

EVERGREEN INTEREST

Hebe rakaiensis and *Miscanthus sinensis* frame this view of a wooden bridge over the mill race. Stepped box cubes and tussocks of *Stipa tenuissima* lead down steps to the riverside

"Green architecture creates interest all year round"

Evergreens and grasses help to organise this stylish garden into route-ways, vistas and destinations. Designer Ian Smith of Acres Wild shares its secrets



IN THE GARDEN WITH...

Ian Smith of Acres Wild

AT Private garden, nr Ripley, Surrey
GARDEN SIZE Seven acres divided into smaller areas

SITE Various aspects

SOIL Free draining and sandy

FEATURES Formal and informal gardens; kitchen garden; lake, mill pond and race with ornamental bridge and decked area; formal ponds and fountain; parterre; terraces; greenhouse; swimming pool; pleached lime avenue; grasses; evergreens; perennials; foliage plants; ferns; herbs

CONTACT Ian at his design practice, Acres Wild, for large scale design and landscaping commissions, on 01403 891084; www.acreswild.co.uk

Winter interest is a crucial element of any great garden design. Here in this large country garden in Surrey, the problem is solved with dramatic aplomb using neatly clipped architectural evergreens, grasses and shapely seedheads. “We didn’t specifically think about ‘winter interest’ when we started,” says the garden’s designer, Ian Smith. “Using plants for good structure all year round is just good design practice.”

The property is a former millhouse, complete with a lake, millpond and mill race. “Our brief was to link the lake, pond and race with the rest of the garden, and to create a walled kitchen garden with a new greenhouse,” says Ian. “Around

“Structure helps you organise route-ways and destinations”

FROSTED FORMS (clockwise from top left) Iron gates lead to the walled kitchen garden; formal parterre with box, lavender and euphorbia; *Cortaderia selloana* with mown path; parchment-coloured miscanthus ‘Ferner Osten’; frost lends texture to the formal pond; steps edged with mounds of *Hebe rakaiensis*
INSET *Euphorbia characias wulfenii*

the lake we put in a new boathouse, refurbished the wooden bridge, and added decking areas and planting.

“Closer to the house we created a formal garden with a pleached avenue of Caucasian limes, *Tilia euchlora* (which is more aphid-resistant than common lime, *Tilia europaea*). There’s a formal pond with a millstone fountain at one end and a new herb garden, with lavender, clipped yew and box for evergreen interest.”

When Ian and his team started work on the kitchen garden there was literally nothing there. “It was just a field,” he says. “Once we’d established the client’s requirements we put in some green



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architecture and focal points to help organise the space. That's always the starting point; begin with the structure then build from there.

"Creating structure helps you organise the site in terms of route-ways and destinations. Once you have the destinations worked out and the routes between them, then you can create places to stop and pause, using strategic focal points to draw you through from one area to the next. The plants are really the last thing you consider – and here we chose plants for a long season of interest, including evergreen shrubs, grasses and perennials with good winter seedheads."

The design is a combination of formal and informal areas – using straight lines and smooth curves in the formal areas, and softer, more sinuous lines in the informal areas. "There's a gentle transition from the formal garden, closer to the house, to the more informal garden and the fields beyond," explains Ian. "This idea can work on smaller scale projects too – you can emphasise different types of space using different planting styles, to give them each a separate character."

"For the formal architectural effects we've used clipped box, yew and large mounds of *Hebe rakaiensis*," he says. "Stands of *Euphorbia characias wulfenii*

and hydrangeas, with their parchment-coloured seedheads, offer strong shapes and texture too, alongside the bold foliage shapes of hellebores, acanthus and evergreen ferns."

Grasses play a design role too. "Deschampsia has tufty seedheads so we use it en masse in the outer reaches of the garden because it has a more relaxed, meadowy feel," says Ian. "Miscanthus on the other hand is taller, more elegant and sculptural."

"We've used *M. sinensis* 'Gracillimus' in the formal gardens as a statement plant. It has a fine leaf that's not too heavy." By the lake, *M. sinensis* 'Ferner Osten' partners bulrushes (*Typha latifolia*) because it has a wafty, reed-like look and sways beautifully in the breeze.

"Lawns are another useful design element," says Ian. "Leaving some of the lawn to grow a bit longer brings a different

GREEN ARCHITECTURE (clockwise from above) Hellebores rise from a stone font with ferns at its feet by the pond, leading to the main lawn; horse chestnut buds in frost; a raised brick-built pond framed by box hedging and roses; steps leading up to the house are bordered with box cubes **CENTRE** Ice-encrusted hydrangea seedheads offer an air of faded elegance

texture to the design. You can mow a path through longer grass to influence how people move through the garden."

Ian says that bare soil in winter offers a bit of clear space in the garden, allowing sculptural plants with a strong silhouette room to breathe. "It's nice to have a quieter season in winter when the borders are more or less empty. There are pared-back browns, russets and evergreen foliage, and it's nice to have that contrast with the other seasons."

"There are willows and dogwoods for blasts of colour; you don't notice them in summer, but in winter they really shine. We've planted ours where they'll catch the winter sunlight."

"If you fill a garden with evergreens it would be very dull. You need deciduous plants to help ring the changes and to appreciate the seasons more." ❁



We chose plants for a long season of interest, including shrubs and grasses



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