

SIZE
*4½ acres, set within
surrounding meadows*

SOIL
*Heavy Wealden clay,
improved with organic
matter, compost and well-
rotted manure*

SEASON
*Designed to provide
interest throughout
the year*

STYLE
*An Arts and Crafts-
influenced garden, set
around a traditional-
style Sussex farmhouse*

A sense of place

On the Sussex High Weald, this tranquil and captivating garden

has now blended seamlessly into its rural surroundings

WORDS BY PAULA MCWATERS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUZIE GIBBONS



There are occasions in life when you just know instinctively that something feels right. Ian Smith and Debbie Roberts of Acres Wild garden design had that feeling when they went to visit the building site of a new house on the Sussex High Weald. "It slopes gently down towards the west and has glorious views over meadows, woodland and distant downland. It was a clean slate and we could see the plot's potential straightaway," Ian says.

The owner's brief was simple: "Make us a garden that looks as though it has always been here." That's easier to say than to achieve, especially when confronted by vast piles of spoil from newly built house foundations. But Acres Wild enjoy the challenge of what Ian calls invisible design: "We like people to feel that the way you move through a garden is completely natural. The path you're walking along should feel like the one that was always there, not something that's been imposed."

This was especially important at Brightling Down Farm where the house was designed in the vernacular style with reclaimed materials and the garden needed to fit seamlessly around it. Less than 15 years on, it sits comfortably in its rural surroundings. "The owners are not expert gardeners, so after

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Glowing *Liquidambar styraciflua* underplanted with sedums and grasses; fluffy flowerheads of

Pennisetum alopecuroides; *Cornus alba* 'Sibirica' leaf shimmers in early morning light **OPPOSITE** Meandering paths lead between pines and *Acer* 'Bloodgood'

DESIGN TIPS FROM ACRES WILD

There are two ways to disguise the edges of a pond that has an artificial liner: create a damp bog garden area with suitable marginal planting, or choose plants that give the same reed-like look but are happy to grow in drier soil, eg hemerocallis, miscanthus and molinia.

Use specimen plants as eye-catchers, especially where they can be viewed across water and reflected in it.

On a curving path, put in an attractive shrub or tree on the inside of a bend and then repeat it further along on the other side to give the impression that the path has had to curve around them. It lends a sense of maturity.

Plant grasses in drifts – as generously as your budget and space allow – to increase impact.

Choose natural materials where possible, especially reclaimed bricks, tiles and wood, to give a weathered look.





expressing their colour preferences, they were happy ☺ to leave the specific plant choices to us," Ian says. They are highly appreciative of what has been created for them and rely on their talented gardening team to tend it for them.

Grasses have been used extensively, especially around the interconnecting ponds down the hillside north of the house. A myriad paths weave through this area, criss-crossing the water over zig-zag wooden bridges or large flat stepping stones. The soothing sound of waterfalls is ever-present. Striking specimen trees include a wonderful liquidambar and Japanese maples, *Acer japonicum* 'Aconitifolium' and *Acer palmatum* 'Bloodgood', both beautifully reflected in the water.

While the area immediately around the house was tackled first, with stone terraces and a pergola walkway that leads off to one side, a masterplan was drawn up for the whole site so that distinct areas could be built in stages over several years. A walled kitchen garden provides all the vegetables and fruit the owners need, including salads all year round, plus chard, kale and leeks in winter. The crops are interspersed with pot marigolds, nasturtiums and dahlias, giving punches of colour among the produce. Initially, Ian specified walls on three sides and a yew hedge on the third but the south-westerly winds proved too drying and now a fourth wall has been added. With its thoughtful design and use of weathered materials, it is hard to distinguish it from a real Victorian kitchen garden. Elsewhere there are deep herbaceous borders and wide lawns, which ☺

LEFT Purbeck stone has been artfully arranged to create naturalistic waterfalls

and stepping stone bridges
ABOVE Massed grasses bring softness and movement



ABOVE Late crops of beans, courgettes, mustard leaves and kale abound in the kitchen garden **RIGHT** Stone setts form a chequered path to a formal knot garden linking the pergola walk to the kitchen garden

make the garden ideal for entertaining. A tennis court and a swimming pool are carefully screened by both layout and planting to prevent these relatively modern features from intruding into the subtly maintained maturity of the site.

Ian and Debbie have taken a broad brush to the planting, colouring the borders with sweeps of sedums and grasses that give the garden a strong presence and framework. The policy has been to plant densely and then to adapt and edit the palette whenever things don't work. The garden is plagued by deer and rabbits, so certain mass plantings have been chosen not only because they look good but because they don't get chewed.

In the Japanese garden, a secluded area surrounded by woodland, Ian and Debbie have provided the 'essence' of Japan in their plant choices rather than following the style slavishly. Alongside specimen acers, both hebes and *Lonicera nitida* are clipped into domes to provide an undulating green backdrop. "The idea was to create a tranquil area ideal for lingering and switching off from the outside world," Ian says. That's something anyone would welcome. 🌿

📍 *Brightling Down Farm is open for ngs.org.uk by appointment only; from May to October for groups of ten-30 (valstephens@icloud.com; 01424 838888). Acres Wild (01403 891084; acreswild.co.uk).*

