

A New MOOD

At Old Cross Street Farm in Sussex, a modern garden vies for attention with the Sussex Downs as it takes on rich autumnal colours

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Lavender 'Folgate' is tolerant of clipping, which permits the creation of even hummocks of silver-grey that shine throughout winter.

IN 2005, THIS 17TH-CENTURY STONE FARMHOUSE on a narrow rural Sussex lane must have looked like many others that were ripe for a bit of love and attention. There was a concrete farmyard in front, an unadorned rectangle of sloping ground behind, and a threadbare orchard beyond that. Adjacent to the farmhouse stood a wreck of a barn and a cart shed, while an acre or two of flat paddock stretched away on the south side towards the distant wooded undulations of the South Downs.

Thus it was when Belinda and David Wilkinson acquired Old Cross Street Farm and set about skilfully rebuilding, adding bits and joining up other bits to create a stylishly rambling combination of oak, weatherboarding, mellow brick and stone, peg tiles and slate roofs and – to huge effect – glass. Now, a glorious uninterrupted view of the South Downs is a big feature of virtually every room of the house. The challenge that Belinda, who is an experienced gardener, happily took up was to dress that amazing view, to create a garden that seamlessly stretched out into it. She sought a garden that was not only sensitive to the restored and embellished ancient buildings but that also embraced the New Perennial planting style she so admired.

Belinda started with her own ideas on the south side of the property, to create a fairly traditional space-with-a-view for eating and sitting for themselves and their two young boys. The soil was basically fertile greensand, but it had been churned up, first by horses and then by builders, and was rocky, clay-ey and extremely hard going. She was

Right Plump crab apples adorn the branches of *Malus* 'Evereste'.
Below Next to the swimming pool, reclining chairs take in views of wooded Downs hillside.
Bottom right Mauve flowers of *Verbena bonariensis*.
Below left Mahogany *Malus* 'Evereste' rises from a sea of *Echinacea purpurea* seedheads.



and is, she says, blessed to have the help one day a week of gardener Will Carver, who trained at Merrist Wood and Kew, and whom Belinda has known and worked with for 20 years.

Above A gravelled seating area is perfect for meals outside; box balls mark the steps.
Left Deep crimson *Sedum* 'Matrona' and silver-stemmed *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire'.

Dumplings of closely planted box and lavender quickly materialised around the base of the extended house, as did gravel, mellow wooden furniture, a semi-raised rectangular pond surrounded by more clipped box and a beautiful, discrete swimming pool embellished with massed *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle'. But a couple of years into the project, Belinda realised she would need professional help to extend the garden into the adjoining paddock.

Belinda's brief to Ian Smith and Debbie Roberts at Acres Wild was clear and uncompromising. The garden and wooded landscape were to dissolve into each other, boundaries would have to be as invisible as possible, and the garden badly needed its own trees. Its maintenance must be as easy as possible and, because the garden was so much in view from everywhere in the house, it would have to look good all the year round. All mowing should be easily done by Belinda on a tractor mower only, and paths



Right A formal raised pond contrasts with swathes of perennials.

Below right Autumn-blushed leaves of *Viburnum plicatum*.

Below *Phlomis russeliana* boasts long-lasting architectural seedheads.



should all be wide enough to allow two people to walk side by side and chat.

Now, the paddock is maturing into a thoroughly modern and practical garden. Its specimen trees punctuate swathes of harmoniously coloured perennials and grasses whose textures mellow dramatically in autumn and which, combined with a plethora of clipped evergreens and soft-focus hedges, have a skeletal, moody presence in low, misty light. A similar flatness of terrain means there is more than a hint of the award-winning Jardin Plume in Normandy about this garden – in some aspects of the planting and in its relationship to its buildings – but the setting here with the distant South Downs gives this garden an extra dimension over and above the flat pastures of Normandy. Above all, Belinda has, with the help of skilled designers and her gardener, achieved the garden she had in her mind's eye 10 years ago.

The garden isn't only about modern-style perennial planting; there are also nods to traditional cottage gardening. To one side of

the main garden, for example, near a seating area on the eastern boundary and flanked by familiar shrubs such as *Viburnum plicatum* and a plummy-leaved *Cotinus*, there is a higgledy-piggledy stepping stone path over which the unstoppable blue *Geranium* 'Rozanne', various oreganos and slumpy sedums sprawl. This leads you towards a substantial oak gazebo overhung by an ash tree, and onwards down a wide grassy avenue of *Malus* 'Evereste', with fiery-red autumn fruits and foliage. Indeed the injection of specimen trees, among them *Sorbus*, *Liquidambar* and *Prunus serrulata*, now, after 10 years, is having a tremendous visual impact

BELINDA'S ADVICE

- This garden drags its heels as far as 'going to bed' in autumn is concerned. There is no wholesale cutting back of anything that remains handsome, so sedums, *Phlomis* and most grasses stay until Christmas and beyond, while echinaceas and ghostly remains of *Perovskia* are edited as needed. Hydrangeas are not de-mopped until April.

- Plantings are monitored annually. Any that grow beyond their allotted space are stripped out in spring or autumn, reduced in bulk and replanted.

- Lavender 'Folgate' is hard-pruned once in September, then re-grows to form silvery hummocks for winter. Belinda expects to replace it every five to seven years, and buys 'spares' at the same time, heeling them in – in case of casualties.

Clockwise from top
 Raised beds in the kitchen garden; berries on *Crataegus persimilis* 'Prunifolia'; box-edged beds of sedums; *Geranium* 'Rozanne'.

on the garden, while swathes of *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire', planted in the garden's own middle-distance beyond the curved hedges, adds to

the end-of-season riches in the borrowed landscape – with the bonus of scarlet stems that bring a note of interest in the low light of winter.

Strategically placed stands of white-barked *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii* are a linking theme throughout the garden, their trunks stark against the walls and buildings around them. The lavender Belinda chose to plant en masse was 'Folgate', recommended to her by specialists Downterry Nursery. It is an early-flowering silver-leaved variety that responds well to late-summer pruning. In the now smartly gravelled entrance courtyard and in the secluded garden behind the house, the simple, mass planting style is maintained, but softened to include blowsy hydrangeas and roses, broad swathes of ground-hugging purple sage and *Alchemilla*.

A large part of the drama in this garden, however, is created by the perennials, which are shown off to great advantage by being planted en masse, and also by the way they interact with other greenery. A striking feature in the main garden to the south of the house is a circular lawn almost enclosed within a softly shaggy, occasionally cloud-pruned, horse-shoe-shaped box hedge some four feet high. Its strongly curved presence cleverly irons out any



difficulty in creating straight vistas from such a mismatch of buildings. It also serves as a windbreak and fine green backdrop for the husky remains of summer: sedums 'Herbstfreude' and 'Matrona' are extensively used, along with lines and clumps of loose grasses such as *Deschampsia* and *Stipa*.

Everything seems to thrive: echinaceas, difficult to establish in many gardens, proliferate, as do catmint – both tall *Nepeta* 'Walker's Low' and dwarf *N. faassenii*. Contrasting with all these are vast phalanxes of *Phlomis russeliana*, the brown seedheads of which are almost more beautiful than its yolk-yellow summer flowers. There are masses of *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire', with stems that seem to whiten as they age; of delicate tapers of *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Rosea' and translucent rivers of slender, ramrod-straight spears of *Calamagrostis acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'. This whole caboodle manages to echo the contours of a landscape in which the softly rounded Downs, their wooded slopes gradually acquiring the russet hues of autumn, are punctuated here and there by the slender verticals of Lombardy poplars. It is indeed a spectacular show. ■