

PHOTOGRAPHS: Marianne Majerus WORDS: Veronica Peerless

WIDE BLUE YONDER

Acres Wild's Blue Doors garden blends seamlessly from formal spaces out into the surrounding open countryside

A kinetic sculpture of sycamore samaras draws the eye back into the garden from the incredible views over the Arun Valley



Acres Wild
Debbie Roberts MSGD and Ian Smith MSGD established Acres Wild in 1988. They specialise in the design and masterplanning of larger country gardens in south-east England and are three-time winners of the SGD Large Residential Garden Award, and the Grand Award in 2014. www.acreswild.co.uk



ABOVE From the top of the garden, shaped planting beds containing *Stipa gigantea* and *Euphorbia x martini* swoop down the slope.
RIGHT The new timber car port lies beyond the circular lawns, which are hugged by borders of 'Iceberg' roses, *Salix viminalis* 'Mainacht', *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire' and *Hydrangea* 'Little Lime'.

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Nestling in the rolling hills of the Arun Valley in West Sussex is a remote garden so in tune with its surroundings that it looks like it has always been there. In fact, Blue Doors was created just a few years ago by Debbie Roberts MSGD and Ian Smith MSGD of Acres Wild.

Roberts and Smith are something quite rare in garden design – a partnership that has endured for more than 30 years. Having met while studying landscape architecture at Leeds Polytechnic (now Leeds Beckett University) in the 1980s, they migrated back to their home county of Sussex and were given

the opportunity to design a couple of gardens for clients of a local garden centre. “We found we enjoyed the detailed design process of working in a garden environment,” explains Smith. They came up with the name Acres Wild early on. “It’s proved to be a good one,” says Roberts. “We focused on larger country gardens because of our background, and feel comfortable working on a larger, more landscape-scale canvas.”

The simple things
The duo are much in demand for their simple, relaxed gardens, but insist they don’t have a signature style. “If we do, it’s ‘What are the issues and how can we best solve them?’ We take cues from the site and the house and use solid, simple materials that aren’t trying to attract attention,” says Smith. “Clients say that they can’t imagine their gardens could have been any other way,” Roberts adds: “None of our gardens shout ‘design’. And the more you can do with plants in terms of function and structure, the better – not least because of the budget.”





“INTRIGUINGLY, THEY SUSPECT PREVIOUS INPUT FROM A YOUNG JOHN BROOKES, WHO ALSO WORKED THEIR ‘PATCH’”

All of which is very much in evidence at Blue Doors. The brick-and-flint house was a weekend retreat for a London couple, Sarah and David Surtees, who found Acres Wild online, and knew they would be the perfect fit for their sloping one-acre plot, which nudges against the flint walls of the Arundel Castle estate. They wanted the garden to feel like part of the landscape, with seating and dining areas, a kitchen garden and a solution to their parking problem: the garage had been incorporated into the house, and there was no drive or parking, just a country track.

Roberts and Smith work jointly on projects, but one always takes the lead – in this case, Roberts. The garden was essentially a blank canvas dotted with mature trees although, intriguingly, they suspect previous input from a young John Brookes, who also worked their ‘patch’. An existing terrace on the south side had a wall of double thickness brick, plus paving slabs set in a grid pattern – both of which were hallmarks of his style. “We’ve worked on a few projects where we’ve known John was involved or suspect he might have been, but there is no mention of this garden in his archives.”

