



Line of beauty

Gail and Jonathan Hughes-Morgan wanted a traditional English country garden with water at its heart. With designer Ian Smith of Acres Wild at the helm of its transformation they achieved so much more

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In brief

Name Millwater.
What Award-winning, large country garden with a variety of water features, including a mill race.
Where Surrey.
Size Seven acres of ornamental gardens in a 13-acre estate.
Soil Free-draining sand.
Climate Generally temperate but prone to flooding in the areas around the lake.
Hardiness rating USDA 8.

A wide turf path leads the eye along an avenue of pleached *Tilia x euchlora* towards a round pond with a stone fountain. Stripped of foliage, this lime avenue has a strong sculptural presence in winter.

It was the water that first attracted Gail and Jonathan Hughes-Morgan to their Surrey home, and on a winter morning the sound of it fills the frosty air with a rich, low rumble. “My husband has a thing about water, and this house was built alongside an old mill race diverted from the River Wey,” says Gail. “When we came here, the only other water feature was a silted-up lake, but I could see the potential.”

In fact, recognising potential is something Gail is very good at, and this is just the latest of a number of properties she has improved. “I never have a problem working out what to do with the buildings,” she says, “but I don’t have the eye to transform a garden.” Which is how she came to meet Ian Smith of design practice Acres Wild. “I was introduced to Ian two gardens ago, and he is a genius at spotting what needs to be done, then making you think it was all your own idea.”

It’s hard to believe, looking at the gardens today, but when Ian turned up in 2009 the site was a blank canvas. “There was very little here to work from. It was more of a field than a garden,” he says. “The first step was to find out what Gail and Jonathan wanted from their garden, then to set it into a meaningful structure. There was ➤

Main image

The stone fountain at the far end of the lime avenue is just one of several water features throughout the garden. It is left to run throughout the winter, unless a sustained period of freezing weather is forecast.

Bottom row left to right

On the terrace at the back of the house, a formal pool is framed by a narrow bed of thyme and cubes of clipped box, which contrast with a froth of frost-tipped ferns. Sitting at some distance from the house, in a simple green space, is a rectangular reflecting pond, which is surrounded by a yew hedge and a pair of stone gateposts sourced online by Gail.

To one side of the house, where a tarmac drive once ran up the slope, Ian has wrought a dramatic transformation by creating a level terrace where brick steps lead past a stone fountain, through an arch in the barn and on to the lime avenue.

Caring for water in winter

Water is a valuable design element all year round, but in the pared-back winter garden it really comes into its own. Low slanting sunlight through clear, still air throws down beautiful reflections, and even on dull days the crystalline quality of the water’s surface can make for a mesmerising picture. There are a few practicalities to consider when preparing for the winter. The most important thing is to avoid a build-up of decaying vegetable matter in the water. Net the surface to keep out falling leaves in autumn if the pool is close to deciduous trees, and consider thinning out marginal planting, particularly in smaller ponds. If the pool contains fish, take steps to prevent the surface freezing over. One simple solution is to float a small rubber ball on the water. Pumps should also be protected from freezing conditions. Switch them off when severe weather is forecast and, in extreme conditions, consider removing them and storing indoors until spring. Gail tends to have more trouble with floods than freezing conditions. In extreme rainfall, the water levels can rise alarmingly. On several occasions the handrail on the bridge over the mill race has been completely submerged.



“Essentially, I wanted all the traditional elements of an English country garden, but with lots of ornamental water as well”



▷ already a tennis court, and a greenhouse marooned in an expanse of grass, to which the Hughes-Morgans wanted to add a swimming pool, water features and a walled kitchen garden. “I do think a kitchen garden is a wonderful gift to give to a house,” says Gail. “Essentially, I wanted all the traditional elements of an English country garden, but with lots of ornamental water as well.”

Even with 13 acres at his disposal, Ian had to spend quite some time thinking about how all these elements could fit together to create a cohesive whole. “The design process starts with thinking about how people will move through the space. You have to find the lines of desire, then work with them. It is a highly manipulative process, but if we get it right, you shouldn’t notice,” says Ian. It is a mark of how well he succeeded that when the Society of Garden Designers awarded this garden its prestigious Grand Award in 2014, the judges described it as a transformational project – a garden that feels as if it has existed for decades, leading you on a journey through spaces that feel ‘composed and perfectly linked’.

Starting from the house, Ian lined out the main vistas and routes of travel around the garden. “The lake lies some distance away, and is hidden from the house, so we had to tempt people to walk there,” he says. “We also needed to link up the few existing elements, including an old barn and some mature trees, and make sense of various slopes around the garden.”

French doors from the house now lead out on to an elegant ornamental garden centred on a large, formal pond set into a stone terrace that is punctuated by cubes of box. In warmer months this functions as a relaxation and entertainment area, but at this time of year its strong structure and sheet of reflective water combine to form a dynamic picture when viewed from the house.

From here the design encourages visitors to walk out into the wider gardens along a series of paths laid in a patchwork of bonded gravel, stone slabs and ornamental creasing tile details. The combination of materials lends a pleasing air of Arts and Crafts solidity to the design, and sets up vistas and focal points to tempt the curious.

