

Making the gardens grow

LEIGH CLAPP chats to some of the influential personalities in the Sussex gardening world and discovers what they love about living and working in our beautiful county, as well as the trends they predict for gardening this year

GARDEN DESIGNERS

ANDY STURGEON

is one of the UK's leading garden designers with seven RHS Gold-Medal-Winning Chelsea Flower Show Gardens, as well as being a lecturer, TV presenter and writer. He fuses traditional materials and contemporary styling, innovative planting and sculptural characteristics to create strong architectural designs. "I've worked on gardens all around the world, from tiny roof terraces to large rambling estates," he says. "I adore the space and freedom of designing large rural gardens just as I relish the challenge and excitement of designing for the urban environment." Andy clearly enjoys living and working in the heart of Brighton. "I get the vibrant city life and all it has to offer with the sea on my doorstep and the South Downs in my backyard," he says. "I can't ever decide if I am an urbanite or a countryside lover so it suits me down to the ground that I can pick whatever I want depending on my mood."

With the wealth of wonderful gardens on our doorstep Andy recommends his favourite must-sees as Nymans with its connection to plant-hunting of the past and the resulting interesting plant collections of plants such as magnolias and eucryphias, the jewel of a garden at Marchants Hardy Plants nursery, and frequent visits to a favourite of many, Great Dixter. "I like the fact that it is relatively compact and the energy and ethos of Fergus Garret ensures that you will see something new and unexpected



on every visit," he says. Looking ahead for 2017 Andy offered some trend predictions. "It's all about shrubs. Gardening moves very, very slowly and over the last couple of decades we discovered grasses and became obsessed with them. Then we became experts on naturalistic perennials and added them to the mix and now it's the turn of shrubs but this isn't a return to the berberis and mahonias of the 1970s and 1980s, there are some much more exciting candidates appearing."

*Andy Sturgeon Design
7 Marlborough Place
Brighton, BN1 1UB
www.andysturgeon.com*

DEBBIE ROBERTS AND IAN SMITH

of the widely respected garden design company Acres Wild have been designing stunning gardens for 28 years across the south east. "We aim to create unique and timeless gardens with enduring appeal and a harmonious sense of place – our gardens have a strong underlying structure softened with full and naturalistic planting," they explain. An appreciation for the environment of Sussex permeates their designs. "What makes Sussex gardens special is the diversity of landscapes in which they sit, be it downland, Wealden, coastal or woodland," says Debbie. "We enjoy living in the Nuthurst area with the intimacy of the rural landscape around here but with easy access to London and the coast."



A garden in the landscape by Acres Wild

Asking them about essential gardens to visit this year in Sussex they suggest the well-known Great Dixter and Gravetye Manor, but also the imaginative plantings in public spaces like Bexhill seafront, Preston Park and The Level in Brighton. Finally I ask this talented pair for their advice for home gardeners this year and any trends they see for 2017. "Think of your garden as a setting for your house, especially the front garden, and give it as much thought and attention as the rooms in your home. Trends come and go but gardens should be timeless – they should compliment the house and sit well in the landscape."

*Acres Wild Ltd
1 Helm Cottages
Nuthurst, Horsham, RH13 6RG
www.acreswild.co.uk*

ANNIE GUILFOYLE

combines a successful garden design consultancy





with lecturing and writing, and she is also the director of Garden Design at KLC School of Design at Hampton Court Palace and Garden Course Consultant at West Dean College. She echoes the affinity with the county, saying, “East and West Sussex is such a special place from a landscape point of view and of course this extends to the gardens. Having the coast so close and the South Downs running through the heart of the county means that we do have a really varied landscape. I am sure that this inspires our gardeners even more. West Sussex is a great county for both gardens and nurseries; we are very lucky to have such rich pickings so close to hand. I think that we are spoilt for choice, quite honestly!”

