

FEATURE GARDEN NORNEY WOOD

NURTURED BACK TO ITS FULL POTENTIAL BY OWNERS JEAN AND RICHARD THOMPSON, **NORNEY WOOD** NOW SERVES AS A HAVEN FOR BOTH NATURE AND ITS VISITORS, AIMING TO ENCOURAGE A SENSE OF STEWARDSHIP FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AS WELL AS A RESOURCE FOR PLANT KNOWLEDGE

Jean and Richard Thompson purchased their Edwardian home and the surrounding garden and woodland in 2006. Visitors to Norney Wood step into more than just their back garden, though. Inspired by Gertrude Jekyll and settled in the Surrey Hills, Norney Wood adopts a modern twist in more ways than one.

The private garden is open to the public for a range of events throughout the year, hoping to inspire its visitors through its remarkable beauty as a ▶





nostalgic English country garden and its contemporary ecological approach.

Strong perpendicular lines of hard landscaping and extensive hedging structure the space, while traditional plants including roses, lavender, geranium and nepeta are block planted and bursting full of scent. Water features throughout the garden create a tranquil atmosphere, and a natural woodland also surrounds the space.

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But Norney Wood wasn't always this idyllic; in fact it has been crafted over the course of more than 10 years. Work commenced in January 2007 to transform the 10 acres. “The garden was tired, overgrown and needed to be brought back to life,” explains Jean.

Most of the space was made up of mown lawns leading to natural areas of overgrown woodland, where laurel had been allowed to grow into large trees which dominated the space. This meant the surrounding beech trees had grown to 40ft to compete for space. The terrace garden had been completely lost in undergrowth and was being destroyed by bamboo. What little flowering there was had been demolished by free roaming deer and rabbits. Jean and Richard could see the garden's potential though, with the beech,

oak, larch and scots pine trees in particular attracting their interest, and a large bank of rhododendrons providing hope.

Working with Acres Wild to create the initial design for the garden, it was important to root the garden firmly into its historical context and location. There was to be a contrast between the strong underlying design and the exuberant naturalistic planting, as distinctive areas extend around the house in a series of linking spaces.

“Books about and by Gertrude Jekyll and her partnership with Lutyens have mostly inspired us,” Richard tells us. “In particular, a book entitled ‘Garden Ornament’ by Gertrude Jekyll published by Country Life in 1918.”

The initial phase was the creation of the formal gardens directly behind the house and the West Courtyard Garden to the right of the house.

Four crab apple trees mark the entrance to the West Courtyard Garden, opening up to *Acer palmatum* ‘Bloodgood’ underplanted with *Hakonechloa macra* and ferns. Two large terracotta pots filled with *Hosta* ‘Christmas Tree’ and dotted with allium are strategically placed at the head of the path. This leads alongside the house, past *Rhododendron* ‘Daviesii’, *Alchemilla mollis* and through yew hedging. There's also a small blade fountain which cascades into the pond from the bargate wall, and is filled with a variety of water plants. From the West Courtyard Garden, glimpses of the Lawn Terrace Garden and the Pleached Lime Walk with a bank bursting full of rhododendrons can be seen.

A nepeta and rose path borders the Lawn Terrace while *Rosa* ‘Gertrude Jekyll’ grow along the house. When originally planted though, instead of a vibrant pink, the flowers bloomed a creamy pink-apricot colour. Sending a replacement flower, David Austen was equally puzzled. Jean and Richard eventually found that the mystery rose was a combination of *Rosa* Tea Clipper ‘Ausrover’ and *Rosa* ‘Gentle Hermione’ and today it grows in arches which replicate the gable ends of Norney Wood.

The strong architectural features of the nepeta and rose path and the Pleached Lime Walk link the house to the garden. The pleached Limes are underplanted with seasonal interest, as *Helleborus*, allium, *Pulmonaria* and *Convallaria majalis* burst through in the spring and geranium, roses, ferns, *Hosta* and *Rodgersia* bloom in the summer.

The ‘thunder house’ lies at the heart of the garden, where visitors are able to view most of what's on offer and it is inspired by a passage in Gertrude Jekyll's writings: “Apparently, Gertrude Jekyll liked to be outside but undercover to watch thunderstorms,” explains Jean. “It turns

out that this building bears a striking resemblance to the Thunder House in her garden at Munstead Wood."

The main formal water feature sits in the tranquillity garden, named not just because the calm sound of water encapsulated within this space. Simple planting decorates the borders, with *Agapanthus* on either side of the blade fountain, yew balls, *Acer palmatum* 'Osakazuki' and *Rosa* 'Gertrude Jekyll' and 'Gentle Hermione' filling the air with a sweet aroma.

The second phase involved the removal of a large portion of the laurel, though some was kept to create a natural laurel grove. This revealed a line of beech trees which now lead to a natural pond. Over time, various plants and grasses have taken root around the edge, giving the pond a natural look and feel.

The East Courtyard Garden and Hot Summer Garden were developed during the third phase. The East Courtyard Garden mainly uses hard landscaping, as walkways move through *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Limelight', *Wisteria floribunda*, *Heuchera* 'Green Spice' and *Campanula lactiflora*.

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Flanking the steps to the Hot Summer Garden are mounds of *Hebe rakaiensis* behind which are the chalice shaped flowers of *Zantedeschia*. The area itself is bursting full of bright and scented summer plants, including *Verbena bonariensis*, *Crocsmia* 'Lucifer', *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna', *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire', and *Hemerocallis* 'Chicago Fire'.

But Jean and Richard didn't just want to create something which was aesthetically pleasing. Sustainability was central to the project from the very beginning. By keeping the 10 acres of woodland wild, it is a haven for wildlife; from deer, badgers and foxes to hummingbird hawk moths, bats and woodpeckers. As the garden is fenced off, there is minimal damage from the outside wildlife and Jean and Richard are able to continue to enjoy their space in harmony with nature.

This nature-focus approach extends to their home: "It was important to turn our early 20th Century house into a warm and inviting home using the most sustainable heat sources possible," Richard explains. Ground source heat pumps were installed, 7,000L underground



rainwater tanks collect rainwater from the roof and are automatically topped up by a borehole during dry periods, and solar panels generate electricity. Jean and Richard haven't stopped there, either. It is incredibly important that Norney Wood, as well as itself being sustainable and ecologically beneficial, serves as an educational tool.

The grounds are regularly opened to students who are participating in horticultural courses, and Norney Wood supports local artists and arts clubs through a range of activities and events, ranging from art classes, flower arranging classes, photography days and yoga.

Jean and Richard have also allocated a local primary school its own garden, which is used as part of its Key Stage 1 curriculum. The school has begun to create orienteering courses throughout the garden, so children can learn about maps and compasses as they find their way from tree to tree. "It is vital to teach them about their natural surroundings at an early age," says Richard. "The children are the future."

It is through engaging with the local community that Norney Wood hopes to serve as a window into the wonderful world of nature, showcasing the classic beauty of an English garden packed full of wildlife, alongside its 21st Century developments towards sustainability.