



A sense of belonging

Blue Doors Lodge, Arundel, West Sussex

Steven Desmond visits a newly made garden that sits perfectly in this ancient arable landscape

Photographs by Marianne Majerus

TO say that the garden at Blue Doors Lodge is quietly situated is something of an understatement. It lies at the end of a long West Sussex road with grass growing up the middle, one of those tracks that winds slightly for no obvious reason, with great undulating arable fields extending indefinitely away on both sides. The house and garden plot at the end of this track stand quite alone, pushed up against the ancient flint-built park wall of Arundel Castle.

From this point, some 200ft above sea level, the garden looks out over a broad prospect of farmland all around. In late summer, the view carries the eye gently downwards over ripening barley to a gathering of shallow valleys and up again to long ridges forming the horizon.

Gradually, villages here and there come into focus, grouped around church towers and spires. In the parkland rising steeply behind, scars of chalk are exposed at the surface of the slope.

Just beyond the garden boundary, groups of yellowhammers race each other along a hedgerow scattered with the distinctive blue of a tall wildflower, one of those rangy bellflowers that enjoy the dusty half-shade of July and August. This one is the nettle-leaved bellflower, *Campanula trachelium*, thriving here in its textbook habitat. Like so many of its genus, it has that washed-out blue look. I would have said it might set the tone for the garden planting scheme here, had not the owner and the

designers reached that conclusion long before me. They were right.

The house at Blue Doors Lodge (whose doors are, inevitably, *not* blue) is a modest, traditional structure with twin gables. The walls are faced with panels of flint, which look all the more arrestingly lovely the longer the eye dwells on them. It's a well-nigh impossible building material, given that every piece is uniquely wiggly in every dimension. The craftsmen who achieved the durable and decorative result, in about 1840, are to be congratulated.

Order and rhythm are neatly provided by brick dressings. Those gable ends are afforded the faintest whiff of Gothic romanticism by wavy bargeboards that reach

right up to the nests of chattering house martins in the apex.

All this tradition, restraint and local fabric have met their response in the form of the new garden, begun in 2012. The project is a joint effort between the

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owner, Sarah Surtees, experienced in interior design, and the well-known local garden-design practice of Acres Wild, led, in this instance, by Debbie Roberts. Their first concern has clearly been to work the new garden into its setting and their means of doing this have been to observe and respect native materials, forms and colours.

We arrive, for instance, crunching over limestone chippings, at a gate in the manner of good old park rail, framed in simple brick gatepiers. The boundary is formed by a young yew hedge, avoiding the awkward



A personal touch: the name of the house is carved into the swing that hangs from the Norway maple, overlooking the barley fields



Preceding pages: Lush planting includes the blue geranium Rozanne and drifts of nepeta. *Above:* The flint-faced house with wavy bargeboard gable ends dates from the 1840s

question of whether to extend the existing walls. Yew is the right choice: native to this terrain, quick-growing despite its mystifying reputation for not being so, superbly stately and durable, and only requiring one haircut a year.

Here at the gate is revealed further evidence of considered thinking: subtle downlighters, like half-bells, built into the gatepiers so that we can easily find our way on winter evenings without mucking up the night sky, which must be a precious expanse of silent beauty here.

Once inside the gate, we rise up to the door on gradual, simple terraces of brick, level lawn and pale paving. Gertrude Jekyll said that the approach to the front door should be low-key and she was right. Along the way, we become aware of flanking planting spreading away along the base of the walls in the form of neat evergreen mounds of *Hebe rakaiensis*, low lines of lavender, tufts of catmint and the contrasting acid

greens of lady's mantle. The keynote is admirable restraint, a theme to be continued.

On one side of the house, looking down to those valleys, a terrace secured by a brick retaining wall invites us to admire the view. There isn't much room left within the curtilage, but that vital space is filled with excellent planting. Tall, washy-bluish-white campanulas answer their wild relations without pretending to be the same, big domes of white hydrangeas sit against the noble length and height of the flint park wall and a spreading drift of *Perovskia*, pale grey and pale blue, fills much of the space in between. *Perovskia* is one of those irresistible plants, somewhere between a shrub and a herbaceous perennial, that's either deeply happy (here, or on the French Riviera) or deeply unhappy. I have long learnt to enjoy it in other people's gardens.

These blues and whites—the blues a little lavenderish and the white a little ice-creamy



A purple patch: drifts of catmint and roses pick up the blue-and-white planting theme



Above: Undulating mounds of clipped box globes help to ground the shed, which sits against the flint walls of Arundel Castle. *Below:* Rosa Iceberg has been a favourite since 1958, producing softly tinged white flowers from early summer until well into winter



Above: Inspired by the Norway maple that gives height to the garden, Leeds-based artist David Watkinson created this samara sculpture—the giant seedheads twirl independently and mesmerisingly on bearings. *Below:* A zinc tub tumbling with nepeta

—form the theme that runs through the whole garden and which brings us back to our old friend from Nature, the nettle-leaved bellflower. On the opposite site of the garden, this theme is picked up everywhere, but boredom is prevented by shuffling the pack of plants.

‘How lovely to see the Floribunda rose Iceberg lighting up the borders’

Good doers are everywhere in the form of long lines of *Geranium* Rozanne and the Floribunda rose Iceberg, which seems to have followed me around like a faithful dog since my dim and distant youth. How lovely it is to see it here, lighting up the borders in this modern scheme, as healthy and happy as can be. There are some companions you can always rely on.

Here, in contrast to level terracing, we have an open lawn allowed to fall loosely away down the slope. The expanse is interrupted on one side by a mature Norway maple, *Acer platanoides*, giving height

and a sort of enfolding seniority. The choice of ornamental trees for a rural garden such as this is, I think, an important one, as their forms should blend in with its setting without merely disappearing. A garden, thought William Morris, should not be mistaken for a piece of countryside.

Norway maple is a good choice, because it's a sort of souped-up sycamore, similar in form and detail, but in every respect more refined. The leaves are shinier and have lovely yellow autumn colour where the sycamore has none, the bark is smoother and so on. Its seedlings are equally invasive, but timely vigilance will stop them in their tracks and timely vigilance is the key to good gardening.

In this instance, fear of the dreaded winged helicopters has been neatly turned to artistic advantage in the form of an elegant garden sculpture. Those helicopters are botanically known as samaras, which makes them sound altogether swisher, and the Leeds-based sculptor David Watkinson has placed an ingenious mobile reproducing their form on a pedestal not far from the tree. The pair of samaras, greatly and handsomely enlarged, swing

freely on a pedestal in the slightest breeze and each is equally free to twirl independently. The smooth noiselessness of all this is due to the discreet beauty of smooth-running bearings.

Hard as it is to resist the laying on of hands, the real pleasure comes from watching the elegant movement responding silently to invisible forces.

As the lawn continues down the slope, it leads us to a domestic corner of raised beds and a fruit cage, hedged about with young apples and a sculptural fig. The eye wandering back up from here sees a casual, but carefully placed, open framework of other fruit trees, both productive and ornamental, crowning those blue-and-white borders on the way to the house.

The cherries, thorns and damsons—providing blossom, fruit and autumn colour in due season—bring the mind back to the hedgerows nearby, sprouting at this time with nettle-leaved bellflowers, exactly as we began. Settled in its setting, but with a mind of its own, Blue Doors is a quiet message to us all.

Acres Wild Landscape & Garden Design (www.acreswild.co.uk) is a three-time



Society of Garden Designers award winner for residential design and specialises in designing and master planning larger country gardens in Sussex, Surrey, Kent and Hampshire