Chatting further about her favourite gardens and trends in gardening this year she says: “After West Dean and Great Dixter which I am closely linked to, special mentions are Parham and Charleston, both of which are extraordinarily beautiful gardens, then I am always happy to visit Gravetye Manor to see what Tom Coward the head gardener is doing. In 2017 I think

that there will be a continuing interest in wild flower meadows and a more naturalistic style of gardening.”

*Annie Guilfoyle Creative Landscapes Daisy Cottage
40 Lutener Road, Easebourne, GU29 9AT
www.creative-landscapes.com
for new courses at West Dean check the website, www.westdean.org.uk
new monthly course at Great Dixter, starting in March, on Arts & Crafts Design, see www.greatdixter.co.uk/whats-on/events/the-art-and-craft-of-garden-design-2017*

THE NATIONAL GARDENS SCHEME

With Sussex being such a huge county there is a wealth of variety of gardens, from grand estates to small cottages, which open through the scheme. In recent years large numbers of visitors have made it one of the most successful counties in the UK in terms of monies raised through the NGS.



Geoff Stonebanks is the publicity officer for the East and Mid Sussex NGS and a keen gardener at his inventive garden Driftwood in Seaford, which appeared on BBC2's *Gardeners' World* last autumn and was a finalist in the *Gardeners' World Magazine* Garden of the Year (Small Space) in 2016. “Having spent most of my adult life living and working in London, with a very small garden, how refreshing to have now been living in Sussex for 12 years and finding time to learn new skills to garden as well as being able to open it for charity,” he says.

“I live a quarter of a mile from the sea, and there's nothing between it and my garden. I relish the daily challenge of maintaining my award-winning garden whilst having to combat the elements. It really keeps me on my toes. If, like me, you are retired and need some exercise, but don't want to go to a gym and formalise it all, then get out in the garden, it's amazing what the fresh air and physical activity can do for you.”

*Driftwood, Seaford, BN25 2RS
www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk
www.ngs.org.uk*

HEAD GARDENERS

TOM COWARD, head gardener at Gravetye, has found the process of restoring an important historic garden very rewarding.



This Elizabethan mansion was once home to the creative and innovative gardener and writer William Robinson (1838 – 1935), whose books *The English Flower Garden*, one of the best-selling horticultural books of all time, and the revolutionary *The Wild Garden*, introduced mixed herbaceous borders and naturalised planting styles that were groundbreaking and still influence us today.

“Many things set Gravetye apart,” says Tom. “Its history and past influence is very important. Its design and location is exceptional. One of the things that makes it special for me, as a gardener, is seeing the interaction between the guest and the garden. In many public gardens people just ‘view’ the garden, have a cup of tea and leave.

At Gravetye, because we are a hotel and restaurant, the visitor numbers are a bit lower but the interaction is much more intimate. People really use the garden, whether they are just staying for a tea or a weeklong stay. Seeing the pleasure this gives to our guests is very rewarding.”

Tom clearly enjoys living in the county. “I love the Sussex countryside, which is so beautiful and diverse. Gravetye feels so remote yet I can be in the middle of London very quickly. I have a passion for Harvey’s bitter which never tastes quite the same out of Sussex!” 2017 will see the continued development of the gardens, with more fruit plantings, particularly apples, which will be grown intensively as step-overs. “Hereford Russet is the variety we have been most impressed with for its exceptional flavour,” says Tom. “We only have one tree, which fruited for the first time in autumn and it was so good that I have ordered 30 new trees. In the borders we are always working on new ideas, I am quite excited about

some seed a friend gave me of *Patrinia punktata*. I germinated these in October and will overwinter them in the cold frame before a spring planting. It will be fun to see if they are any good and to learn how best to use them.”

Gravetye Manor

Vowels Lane, East Grinstead, RH19 4LJ

www.gravetyemanor.co.uk

FERGUS GARRETT

is continuing the legacy of the late Christopher Lloyd at the renowned Great Dixter. The garden with its innovative, experimental and exciting ever-changing planting is a place of pilgrimage for horticulturalists across the globe. Originally laid out by Lutyens, there is interest from a variety of gardens around the characterful house, including whimsical topiary, carpets of meadow flowers that seem to flow from the countryside, a vibrant exotic garden and dazzling borders. Fergus was Lloyd’s long-time head gardener and is known as a bit of an horticultural wizard, painting the gardens with colour, textures and form. “The garden is so dynamic, still very experimental, a very creative place,” he says. “We’re not playing safe.”