There is a small stone fountain set in a low square pool and, up a few steps and framed by an arch in the barn, an imposing avenue of pleached limes. At the far end of this avenue sits a large circular pond set in a low hedge of box, surrounded by a circle of lawn and framed by an outer hedge of yew. It is exceedingly simple but highly effective.

The walled kitchen garden has a dipping pool at its centre, adorned with a whimsical cherub fountain and, through the far gates, past a Modernist grid-planted ‘orchard’ of crab apples (*Malus* ‘Evereste’), ▷

Main image

In what was originally planned as a herb garden, a classic combination of box and lavender offers interest throughout the year. The main greenhouse, installed by the previous owner, faces the barn and backs on to the walled kitchen garden.

Bottom row left to right

At the farther reaches of the garden, *Hebe rakaiensis* lines a steep flight of steps that lead down to the mill race. The large Cretan pot is from Pots and Pithoi.

A modernist grid of *Malus* ‘Evereste’, which provides a cloud of white blossom in spring, links the kitchen garden to a circular lawn, edged with curved hedges of clipped yew. Seedheads of *Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’, and stone urns add to the impression that this garden has been established for years.

On a still winter’s day the mill race is hauntingly beautiful. Gail often spots kingfishers zooming low over its water.



“The design process starts with thinking about how people will move through the space”



▷ you can glimpse a large, reflecting pond that is faintly Italianate in its simple juxtaposition of water, stone, grass and tightly clipped yew.

At the farther limit of the seven-acre ornamental gardens lies the only naturalistic water feature – a large and very lovely lake, originally excavated by previous owners in the 1980s, but dredged and enhanced by Ian, who planted the margins with reeds and gunnera, and designed a little wooden boat house and landing stage.

At this time of year, the lake is utterly beautiful. The surrounding trees are reflected in its glassy surface, and birds are drawn to the margins where frost-rimed seedheads stand in bold silhouette. “Before Ian created the garden I never bothered to walk down to the lake,” says Gail. “But now I go there every single day, and every day I see something new and beautiful.” □

USEFUL INFORMATION

• Ian Smith is one half, with Debbie Roberts, of design duo **Acres Wild Landscape and Garden Design** (Tel 01403 891084, acreswild.co.uk).

GARDEN PLAN

- 1 Mill pond
- 2 House
- 3 Stream garden
- 4 Lawn
- 5 Formal pond
- 6 Terrace
- 7 Swimming pool
- 8 Fountain terrace
- 9 Old barn
- 10 Lavender parterre
- 11 Greenhouses
- 12 Tennis court
- 13 Pleached lime avenue
- 14 Walled kitchen garden
- 15 *Malus* ‘Evereste’ orchard
- 16 Circular pond with stone fountain
- 17 Circular lawn
- 18 Reflecting pond
- 19 Mill race
- 20 Steps with Cretan pot
- 21 Shelter garden
- 22 Lake
- 23 Boat house



9 plants for winter interest

1 *Euphorbia x martini*
This handsome winter foliage plant is more compact than its popular relative, *E. characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, and therefore easier to accommodate in many gardens. The lime green bracts can appear in late winter and will last for many months. 75cm. USDA 6b-10b*.

2 *Phlomis russelliana*
One of the most successful plants for winter silhouettes. *Phlomis* produces whorls of pale-yellow flowers over a very long season (from late spring to early autumn), then holds on to its seedheads throughout the winter. 90cm. AGM*.

3 *Heuchera sanguinea* ‘Palace Purple’
A useful, dark-purple cultivar that makes an excellent ground cover and provides year-round colour in the garden. In winter it looks especially lovely when sprinkled with winter frost. 45cm. RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.

4 *Tilia x euchlora*
The so-called Caucasian lime, is resistant to aphids and so doesn’t drip honeydew like the commonly planted street limes (*Tilia x europaea*). It responds well to pleaching, and makes a strong contribution to the green architecture of the winter garden. 22m. RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.

5 *Lavandula angustifolia* ‘Hidcote’
Lavender and box are a classic summer combination and will, if well maintained, create an attractively sculptural feature in winter. ‘Hidcote’ has struggled in many parts of Gail’s garden, so is being steadily replaced

with ‘Munstead’. 60cm. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-8b.

6 *Hebe rakaiensis*
This deservedly popular hebe will withstand a range of conditions and, although it produces an attractive show of white flowers in early summer, it is increasingly being planted as a low-maintenance, blight-resistant substitute for box. 1m. AGM. RHS H4, USDA 8a-10b.

7 *Teucrium x lucidrys*
This has been used in the kitchen garden to edge several beds. A dusting of frost emphasises the attractive shape of its evergreen aromatic leaves. 30cm. RHS H4.

8 *Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’
Its enormous white flower heads make this a star of the summer garden, but it is also a winner in the winter. The desiccated seedheads will look good right through to spring, when you can neaten the plant with a light trim. 2.5m. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 4a-9b.

9 *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Ferner Osten’
Ornamental grasses of various forms and sizes can make a great contribution to the winter garden. At Millwater the displays rely on tried-and-trusted grasses, such as the tall *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Ferner Osten’, which produces deep-purple flower panicles that age through pink to silver, and which is shown here growing alongside the shorter and aptly named fountain grass, *Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Hameln’. 2m. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b.



*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. Hardiness ratings given where available.