

Terraced areas, each with its own purpose and planting scheme, relate to the adjoining cottages that make up Pip and Mark Cliff's home.

# *Level* BEST

Making sense of the multi-level house and garden at Home Farm while maintaining and enhancing views out to the rolling South Downs was a challenge successfully met by designers Acres Wild and implemented by owners Pip and Mark Cliff and family

WORDS **MAX CRISFIELD** PHOTOGRAPHS **MARIANNE MAJERUS**





**Above** A nod to the countryside and the property's farming heritage, old staddle stones mark the start of a pathway; try *Rosa* 'Sir John Betjeman' for similar crimson flowers. **Below** Banks of purple 'Munstead' lavender make an aromatic surround for this perfectly placed bench.

*“We are a big family and we are out here all the time, often together, often entertaining, and the garden now works for us rather than against us”*

the back. These appear as exquisite mise-en-scène, inviting you to explore further.

But it wasn't always like this. When Pip and Mark first viewed the house and its five-acre garden in 2013, it was the view that hooked them. And what a view! “Our overriding motive, our whole vision for the garden, was to make the most of that,” says Mark, indicating the rolling South Downs, which rise up to greet you like an Eric Ravilious painting.

The trouble was, this glorious panorama was pretty much obscured. As Mark recalls, “Everything was enclosed – the tennis court, the pool, the vegetable garden...” Debbie Roberts of Acres Wild, the Sussex-based design company who took on the project, also remembers it being rather hemmed in and uninviting: “Everything was disparate and nothing really hung together as a piece.”

The house too was somewhat at odds with itself. It had originally been separate farm cottages, and although the cottages had long since been conjoined, there remained an awkwardness in their enforced proximity. This was felt most explicitly in the confusion of levels that made up the house.

This was a big issue when it came to the redesign and build. “Before all the work,” Mark recalls, “wherever you stepped out of the house you were immediately confronted with steps, either going up or down to the next level. I think there were

seven or eight levels in all.” Thankfully, as part of the extensive house refurbishment, some of these levels would be altered, giving Acres Wild an opportunity to simplify the garden accordingly and create a series of intimate ‘garden rooms’ or terraces that directly related to their corresponding interiors.

“This is where Acres Wild have really been so clever,”

says Pip. “What they’ve done has transformed the house and the whole experience. We are a big family and we are out here all the time, often together, often entertaining, and the garden now works for us rather than against us.”

All of this reconstruction meant major earthworks and a lot of disruption. The sheer amount of hard landscaping was slightly alarming at first, admits Pip. But she had faith in the ability of Acres Wild to soften this with sympathetic planting.

Pip had contacted Debbie and Acres Wild after visiting friends in Guernsey. “I was absolutely blown away by their garden,” she recalls. “It had everything we wanted: all the landscaping and the beautiful trailing plants softening the edges.” Then, when she was back in Sussex, Pip happened to be browsing the

**Above** The magnificent views enjoyed by the garden have been opened up, yet the ‘rooms’ by the house retain an intimacy. **Right** *Rosa* ‘Olivia Rose Austin’ with *Salvia nemorosa* ‘Caradonna’.

The first thing that strikes you on visiting Home Farm – the West Sussex residence of Pip and Mark Cliff – is how everything sits together with quiet equanimity. There seems to be a genuine dialogue taking place among the house, the garden and the wider landscape.

This becomes apparent even before you’ve seen the main garden. As you approach the front, with its multi-stemmed amelanchiers emerging from a sea of *Pennisetum* ‘Fairy Tails’, there’s already a process of seduction at play. The house’s expansive front windows offer tantalising glimpses across the dark interior out towards flickers of colour and movement that are framed by the corresponding windows at







Steps lead up to where loungers await beneath the spreading branches of a cherry tree; silvery perovskia joins pink roses and purple salvia.



Acres Wild website and came across pictures of it. “I thought, ‘Hang on a minute, I know that garden!’”

Mark and Pip were keen to create a similar aesthetic for their own garden, with all the poise and romance of a classic English country garden. They wanted it to be natural and unforced, graceful and timeless. Plant wise, there were obvious contenders. Roses, of course (lots and lots of roses), then nepetas and lavenders, hydrangeas and hardy geraniums, phloxes and salvias – all in a subtle palette of soft whites, mauves and blues.

Within this colour scheme, each ‘room’ offers a variation on a theme. The dining terrace (outside the kitchen) is awash with blues and whites – a loose co-mingling of *Perovskia* ‘Blue Spires’, *Centranthus ruber* ‘Alba’, *Salvia nemorosa* ‘Caradonna’ and *Rosa* ‘Susan Williams-Ellis’. The pond terrace (outside the sitting room) is framed with an indigo border of low-level lavender ‘Munstead’ hedging, offset with the soft pink blushes of *Rosa* ‘Olivia Rose Austin’. And the sheltered upper terrace pairs the aromatic *Geranium macrorrhizum* ‘Spessart’ (perfect for the dry shade there) and the roses ‘Desdemona’ and ‘The Alnwick Rose’, both chosen for their gorgeous Old Rose fragrance. Divisions between the terraces, meanwhile, are marked by the supremely architectural *Stipa gigantea*.