A sense of personal expression and fun pervades the garden; people come away with inspiration and a willingness to be a bit braver with their own gardens, as gardens are living, evolving landscapes.

Born in Brighton and now living in Hastings, Fergus feels very connected to the county. “I love being near the sea and Hastings is such a quirky place, dynamic, vibrant and with all sorts of characters,” he says.

He feels that the naturalistic style of planting will continue to be popular, the sense of bio-diversity for wildlife as people are becoming greener, with gardening and ecology coming closer together.

“There are always new plants and styles as it’s a fluid, creative world out there,” he says.

“I am trying to use conifers more, some are extraordinary.”

Great Dixter House and Gardens

Northiam, Rye, TN31 6PH

www.greatdixter.co.uk



Gravetye Manor

AUTHORS

ROSEMARY ALEXANDER

is my go-to guru in Sussex for all things gardening.

A renowned author, garden design consultant, lecturer and principal of the English Gardening School, she also finds time to maintain her own much-visited garden, Sandhill Farm House in Rogate, which looks out over a rolling landscape and is expertly planted within loosely defined garden rooms. "Gardening in Sussex is special as the soil varies from acid to alkaline and is often sandy and quick-draining. It's lovely to emphasise views of the surrounding countryside and gardeners here tend to be quite knowledgeable," she says. "I think garden trends in 2017 will see less reliance on perennials and grasses and a return to shrubs and small conifers and also encouraging wildlife. For my New Year resolutions I intend to spread our annual mulch earlier, try to rid ourselves of bindweed and plant up my newest idea – a small stumpery. I would advise that you always buy the very best plant of its type, often one that has the RHS award of garden merit. If any areas aren't pulling their weight, replan and replant them. Use your camera to record how the garden looks at different times of year and try to improve the next year." *Sandhill Farm House, Rogate, GU31 5HU*
Open through the NGS: Sat and Sun – 22/23 April, 17/18 June, 16/17 September
www.ngs.org.uk

**SARAH RAVEN**

is probably the best-known Sussex gardening personality. From her books, columns, television appearances, courses at her home Perch Hill, online company or her connections to Sissinghurst, she is frequently in the public eye as one of the UK's leading plantswomen. Prolific and talented in everything she touches, her energy and passion is uplifting. "I love the changing nature of gardening – that the whole space you have made looks so different from one month or week or even day and the next," she says. "That's what makes it inspiring and creative." Of living and

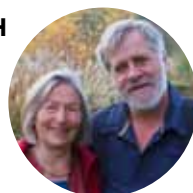


working in Sussex she adds, "it's the most beautiful wooded and unspoilt county within shouting distance of London – that's what I love." Sarah's predictions for gardening trends this year are for "softer, more romantic colours and shapes, girly all the way".
www.sarahraven.com

NURSERY OWNERS

GRAHAM GOUGH AND LUCY GOFFIN

of Marchants Hardy Plants in Laughton, one of the leading small nurseries in the country, specialise in herbaceous perennials and ornamental grasses. All the plants are home-grown and propagated on site. Many of the plants grow in the their beautiful garden which melds into the landscape with views beyond. "Born on the South Downs (and perhaps conceived there too) East Sussex is my home, a humbler counterpart to its grander west flank," says Graham. "Gilbert White's comment 'and of that noble chain of mountains' rings true for us as we gaze upon them from our house windows daily, never failing to be enthralled by their gentle beauty." On 2017's gardening trends he said, "naturalistic planting continues to be popular. With a kinder temperate climate the exotics are exploited in the form of agapanthus, gladiolus and tulbaghia. using them to create an effect that is both symbiotic and harmonious. Always extend your horizons, do it sensitively with a trained eye and when placing plants see that they fit comfortably with their bedfellows." *Marchants Hardy Plants*
2 Marchants Cottages, Mill Lane, Laughton, BN8 6AJ
www.marchantshardyplants.co.uk