In the frame

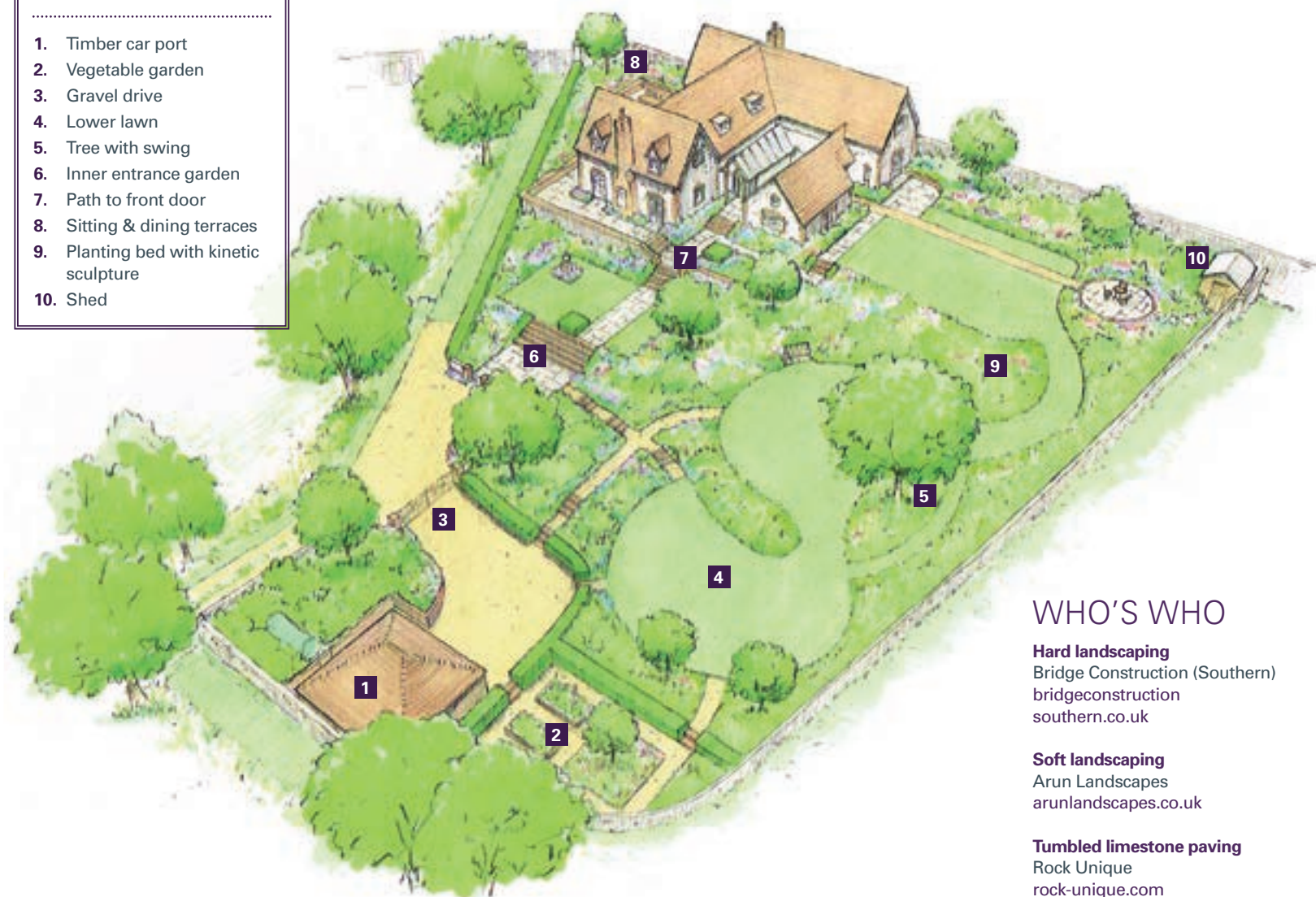
The wall worked so well that Roberts chose to add to it. Wide walls of local brick now contain the dining and sitting terraces (the latter home to a fire pit) on the south and east sides of the house, and frame the path to the front door. The brick is complemented by tumbled limestone paving, “chosen because the texture and material reference the underlying chalk soil.”