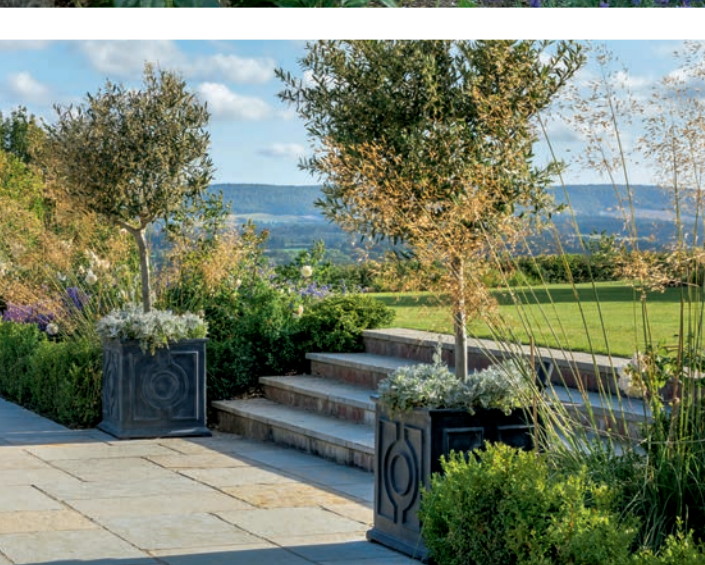
Other ornamental grasses – and there are ribbons of them running throughout the garden – include feathery pennisetums (‘Hameln’ and ‘Fairy Tails’),

**Above** The swimming pool terrace benefits from the shelter of an old stone wall and a traditional black barn.

**Right** *Stipa gigantea* divides the terraces in the lightest, airiest way.

**Below** The convivial dining terrace, with plants on all sides.





**Above** A strawberry crop in the neat, productive kitchen garden.

**Left** Olive trees in weighty planters act as full stops at the end of the poolside borders.

**Below** *Geranium* 'Dreamland' edges the terrace's paving slabs.



stately miscanthus ('Ferner Osten', 'Morning Light' and 'Silberfeder'), the semi-evergreen Japanese sedge *Carex* 'Ice Dance' and the Japanese forest grass *Hakonechloa macra*. Together they lend a contemporary edge to the traditional country-garden planting. "We specifically asked for grasses: we wanted them to soften everything, to make it all more naturalistic and to add movement," says Mark.

Opening up the vista to the South Downs was thankfully far less complex and disruptive than all the re-leveling. Hedges were either removed completely, replaced with lower-level planting (including a new lavender hedge between the vegetable garden and greenhouse area) or significantly reduced. The large beech hedge, which divides the sloping lawn from the tennis court, was halved in height. This liberated the view of the Downs and the magnificent oak that stands sentinel on the crest of the western slope, while still providing protection from the prevailing winds.

The owners, and Mark in particular, are both keen gardeners, which perhaps explains why he took the bold and unusual step of sourcing, laying out and planting himself. "With the help of our three daughters," he is quick to add. "And the boyfriends too!" says Pip. This must have been quite an undertaking, since there were thousands of plants





on the plan supplied by Acres Wild, but Mark is sanguine: “I had no idea that this was unusual; so it was naïvety really that allowed us to do it.”

Mark stuck pretty faithfully to Acres Wild’s planting plan, particularly around the house, but he also went ‘off piste’ at times, mainly for budgetary reasons but also where sourcing proved difficult or if he simply felt like “playing around a bit”. Three years on and Mark continues to tweak and edit, adding bulbs and climbers and whatever else piques his interest. For the family, the garden is a work in progress, “an ongoing project,” as Mark calls it. He has already planted out an orchard with mulberries and quinces, cherries and apples, and is working on plans for a naturalised wildflower meadow. Luckily, one day a week he has the help of a gardener, Marcus, whom he considers indispensable.

The initial ambitions for this garden might have seemed contradictory at first. The overarching vision was to make an expansive, open-armed gesture out towards the surrounding countryside. At the same time, there was a desire for intimacy and pragmatism, a need to fashion discrete, usable garden spaces with their own clear identity and relationship to the house. What Acres Wild – with the help of their clients’ obvious passion and drive – have proven is that these two ideas need not be mutually exclusive. Sure, it’s a tricky balancing act to pull off, but, in Mark’s own words, “they’ve nailed it; they really have nailed it.” ■

*The overarching vision was to make an expansive, open-armed gesture out towards the surrounding countryside*

**Above** Lavender and Rosa ‘The Alnwick Rose’, plus agapanthus and olives in pots.

**Below** Blue Geranium ‘Brookside’ and the grass *Sesleria autumnalis* in a border that offers impact without interrupting the view.