**ANGUS WHITE**

started the unique Architectural Plants nursery over 20 years ago and has an enthusiasm and passion for fine plants and a desire to encourage people to do interesting things with their garden. The nursery specialises in shapely



and exotic plants, including European and Japanese topiary, hardy palms, bamboos, bananas, plants for screening and a range of rare evergreen trees. They are known for their range of interesting, unusual, quirky and even bizarre specimen plants, from agaves and astelias, through to grasses and the ancient Wollemi pine, as well as towering cloud-pruned Ilex crenata. Shape, textures and combined shades of green are the elements that make up the ethos behind Architectural Plants. "The 'design idea' approach still makes us stand out," he says. "There's a powerful discipline behind what we grow and why we grow it. If you share our enthusiasm for the sculptural qualities of plants and want to transform your garden, we make the process absurdly simple. If we design your garden, we only use our plants. If you're one of those people who really like the nursery, this is a heavenly solution."

Since October 2015 Guy Watts has been the managing director. A keen horticulturalist since childhood, starting at Architectural Plants in school holidays, and co-founder of the charity Streetscape which provides apprenticeships in landscape gardening, he is a safe pair of hands for the nursery.

"The nursery is framed around the most incredible Sussex countryside," he adds. "Sunrise and sunset is particularly special here, especially when it's seen by the side of our lake. It's great being able to head out kite-surfing on the south coast after work!" *Architectural Plants*
Stane Street, North Heath,
Pulborough, RH20 1DJ
Open Mon to Sat, 9-5
www.architecturalplants.com

LEIGH'S GARDEN TREND PREDICTIONS FOR 2017

- The garden as a safe oasis within a chaotic, often dangerous world, a space for relaxation and entertaining
- Planting for all the senses
- Growing organic food, even in small gardens with miniature varieties and dwarf fruit trees
- Modern country styling
- Vertical gardening
- Horticultural activities for well-being



PLANT OF THE MONTH

Sarcococca

- small evergreen shrub
- fragrant cream winter flowers
- black fruit in summer

GROWING NOTES

- height/spread 1m
- sheltered spot in sun or shade
- moist, well-drained, fertile soil
- plant where you can appreciate winter scent



NEW YEAR RESOLUTIONS

This is a month for planning. You may like to start a small vegetable garden or resolve to plant some veg in containers. Maybe looking through seed catalogues may inspire some new flowers to try. Involve the children in the planting choices. Spend time looking at your garden to assess its structure and infill, deciding how you may like to develop it.

Action plan for January

READERS' OFFER 2017 NGS GARDENS TO VISIT

Here's a special offer for *Sussex Life* readers. To purchase a copy of the 2017 *Gardens to Visit*, published each February, that lists all the wonderful gardens open through The National Gardens Scheme, you can order at the offer price of just £9 (RRP £11.99), including postage and packing to UK addresses, via the website www.ngs.org.uk and use the code **SXLGTV17**. *Gardens to Visit* is the essential county-by-county guide to the thousands of welcoming gardens in England and Wales, many of which are not normally open to the public. Your visits also help an array of charities, with the NGS having donated in excess of £24m in the past 10 years. Offer valid until end July 2017. Please allow 14 days for delivery.



A later reward

Deadhead pansies to keep flowering. Lift and divide snowdrops after flowering, more success if move growing plants than dry bulbs. Improve your soil by digging in organic matter. If you have shallow soil try building some raised beds. Check the garden for weeds.



CHORES TO DO

Recycle your Christmas tree by shredding for mulch. Planting trees and shrubs now, in the dormant season, can improve their chances. You can prune deciduous trees and shrubs to shape and remove damaged branches. Protect pots from the elements by moving to a protected place and standing on feet to improve drainage. Many perennials can be cut back to make room for new shoots in spring.