



Yours is the earth

A stone's throw from Rudyard Kipling's garden at Bateman's, this hill-top plot in the Sussex Weald seamlessly blends with its surroundings, displaying varied delights ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS RACHEL WARNE **WORDS** RICHARD ROSENFELD





A lightning gallop from Bateman's, Rudyard Kipling's place, up a hill, through the woods and you're here. And Kipling would've loved it. Not a time-warped Edwardian garden, but 27 different areas - the Zen garden, walled garden, orchard, terrace-cum-swimming pool... you name it. All arranged around a not-so-new, brand-new house.

How so? Debbie Roberts and Ian Smith, who run Acres Wild Garden Design, were commissioned to 'create a garden that looks like it has been there forever. Not too perfect. Everything weathered; evolved'. The garden at Brightling Down Farm surrounds a new house given a 16th-century look, with 200-year-old bricks and ancient beams, everything blending into the landscape.

The garden is buzzard-high in the Sussex Weald, 300ft up, wrestling with strong winds and clay. 'You can't change the soil,' Ian says, 'but you can improve it. We added drainage pipes and tons of organic matter, so the ground wasn't so heavy and sticky. Don't think clay is a nightmare - it isn't. It's packed with nutrients. Choose the right plants and they'll thrive.' When adding lavender, they knew exactly where to grow it: in the hot, dry tops of retaining walls. Problem solved.

The walled garden (the size of a tennis court) blocks the wind and is packed with vegetables in raised beds, herbs and fruit. I loved the flamboyant potager look: the 'Sungold' tomatoes with black-leaved, red-topped 'Bishop of Llandaff' dahlias and marigolds; the red chard with nasturtiums and kale; the fennel with dill and cornflowers; the sweetcorn, spouting tails of amaranthus and lettuce. This is stylish, ordered gardening, given a Lady's Day, an Ascot flourish. The eye keeps pinging around: purple chillies, fattening 'Brown Turkey' figs, and thymes popping out of the paving.

You would think that with 27 areas, the garden would be like Pinewood Studios. But the design flows, area to area, under arches, up avenues, then the terrace, the lawn, the orchard, all seamlessly. I loved the pergola, the Arts & Crafts pillars made from old tiles stacked up horizontally, adding an extra touch. And the swimming pool terrace, views frisbeeing clear of the valley, to the horizon, barnacled with hills and woods - everything gently low key.

And I loved the Japanese garden - bare, exquisite and simple. The flashing koi and styled evergreens, the mix of traditional Japanese ingredients such as rhododendrons, bamboo and box; and *Prunus lusitanica* and *Lonicera pileata* because they're feisty, shapely additions that thrive in these conditions and can easily be given 'the look'. The trick is grabbing a new aesthetic - evergreens, not flowers - and an elegant use of space. Forget the West's fixation of straight lines gunning at focal points. We need an Oriental box of tricks. ▶

PREVIOUS PAGE *Sedum 'Herbstfreude'*, *Aster x frikartii 'Mönch'* and *Stipa gigantea*. **THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT** *Pennisetum alopecuroides* and *Bergenia 'Bressingham White'*. **TOP RIGHT** *Sedum*, *Perovskia 'Blue Spire'* and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora 'Karl Foerster'*. **LEFT** Part of the water garden.





ABOVE LEFT Zinnias add a punchy splash of colour to the walled garden. **ABOVE RIGHT** Even the front lawn that lies alongside the driveway is alive with planting that relies on repetition of key plants to create a subtle rhythm of colour, height and texture. **BELOW** The sun terrace by the swimming pool is a calm mix of foliage from grasses, sedges and bamboo, including *Phyllostachys aurea*, *Pennisetum alopecuroides* and *Phormium tenax* Purpureum Group.

Other treats here include the water garden, pond-to-pond tipping downhill; 30 birches close-planted in random scatterings, 1-2m apart; and an amazing avenue of 24 horse chestnuts, which scales down towards the house to become a row of double white cherries, *Prunus avium* 'Plena'.

In autumn, the liquidambar, deciduous azaleas, acers, birches and *Nyssa sylvatica* are the stars. The tree bark adds to the mix, especially *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii*, looking like it's been sprayed with Tippex. *Betula nigra*, the river birch, adds fun shaggy and dangling bark, while lobster red is provided by dogwoods and grasses. Meanwhile, pennisetums, *Stipa gigantea*, miscanthus and molinias thread everything together, and are brilliant in a rural setting.

