



WORDS: Zia Allaway PHOTOS: Marianne Majerus

BLURRING THE LINES

Blending reclaimed materials, mature trees and open water to produce a series of breathtaking vistas, Ian Smith MSGD, co-director of Acres Wild, talks about the 'invisible design' he used to create this large garden in East Sussex





PREVIOUS PAGE

Wrapped with ornamental grasses, a sheltered terrace provides the perfect vantage point to enjoy the water

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

A Japanese-style timber bridge links the design of this pond to the Asian-inspired pool further up the hill; *Acer palmatum* and a granite lantern set the tone for the Japanese-style pool; a formal garden leads through to the walled kitchen garden





Ian Smith

Having trained as landscape architects, Ian Smith MSGD and his design partner Debbie Roberts MSGD set up their studio, Acres Wild, in 1988, choosing to then focus on the more intimate discipline of garden design. They specialise in the design and master-planning of large country gardens, both here in the UK and abroad, and have created designs in France, Spain and California.

Commanding spectacular views over woods and meadows from one of the most elevated points in East Sussex, the gardens at Brightling Down Farm appear to have been embedded in the landscape for a century or more. In fact, they were created over the past 12 years by SGD members Ian Smith and Debbie Roberts of Acres Wild, who conjured up this blend of cultivated landscape and rural countryside to produce a network of mature gardens, each with their own character, from an unpromising building site.

This talented duo specialises in naturalistic planting and sculpted landscapes, using “invisible design” that betrays just the merest hint of a human hand in their “acres wild”. Their work has secured them countless awards, including the 2007 Sussex Heritage Trust Landscape and Gardens Award and the 2012 SGD Large Residential Garden Award for this garden.

Although they work as a team on all projects, one partner always takes the lead; in this case, Ian was principal designer. He explains how the project evolved: “Our clients bought this property with the intention of building a new farmhouse with reclaimed materials that would look like it had always been there, and they wanted a landscape to complement and enhance the building.” Their wishlist also included a swimming pool, tennis court

and terraces to enjoy the panoramic views over the Sussex countryside, as well as a water garden and meadows for wildlife, and a vegetable garden and orchard.

Ian’s design inspiration is always led by practicalities. “Form follows function,” he says, “and this job was an exercise in site planning. We needed to fit together a number of different elements and spaces, and we also had to take into account the site conditions. Perched up on a hill, the property afforded great views, but it was also at the mercy of the wind and we needed to incorporate shelterbelts to reduce its exposure. Although the garden was undeveloped, we discovered the remnants of some old, broken ponds and ditches that had formed part of a drainage system, and we could see the potential of using this area for a water garden.”

East meets West

The traditional architecture of the farmhouse demanded an equally traditional English country garden, and two of the three interlinking ponds – connected by waterfalls

and a stream – echo this style. Flanked by mature woodland and fringed with formal lawns, ornamental grasses and flowering perennials, the line between water and land is blurred with marginals, such as *Pontederia cordata*, *Iris laevigata* and *Butomus umbellatus*, which help to bed the ponds into the landscape.

However, Ian had something more exotic in mind for the third pond at the top of the hill. “I have always loved Japanese gardens and the client also liked the idea of an Asian-inspired feature,” he says. “But it had to be separated in some way so that the design didn’t jar with the rest of the plan. To achieve this, the ground was carefully contoured and planting was used to enclose the space. Water flows from the pond, cascading down over rocky outcrops to form a link with the rest of the garden.”

Ian employed water garden specialist Martin Kelley of Fairwater Limited to help create the ponds, working with him to produce a balanced eco-system. The result is clear water teaming with wildlife and large reflective surfaces that mirror the setting sun and surrounding

“WE NEEDED TO FIT TOGETHER A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT ELEMENTS AND SPACES, AND WE ALSO HAD TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT SITE CONDITIONS”



“PLANTS ARE THE STARS OF THE SHOW, BUT ORNAMENT ALSO PLAYS ITS PART, WITH CAREFULLY CHOSEN AND PLACED JAPANESE LANTERNS”

landscape, forming a set of glittering images that evolve throughout the year.

