



Drifting dreamily into the distance

Flowing lines

White-flowered hydrangeas, roses, *Echinacea*, purple *Salvia* and *Pennisetum* 'Fairy Tails' AGM glow in the foreground as the sun rises over this West Sussex valley. Among hydrangeas in the background here are *Hydrangea paniculata* Little Lime and *H. macrophylla* 'Mariesii Grandiflora'.

Blue Doors garden in West Sussex is a rare example of a place and its surroundings being in total synergy, with sustained groups of planting leading the eye and focusing views

Author: Chris Young, Editor at Large. Photography: Marianne Majerus



Cosy corner

In the northern part of this West Sussex garden, spires of *Salvia* (syn. *Perovskia*) ‘Blue Spire’ AGM and *Stipa gigantea* seedheads take the eye to a summer-house... and onward to the steep chalk escarpment behind.

Welcome home

Part of the design brief was to establish a sense of arrival to the front door. Three sets of five, brick-edged steps – some more than 3m (10ft) wide – link the parking area to the house. Shallow scalloped brick walls scoop down to frame the path, giving the space a classic and timeless feel.



Veg out space

At the far end of the garden, tucked down by the carport, sits the small vegetable garden. Raised rectangular beds surround a waved oak bench by sculptor Tom Nicholson Smith – the restful antidote to any exertion given tending the crops.



Mounted and framed

Different levels enhance views from the front garden, framed between a Norway maple (on left) and a whitebeam (on right). Trimmed box adds solidity among froths of white *Anemone x hybrida* ‘Honorine Jobert’ AGM, *Centranthus ruber* ‘Albus’ and *Rosa Iceberg* (‘Korbin’) AGM.

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Designing gardens that sit within beautiful surroundings can be a real challenge. The owner or designer faces a dilemma: how much do you design and plant the garden when the landscape beyond is so special? This might be a rather lovely problem to have to solve, but trying to achieve the balance is a challenge for those living in rural landscapes.

Ironically (for someone who has now fallen in love with plants and gardens), a garden was never fully on the mind of Sarah Surtees and her husband David when they bought what were originally two farm cottages just outside Arundel in West Sussex. ‘We were weekenders from London, but wanted eventually to move here permanently, and came across the cottages for sale, which we renovated in 2013,’ Sarah says. ‘We were astonished by the views and the potential of the house, but the main requirement for the garden was a path from the drive to the front door.’

Yet this may belie Sarah’s sensitivity to design; trained as an interior designer she has a great eye for detail and was clear about the direction the garden should take. ‘When we started living here, it was evident that this is a special location, so we needed something that would merge with the surroundings. I started googling “meadow planting” and “prairie planting” and that’s how I came across the work of Acres Wild,’ she says.

Planting palette

Debbie Roberts and Ian Smith, from Acres Wild, have been working together for more than 30 years – and their office just happened to be 20 miles away. ‘We have created a lot of gardens on the South Downs so we knew the planting palette that was needed and the plants that grow best on this thin, chalky soil,’ says Debbie. The duo always work together but one always takes the lead with a client – as a result, Debbie and Sarah have now become good friends, working together on the ongoing changes to the garden.

Acres Wild has a relaxed, contemporary country style, with sweeps of herbaceous perennials, co-ordinated colour and plenty of usable space. Sarah’s brief included the need to establish a sense of arrival at the front door; to have a lateral connection between the two side gardens; and to have only blue and white flowers – an intentional link to the house name, Blue Doors. ‘We implemented the garden in two phases, in 2014 and 2015, and I’m so pleased we did,’ says Sarah, ‘as we needed that time to ensure all the plants were watered and tended while they established.’

‘Phasing the implementation was really useful,’ says Debbie, ‘as it helped us get to know the site even better with sun, shade and changing of the seasons. As a result we continued to refine and simplify the design over that time.’

The plot sits nestled at the bottom of a chalk escarpment, with a southern and northern part – effectively a back and front garden. But the front door sits on the side of the house, so the connecting ‘front’ garden was key to the design. As you drive down the long country lane, the front garden is now a wide, expansive space with pads and domes of box, mid-height yew hedges and plenty of planting. It’s a great bit of design. Not only does this space welcome you to the house, the front garden is also the starter for the rest of the site: turn left for a smaller, southern garden that leads off their kitchen and dining room; to the right is the northern garden, with lawn, huge beds, vegetable plot and garaging.

Simplicity of materials

Employing a simplicity of materials is an important design technique. Repetition and consistency of hard and soft materials make a space feel more cohesive. Acres Wild has done exactly this, with red brick paving connecting the brick and flint house; metal edging to the borders throughout; and tumbled limestone paving. So, too, the planting. With more than 70 different plants used across the garden, Debbie and Ian have responded to everything from shade to full sun, but with consistency using grasses, yew hedging, white roses, alliums, blue herbaceous perennials including *Nepeta racemosa* ‘Walker’s Low’ and *Geranium Rozanne* (‘Gerwat’), and evergreen shrubs.

So how has the past five years fared? There is no doubt that the garden at Blue Doors is in total visual harmony with its surroundings: the grasses echo the texture and colour of the arable fields; white flowers visually connect to the chalk escarpments; yew hedging and low brick walls mimic the neighbouring field hedgerow divisions.

On face value, this might seem a simple garden, simply filled with thousands of allium bulbs, hundreds of *Sesleria autumnalis* AGM and *Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Hameln’ AGM grasses, and masses of evergreen low shrubs such as *Hebe rakaiensis* AGM. But to describe it as ‘simple’ would be to overlook the deft touch of the designers. By planting in groups, focusing views and linking materials to the house and surrounds, they have created a rare example of a garden in total synergy with its surroundings. Who said achieving the balance couldn’t be done? ●

Chalky tones

In true country-garden style, roses abound with a mix of whites and soft pink: *Rosa Iceberg* (‘Korbin’) AGM and ‘Penelope’ AGM bring plenty of interest in summer – and act as a nod to the white chalk in the soil and surrounding landscape.

Dramatic focal point

David Watkinson’s sycamore seedhead sculpture sits in a bed bordering the northern lawn, surrounded by ephemeral wands of *Stipa gigantea* AGM.



The details



Blue Doors, near Arundel, West Sussex.

Open: this garden is not open to the public.

Size: 0.2ha (½ acre).

Soil: thin chalk.

Age: planted in two phases (2014 and 2015) and has been established fully since then.

Aspect: faces north, east and south, with a large escarpment to the west on neighbouring land. As the plot is in a valley, it experiences a range of weathers, and the coast is just 4 miles away.

Key season: April onwards; the garden continues to look good through winter with seedheads and grass silhouettes.

Key plants: blue- and white-flowered perennials and spring bulbs, especially delicate white daffodils and camassias.

Maintenance: part-time help from recent RHS Wisley graduate Jonathan Dakic, overseen by the hands-on owners.

Design: Acres Wild; acreswild.co.uk