Gardening up here threw out some nifty surprises. 'We were pushing the boundaries,' Ian says, 'taking a risk with *Acer palmatum* and phyllostachys bamboos, because the sheltering plants hadn't matured and created the right conditions. But *Phyllostachys aurea*, which has a delicate leaf, didn't get flayed by the wind. It's a good choice because it's stiffly upright and doesn't escape and spread.'

Not everything went to plan. The meadow refused to take off - but they are notoriously tricky; HRH The Prince of Wales had to consult every horticultural big wig before his worked. And the rabbits and deer still cause mayhem. But when you want a garden that's part of the landscape, who cares? As Kipling once wrote: 'Gardens are not made by singing 'Oh, how beautiful', and sitting in the shade.' You have to work at them.

When Kipling got sick of tourists going 'Yoo-hoo, Mr Kipp-lingggg' over his flint wall at Rottingdean, he legged it quick to this ancient tangle of woods. A world within a world in clay. Electric and alive.

Brightling Down Farm opens on special occasions by appointment only. For more details, contact Ian Smith at Acres Wild. Tel: +44 (0)1403 891084. www.acreswild.co.uk



The notebook

Brightling Down Farm, on the southern side of the Sussex Weald, features a three-acre country garden. The site is open, exposed and windy, on the top of a hill, and the whole garden has heavy clay and is in full sun

SUPERSIZED PONDS

Go for size - make ponds big (*right*). You can line lakes with butyl rubber liner, made to order, just like for small domestic ponds, using an underlay to prevent any punctures. Avoid clay ponds, because they can dry and crack. Plants such as callitriche will oxygenate it, while lilies shade the surface, keeping the water clear. The marginals are planted in shingle and ballast.



IN FOCUS

This may be an informal country garden, but it still has strong bones and symmetry. The framed view into the walled garden (*above*) highlights two Italian pots, leading the eye on, with the shape of the low-cut box hedge building up to the arch. Ivy on the walls gives an instant well-worn look.

GO EAST

Japanese gardens need five things: restraint - avoid a busy look with scores of different varieties; a scattering of iconic ornaments - such as a granite lantern (*below*); asymmetry - paths do not lead direct to a focal point but bend and twist; a weathered, ancient look; and time, because you'll need to clip things into shape, and then maintain a subtle, naturalistic look.



EVERLASTING BEAUTY

Evergreens make a lasting impact. At Brightling Down Farm, clipped box in round organic shapes and straight-edged squares give a permanent structure to the gravel path near the house (*left*), which in autumn is softened by asters, sedum, lambs' ears (*Stachys byzantina*), *Erigeron karvinskianus* and large fountains of grasses.

DEBBIE & IAN'S TIPS

- **Choose plants for the site** - don't change the conditions to suit the plants. If you must grow something with special needs, such as camellias, grow in a tub with ericaceous soil.
- **Leave autumn seedheads.** They add interest and act as signposts of where the plants are - so you won't accidentally dig them up!
- **Give each area its own look.** That means you can move from area to area, and style to style, experiencing different atmospheres. Don't muddy the waters.
- **Make small spaces look bigger** by using big-leaved plants, such as fig trees and *Fatsia japonica*.
- **Use outside scenery.** If a neighbour has an amazing tree or attractive feature, don't block it: frame it, 'borrow' it. In the country, you can use low ornamental grasses or let the grass grow longer at your boundary, so it mimics the landscape beyond.



CONTACTS

GARDENS TO VISIT NEARBY

- **Bateman's** Rudyard Kipling's English country garden. Bateman's Lane, Burwash, East Sussex TN19 7DS. Tel: +44 (0)1435 882302. www.nationaltrust.org.uk
- **Great Dixter House and Gardens** Northiam, Rye, East Sussex TN31 6PH. Tel: +44 (0)1797 252878. www.greatdixter.co.uk

RECOMMENDED NURSERIES

- **Marchants Hardy Plants** The cognoscenti's nursery. Adjoining garden with borders. 2 Marchants Cottages, Mill Lane, Laughton, East Sussex BN8 6AJ. Tel: +44 (0)1323 811737. www.marchantshardyplants.co.uk
- **Merriments** Excellent range, with many unusual varieties. Hawkhurst Road, Hurst Green, East Sussex TN19 7RA. Tel: +44 (0)1580 860666. www.merriments.co.uk