A growing concern

Beds of perennials and grasses and a herb garden provide an interface between the ponds and house, while a largely west-facing terrace wraps around the property and looks out over mown lawns, meadows and the Downs beyond. The terrace also leads to the pergola walkway on the south side, linking the house with a swimming pool, the walled vegetable garden and an orchard.

“The vegetable garden evokes a traditional Victorian-style walled kitchen garden, which we divided into rectangular raised beds that are easy to plant and maintain,” explains Ian. “The central path through the kitchen garden runs along the same axis as the pergola walkway, so you can see the door from the terrace. Sheltered by the walls, which were made from reclaimed bricks similar to those used for the house, and the woodland to the east, it is in the perfect spot for growing vegetables. The walls also serve to hide the tennis courts to the east. In addition, we included two large glasshouses, which allow the clients to raise more tender crops.”

The orchard, which is planted with apples, including ‘Blenheim Orange’ and ‘Bramley Seedling’, and pears, such as ‘Conference’ and ‘Williams’, nestles between the lower lawn to the west and the kitchen garden, while a small formal parterre garden lies between the pergola and kitchen garden, offering a quiet space for the clients to enjoy before they begin work on their productive plot.

Natural selection

The planting that cements together the different areas is made up of both native and non-native species, with the focus on foliage and late-flowering perennials. “The woodlands around the garden are home to deer and rabbits,” says Ian. “Both ate their way through many plants and the deer decimated the salvias in our original plan. But we are always saying we want to simplify our planting designs and the wildlife certainly helped us do that – we filled the holes with the tougher plants that they didn’t touch.”

Plants are the stars of the show, but ornament also plays its part, with carefully chosen and placed Japanese lanterns and a *shishi odoshi* (deer scarer) beside the Asian-inspired pond. In the formal and kitchen gardens, large terracotta urns provide striking focal points.



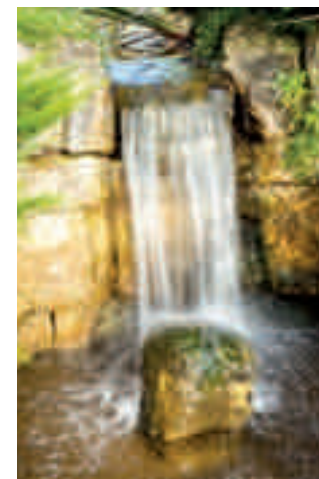
ABOVE Swiss chard and marigolds weave around a willow obelisk in the kitchen garden

BELOW Naturalistic planting, including a gunnera, lines a winding path



The gardens that frame Brightling Down Farm are testament to Ian and Debbie’s visionary approach, while their masterful command of planting, line and form ensures that each plant, path and pool is expertly placed to produce the intended atmosphere, with the ebb and flow of the seasons crystallised in every glance. ○

The gardens are open by appointment through the National Gardens Scheme from May to October for groups of 10-30. Email valstephens@icloud.com www.acreswild.co.uk



PERFECT POOLS

To create successful ornamental ponds requires a critical site assessment and considered planting choices. Here is Ian’s advice:

• Identify the best location

Water is such a strong design element that it needs careful siting to ensure that it contributes to the flow and structure of the garden. At Brightling we used water as both a dramatic focal point and as a thread moving through the design, linking different parts of the garden.

• Capture the mood

Water has many moods from calm and contemplative to dramatic and exciting. We always look for opportunities to employ these characteristics through careful manipulation of levels to create a varied but natural effect.

• Soften the edges

To blend water into the landscape, use grasses, bold perennials and large foliage plants to provide a soft natural edge. Among our favourites are: *Pennisetum alopecuroides*, *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Yakushima Dwarf’, *Hemerocallis* sp. and *Gunnera manicata*.