OPPOSITE, TOP The approach to the house was reconfigured to allow for parking and turning **BOTTOM** The new hedged inner garden features a lawn and tables of box with a limestone paved path, white roses and *Centranthus* **ABOVE** Now there is a sense of arrival with brick steps to the front door

GARDEN PLAN

1. Timber car port
2. Vegetable garden
3. Gravel drive
4. Lower lawn
5. Tree with swing
6. Inner entrance garden
7. Path to front door
8. Sitting & dining terraces
9. Planting bed with kinetic sculpture
10. Shed



WHO'S WHO

Hard landscaping

Bridge Construction (Southern)
bridgeconstruction
southern.co.uk

Soft landscaping

Arun Landscapes
arunlandscapes.co.uk

Tumbled limestone paving

Rock Unique
rock-unique.com

Plants

Provender Nurseries
provendernurseries.co.uk
Palmstead Nurseries
palmstead.co.uk
Knoll Gardens
knollgardens.co.uk

Carport

The Classic Barn Company
oakgarages.com

Shed

Posh Shed Company
theposhshedcompany.co.uk

Kinetic sculpture

David Watkinson
davidwatkinsonsculpture.co.uk

Bench

Tom Nicholson Smith
tomnicholsonsmith.com

"THE REST OF THE GARDEN COMPRISES SLOPING LAWNS AND BOLD SWATHES OF PLANTING IN BORDERS AND PLANTED BANKS"

The terraces sorted, the biggest challenge was parking and turning. This was solved by tucking away a timber-framed carport against the lower east boundary, and reconfiguring the approach to the house. This is now much more organised – a small gravel drive outside a hedged inner garden, wide brick steps and a neat square lawn give a proper sense of arrival. Next to the carport lies the vegetable garden, complete with raised beds, a fruit cage, a small water trough and a sculptural bench.

The rest of the garden comprises sloping lawns and bold swathes of planting in borders and planted banks. Plant choices were naturally edited as the garden sits on chalk, but Roberts was keen to limit the colour palette further to just white and blue flowers. After successional colour from thousands of blue and

white spring bulbs, the garden peaks in early summer with the first flush of roses ('Iceberg' and 'Penelope') and early perennials, including *Campanula lactiflora* 'Prichard's Variety', *Centranthus ruber* 'Albus', hardy geraniums, *Iris* 'Jane Phillips' and *Salvia x sylvestris* 'Mainacht'. The garden peaks again in late summer, when white hydrangeas, blue *Perovskia* and masses of late-season perennials such as *Echinacea* and *Eryngium* come to the fore.

Sympathetic structure

Mound-forming evergreens such as *Cistus x hybridus*, *Viburnum tinus*, *Choisya ternata*, *Hebe rakaiensis* and *Buxus sempervirens* provide structure and mimic the clumps of trees in the wider landscape, while swathes of ornamental grasses including *Miscanthus sinensis*





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‘Kleine Silberspinne’ and ‘Morning Light’, *Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Hameln’ and *P. ‘Fairy Tails’* reflect the colours and textures of the arable fields beyond. Areas of unmown grass around the boundaries help the garden bleed into the landscape.

The clients are thrilled with the garden, so much so that they have moved to the house permanently. Roberts and Smith are also delighted. “It unites the house to the landscape and is maturing well,” says

Roberts. Is there anything she would change? “No – the design evolved and simplified during the process, in close collaboration with Sarah, and the final iteration was where it should be.” What would their advice be for designers working on a similar sort of project? “Do not impose yourself,” says Smith. “Pick up on the atmosphere; use materials of the place and remove all extraneous details that detract.”

They say their own work has simplified over the years, too, with a ‘pare back and simplify’ formula that works – there’s now a lead-in time approaching a year for new projects and most clients are prepared to wait. “We recently had an enquiry from someone who had spotted a garden on our website that is now 22 years old,” says Roberts. “We keep it there because it doesn’t look dated. We try to create real, comfortable gardens with a timeless sense of place, that hold you in the moment.” ○

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Take a seat and enjoy the garden and views from the AdirondackE style chairs on the sitting terrace; a handcrafted bench in the vegetable garden; around the square table on the dining terrace with its BrookesE inspired walls; or a swing by Sitting Spiritually