

BUILDING *On the Past*

Working on a limited budget, Sarah and Sal Pajwani have creatively adapted the 1970s features of their Berkshire garden to develop a unique style, part prairie, part cottage – and full of character

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS NICOLA STOCKEN

From a former blank canvas, the house now looks onto a wildlife pond, fringed with kingcups and irises.

AS EACH SEASON UNFOLDS, THE GARDEN at St Timothee changes character, shifting imperceptibly from summer's spontaneity – all swaying grasses and flowers – to autumn's leafy abandonment, and then the stark beauty of winter's silent silhouettes, before the ebullience of spring bursts onto the scene. "Our house sits in the middle of the garden with lots of windows so there are ever-present views of the garden, which means it has to look good all year round," explains Sarah Pajwani, who has guided the development of this distinctive garden from an unremarkable two-acre field.

Many dream of creating a garden from scratch, but it is not without its challenges, as Sarah and her husband, Sal, discovered a decade ago when faced with a largely empty field and ugly dilapidated

outbuildings. "Initially, we found it hard to make sense of the space," Sarah recalls. "We'd never before had a blank canvas, nor lived in a house long enough to do much more than nurture what was already there." Fortunately, the couple did inherit some magnificent mature trees, among them a *Magnolia x soulangeana* near the pond, a line of poplars running along the western boundary and, to the east, woodland that includes a red oak, copper beech, white poplar and silver birches.

The house was built in 1937, with two wisterias trained up its walls, and a large lawn dotted with apple and pear trees and clumps of pampas grass. "They were truly 1970s, but we were creating the garden on a budget and I couldn't just buy all new plants, so I tried to use everything that was here," explains Sarah. The first major task was to rabbit-proof the entire garden, and then to plant trees and hedges to define different spaces within it. "Sal and I planted the hornbeam hedge as tiny knee-high twigs," she recalls.

In the early days, while Sal focused on the heavy digging, sifting out endless bricks and builder's rubble, Sarah envisaged the style of garden they would create. "At first, I was very much feeling my way," she explains. "I love so many plants, especially perennials and grasses and, while vast swathes of a limited palette of plants look lovely, I wanted to grow as many different ones as possible. I describe the style here as 'cottage meets prairie' – it's a bit of everything."

First, though, came the challenge of linking the house to its garden. "Originally, the house looked as if it had just been stuck in the middle of a field," Sarah points out. The couple asked designers Acres Wild to create a scheme that incorporated new paths around the house, linking to seating and areas of planting within the wider garden. "Once we had a layout, we wanted to plan and plant the borders gradually ourselves, but it was essential to have a coherent vision from the outset – otherwise a garden becomes disjointed as you go along."

The new design integrated a wider front terrace with steps to the east that descend to several new paths. One leads around a herbaceous bed that combines ornamental grasses (*calamagrostis*, *deschampsia*, *Stipa gigantea*, *pennisetum* and *Hordeum jubatum*) with hardy geraniums, roses

Below Wisteria, planted in the 1930s, clothes the house; the terracotta pot has been converted into a rain water butt.



Top An old apple tree blossoms above a seating area in the lawn. **Middle** White-flowered bleeding heart, now called *Lamprocapnos spectabilis*. **Bottom** Sarah Pajwani with her spaniel Domino, and *Wisteria sinensis*.

and irises, giving way later in the season to prairie favourites such as coneflowers and sea hollies. Arriving at a wildlife pond edged in kingcups, rushes and flag irises, the path ends at a bench in the shade of a mature magnolia that peaks in early spring, shortly before blossom breaks on the fruit trees.

Although established only a few years ago, the pond is already home to frogs and broody mallards, who are invariably chased away by the family's spaniel, Domino. "Sitting on the bench behind the pond makes me feel far away from everything," says Sarah. "Possibly it's the effect of looking across water. I find it very soothing." Forming a spectacular backdrop behind the pond are several clumps of the original pampas grasses, moved there with a digger. "By September, the garden is much more muted, and the pampas clumps are like fireworks coming out from behind. It's an ideal position for them."

Other survivors from the original garden include a pair of head-high box balls, one of which was moved to make way for a path that links with a sight line from the house, and ends in a box parterre. Amazingly, the box plant survived, and two more were added. "None were pruned last year," says Sarah. "Sometimes you can be too fussy and perfectionist in a garden. I have periods of being quite controlling, but others when I accept what's



planted with a blend of tulips – dusky ‘Paul Scherer’, orange ‘Ballerina’ and vibrant pink ‘Doll’s Minuet’. By summer, blue perovskia has taken over.

Old apple trees crop up throughout the garden, overhanging paths or seating areas, and combined into informal borders and island beds that Sarah has both designed and planted. “I think trees are at their most beautiful in winter when you just see the skeleton. It’s almost a knee-jerk reaction to think about colour, but shapes are so important,” she adds. It was only as she started planning the first border that Sarah realised the enormity of the task ahead. “I had little gardening experience and no planting plan, but that was part of the fun,” she says.

Freed from the constraints of a rule book, she envisaged roses softened by the movement of grasses, only to be advised against it. “That made me all the more determined to make it work,” she recalls. Today, the sight of *Rosa* ‘Tranquillity’ interspersed with *Stipa tenuissima* gives a modern flavour and vindicates her decision. “I think we’re all becoming much more relaxed about our gardens, allowing plants space to develop and do their own thing.”

