, and says Debbie, "after five or six years, shrubs such as santolinas are getting pretty elderly". There is room, too, for adjustments to be made. They plan to add white valerian (*Centranthus niber* 'Albus') among the bushes of *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote' that spill out over the path leading up into the garden. And the *Helictotrichon* also planted here may be replaced by *Elymus hispidus*, another, but much tougher, steely blue-grey grass.

The most important renewal project this year, though, has been the wildflower meadow. Set just



DESIGN

REVELATIONS

FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT ACRES WILD LANDSCAPE & GARDEN DESIGN

ACRES WILD



Debbie Roberts and Ian Smith trained in landscape architecture before setting up Acres Wild in 1988. The company offers a design and consultancy service for private gardens as well

as public and commercial landscape schemes. A typical Acres Wild design consists of bold underlying structures softened with full and naturalistic planting to reflect the character of the client, their home (or premises), and the wider landscape setting.

The team has worked on private gardens and estates throughout Sussex, Surrey and the southeast of England as well as public, commercial and community projects. Projects include: a wildlife garden for London & Edinburgh Insurance Head Office in Worthing; the Durrington cemetery extension for Worthing Borough Council; and an outdoor classroom for Hazelwick School, Crawley. Display gardens include the Life Cycles Garden at the 1992 Garden Festival Wales.

In 1999 Acres Wild design were awarded the British Association of Landscape Industries principal award for a private garden in Virginia Water, Surrey and the team has previously won the Phoenix Award for Memorial Garden Design.

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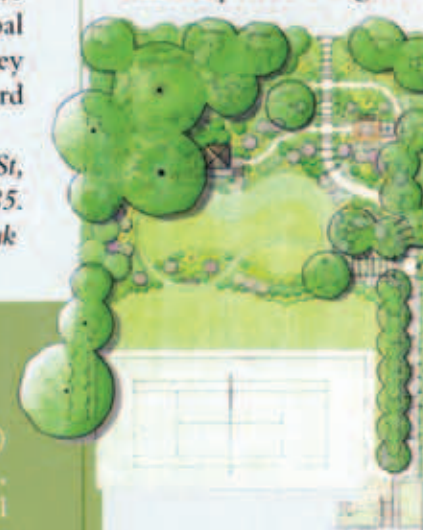
FURTHER READING

Creating Garden Ponds and Water Features (Harper Collins £15.99, 2001), is the first book written and photographed by the Acres Wild design duo and features ideas and inspirations for water gardens of all sizes.

INFLUENCES

"We take our influences directly from the landscape and try to capture the wider character and atmosphere of a place in the garden," say Debbie and Ian. "We aim to make the garden look as if it has always been there, with an inherent 'rightness' and harmonious sense of place, as if it was almost an inevitability that the garden has developed in that way." They both feel that the hand of the designer should not reveal itself too readily, but that the presence of an underlying order should be felt, sometimes almost unconsciously. "We do not impose on the landscape, but will use strong design principles and ideas to achieve our aims." The colours, textures and moods of the natural landscape are a big influence, but they don't attempt

merely to artificially imitate the natural landscape, enjoying the intersection and interplay between the hand of man and nature. Other inspirational influences are artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, who they first encountered when they were students in Leeds, and land artist Chris Drury – especially for his work in the Sussex landscape.



LEFT: THE PLAN FOR THE GARDEN NEAR ROTTINGDEAN IN SUSSEX.

in front of the lookout, the meadow's curved shape copies the contours of the downs behind. Despite low soil fertility, "the rye-grass had taken over completely," Judith says. "Its roots had got so matted and entangled through everything else that it was difficult to know what to do." She discovered the answer from David Howard, the Prince of Wales' head gardener at Highgrove. "I met him when he was visiting a neighbour and quizzed him for hours. He told me to dig out every trace of grass and start again using a mixture with plenty of yellow rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*) in it. It's a semi-parasite," she says, "that draws some of the strength away from the grass and helps keep it in order." This spring, as David Howard suggested, Judith removed some topsoil to reduce fertility further and sowed a mixture

containing scabious, agrimony and knapweed as well as the yellow rattle. She also raised wildflower seedlings separately in pots and added these to the meadow as small plants. Left-overs were planted into nearby borders to accentuate the natural, self-sown look.

Self-seeding is positively encouraged here, and oxeye daisies have scattered themselves over the lower part of the slope to create a spangling of white and yellow. "Plants often know where they'll grow best, and self-seeding allows the garden to develop its own dynamic," says Ian. It is, of course, just part of the ecological approach that underpins the whole way of gardening here – understanding plants' needs and what they will give in return – and this particular hillside shows just what pleasures and rewards it can bring.

SUPPLIERS

PLANTS

COBLANDS DESIGNER PLANTS (wholesale supplier)
Back Lane, Ivy Hatch, Igham, Sevenoaks,
Kent TN15 9AU. Tel 01732 885700; email
dp@coblans.co.uk; www.coblans.co.uk

BRITISH WILD FLOWER PLANTS

Burlington Gardens, 31 Main Road, North
Burlingham, Norfolk NR13 4TA. Tel 01603
716615; www.wildflowers.co.uk

GAZEBO

ENGLISH HERITAGE BUILDINGS

Coldharbour Farm Estate, Woods Corner, East
Sussex TN21 9LQ. Tel 01424 838643;
www.ehbp.com

KEY HERBACEOUS PLANT LIST

<i>Centranthus ruber</i>	<i>Salvia purpurea</i>
<i>Silene maritima</i>	<i>Euphorbia robbiae</i>
<i>Echium vulgare</i>	<i>Thymus x citriodorus</i> 'Silver Posie'
<i>Eryngium variifolium</i>	<i>Scabiosa caucasica</i>
<i>Sedum</i> 'Herbstfreude'	<i>Armeria maritima</i>
<i>Fragaria vesca</i>	<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>
<i>Iris</i> 'Jane Phillips'	<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i> 'Purpureum'
<i>Stachys lanata</i>	<i>Geranium sanguineum</i>