The *apple tree* looks as if it’s having a bad hair day, but it is a wonderful sight in winter, *dusted in frost*



Establishing structure is a work in progress. “I’m feeling my way with evergreen shrubs – they are so large and dark; I like lightness, and to be able to see through the planting,” she explains. At intervals along the borders, she has planted small magnolias and shrubs such as *Cotinus coggygria* ‘Royal Purple’ and a number of viburnums. However, Sarah insists that plants are very much a matter of personal taste. “There’s a wonderful *Cotoneaster horizontalis* on the corner of one of the sheds, which a friend dubbed a ‘car park plant,’” she says. “But it’s the perfect plant for that spot, and it loves being there.”

Dogwoods grow well in the garden’s alkaline soil – a mix of heavy clay and chalk – and closely cropped clumps appear throughout the borders, adding colourful stems in winter, and foliage in the warmer months. Another favourite is spurge, not only the shorter *Euphorbia griffithii* ‘Fireglow’ which adds drama among tulips such as ‘Ballerina’, ‘Abu Hassan’ and ‘White Dream’, but also great outcrops of *Euphorbia characias*. Less lofty bulbs and perennials, such as low-growing grape hyacinths, blue spikes of bugle, clumps of alchemilla and bergenia, thrive on border edges, while mounds of hardy geraniums glue the planting together.

going on and don’t clip too tightly.” The huge box balls stand close to an old apple tree, ‘Worcester Pearmain’, that blossoms above chairs and table on the lawn. “It looks as if it’s having a bad hair day, but seen from the kitchen window, it is such a wonderful sight in the middle of winter, dusted in frost.”

So too are the hedges in the box parterre: here the tops are rounded, a look that at first perplexed gardener Marek Bahno, who maintains all the hedges as well as the lawns, freeing up Sarah to focus on planting. “I think sharp, 90° angles on hedges look too hard-edged for my style of garden – the idea of softer rounded tops is something I first saw in Mary Keen’s garden,” says Sarah. Wedged between two handsome brick outbuildings, the parterre is

Top Vigorous *Clematis montana* is absolutely smothered in pale-pink blooms in mid-April. **Above** Shade-loving epimediums and luzula edge a wooden path; large pampas grasses were relocated here.

Above A sweeping curve of tulips ‘Ballerina’, ‘Abu Hassan’, ‘White Dream’ and ‘Paul Scherer’, mixed with grasses and cornus.

Right Clumps of zesty *Euphorbia epithymoides*.

Left The richly coloured flowers of *Magnolia liliiflora* ‘Nigra’.



Painting with tulips

Blend them in vibrant combinations, use contrasting perennials or team with a plant in the same tone to bring out the best in tulips

This garden feels wonderfully relaxed, and Sarah takes as much delight from seeing plans come to fruition as from unexpected self-seeders or planting combinations. “I hear people talk about stamping your personality on your garden, but that’s not what I want to do,” she explains. “Ours is a partnership, not a dictatorship.” Throughout the garden’s evolution, an old rhyme has played in the back of her mind: ‘Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.’

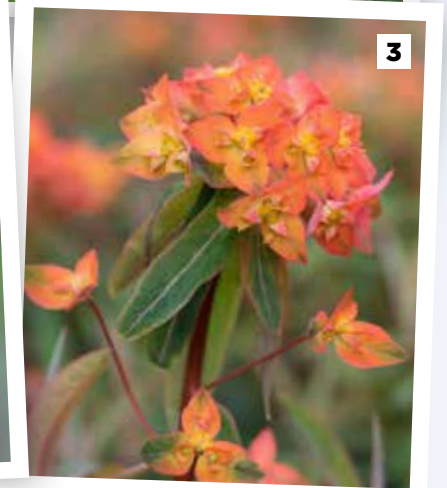
And, in a curious way, it is a theme that flows through the garden. “I embraced what was here partly because we had a limited budget, but also because I felt it important to love what you already have,” says Sarah, who even hung onto two inherited ornaments – a bizarre Venus de Milo and a stone owl. But she has also introduced lots of new elements such as trees, border plants and new planting combinations, injecting freshness and excitement into the garden. Then, there are lots of ‘borrowed’ plants, gifts from friends and family. Some of the hardy geraniums, meanwhile, originally came from her mother’s garden: “She was a very keen gardener. We lived near the gardens of Heligan when they really were lost, and I played in the nearby woods.”

“People talk about stamping your *personality* on your garden, but that’s *not* what I want to do”

Finally, blue is the colour that helps to unify the different areas of the garden, blending pinks and lilacs in one border with oranges and yellows in the next, followed by wine red and deep purple in another. “I love blue flowers, and blue shades do seem to work especially well in the English light, set against dark thundery skies, but to overdo it would become boring,” Sarah notes. Sal’s favourite blue flower is *Salvia* ‘Amistad’, a surprise present he received from Fergus Garrett while visiting Great Dixter on his 50th birthday.

Recently, Sarah’s 85-year-old father came to visit, and was somewhat dismissive about the ornamental grasses – until they moved and were caught in the light. “Grasses soften everything by adding a hazy effect, and prevent a garden being too cloying, too perfect,” Sarah explains. “Creating this garden has changed me. I’ve softened, as the garden has taught me to give plants – and people – their space.” ■

The garden at St Timothee opens in aid of the National Garden Scheme on 14-15 June and 14 August 2019, and for groups of 10+ by prior arrangement. ngs.org.uk



1 A small olive tree, *Olea europaea*, in the centre of the parterre was a moving-in gift from Sarah’s sister. **2** The maroon flowers of *Geranium phaeum* var. *phaeum* ‘Samobor’ partner well with tulips in orange or red tones. **3** Vivid *Euphorbia griffithii* ‘Fireglow’ has fiery heads in spring and summer. **4** Tulip ‘Rosalie’ emerges from a mass of delicate *Dicentra formosa*, with its ferny foliage and pale-pink flowers.