

An olive tree, underplanted
with *Nepeta x faassenii*,
stands at the centre of the
box-edged parterre

A FINE BALANCE

*The wild and the manicured get
equal billing in Sarah Pajwani's beautiful
Berkshire garden*



The path from the front terrace to the parterre is edged in self-seeding *Erigeron karvinskianus*. The wisteria on the house and the mop-head hydrangeas were already here



AT HOME WITH...

Owners Sarah and Sal Pajwani and their cocker spaniel Domino.

House A 1930s house in Berkshire with older outbuildings.

Features A two-acre garden including a wildlife pond, parterre, meadow areas and borders designed to look good all year round. Soil ranges from heavy clay to chalk.

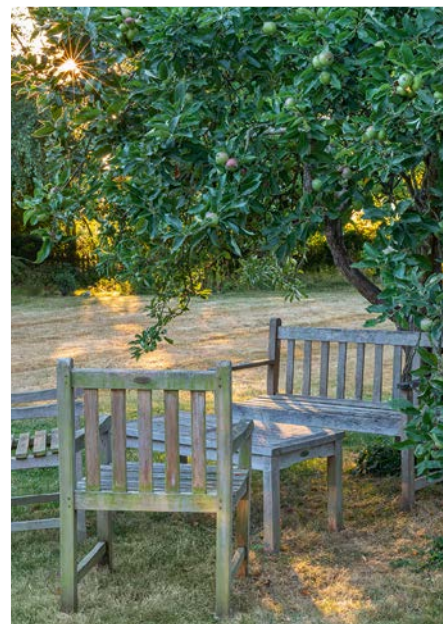
Pure coincidence brought Sarah and Sal Pajwani to this house and garden on the outskirts of Maidenhead. Though they'd talked about looking for a new home, they'd made the sensible decision to wait and see which senior schools their two boys (now grown up) got into before making a move. But that all went out of the window when, having taken the morning off to take their eldest to an admissions interview, they spotted a promising looking property in the local paper, just around the corner from the cafe they were in. 'We phoned the estate agent, told him we were free there and then, and that was that,' says Sarah. The house was hidden away at the end of a lane, surrounded by meadowland and woods. 'It felt like the start of an adventure. The two-acre garden wasn't much more than a field with a tiny pond and some dilapidated sheds, but it felt like a huge, fantastic playground. We both felt really excited.'


The excitement grew the night they moved in, in March 2006. 'We went to bed listening to the owls hooting, which was magical,' says Sarah, 'and then we were woken by bizarre noises which turned out to be muntjac deer.' There was more wildlife to get acquainted with, too. The overgrown pond was full of newts and tadpoles, the survey had unearthed a badger undermining a corner of the house, and there were rabbits everywhere. 'It was like *Watership Down*,' she says.

At first, making the house habitable was the top priority and the garden was left to its own devices, although even the most basic tasks proved to be a steep learning curve. 'The rabbits went for every single plant I put in and the first time we mowed the lawn it took us eight hours,' says Sarah. 'So we bought a ride-on mower, but that cost more than our car!' Eventually, time and budgets >



“WHAT MAKES THIS GARDEN SO SPECIAL IS THAT IT LOOKS GOOD PRETTY MUCH EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR. IT'S A CHALLENGE, BUT I REALLY ENJOY IT”





Sarah enjoyed watching the tadpoles and newts so much that she decided to make the pond larger. Now a heron visits, too

allowed for a more considered approach and, in 2008, Sarah asked garden designers Acres Wild to put together a masterplan. 'We loved the garden's wildness but I was longing for more interest and colour,' says Sarah who, armed with copious tearsheets from magazines, had resolved to do the planting herself. 'Much more daunting for me was the challenge of how to create a layout that made sense.' Her design brief was straightforward: something 'simple, natural and easy to maintain - with a bigger pond.' Wildlife ponds are generally considered fairly high maintenance, so this was something of a contradiction in terms, but Sarah's mind was made up. 'We had so much fun watching all the newts and the tadpoles and the birds, we were determined to find a way.'

Before any work could begin, and if any new plants were to stand a chance, the dilapidated fences had to be repaired and rabbit-proofed, and hedges planted to hide them. Once that was done, they brought in the diggers and dug out the pond and the beds.


Sarah was keen to ensure the garden looked good all year round, so successional planting was key. Hornbeam and holly hedges, conifers (yew and cypress) and evergreen box, used in the parterre and in some judiciously placed domes, were planted to ensure the garden has 'good bones' throughout the seasons. Bulbs - cyclamen, winter aconites, snowdrops, daffodils and tulips - add interest in late winter and spring before the blossom from the old apple and pear trees start to take over.

Grasses have been particularly useful, adding a sense of movement to the borders throughout summer and autumn - 'I love their softness and texture,' says Sarah - and then a structural, >

CH&I loves... LILY PONDS

According to the RHS, over the last century nearly 70 per cent of ponds have disappeared from the British countryside, so if you can accommodate one in your garden, it will provide a much-needed habitat for a wide variety of wildlife

- Be prepared to carry out regular maintenance, particularly in the first few years. Sarah had to don waders and scoop blanket weed on a weekly basis for the first two summers, until the oxygenating plants had established.
- Ensure at least one side of the pond has a long, shallow slope. This allows easy access for wildlife and can be planted up.
- Include floating aquatic plants, such as water lilies (which help shade the surface) and submerged plants to act as oxygenators.
- Some shade is good to reduce problems with algae, but not lots.
- Ask anyone with an existing pond for a barrel of their water and oxygenators to turbo-charge your pond in achieving balance.
- Adding extract of barley straw to the water each week from April onwards can help suppress algae.
- It will need thoroughly cleaning every 5-10 years.

A lush garden scene with a pond, a brick house, and various flowers. The garden is filled with a variety of plants, including tall grasses, purple flowers, and white flowers. A brick house is visible in the background, partially obscured by trees. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and serene.

“What we love most is the pond – it’s the heart and soul of the garden because it attracts so much life”

Sarah has worked hard to ensure the garden is full of blooming colour all throughout the year



Sarah lets wildflowers grow in the grass and looks forward to discovering what will appear each year

sculptural element as their seedheads stand over winter. The golden oat grass, *Stipa gigantea*, is one of Sarah's favourites, while in the 'grass island' bed at the heart of the garden she has combined erect *Calamagrostis*, the cloud-like *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau' and the fluffy bottle-brushes of *Sanguisorba obtusa* with a romantic mix of long-flowering perennials and roses to great effect. Later-flowering plants such as echinaceas, heleniums, dahlias and asters ensure touches of colour right through autumn, when the stems of *Cornus* 'Midwinter Fire', the backbone of the borders around the pond, ignite into a blaze of fiery orange. Wildflowers, which Sarah encourages in both the long grass around the lawn and in the woodland border, add a further layer of interest.

As the garden has matured, happily, the rabbits have become less of a concern. 'They still come and have a nibble on things but it's not a problem,' says Sarah. 'In fact, the longer I stay here, the less importance I place on individual plants and the more importance I place on all the life that it brings. When we first moved here, we had people offering to shoot the rabbits, the crows, the foxes; talking about the 'war on slugs'. I'm still not sure I'd go so far as to say slugs are a joy, but it is lovely to watch all the creatures doing their thing. This was a wildlife paradise when we came here. We've made it into a garden for us to enjoy, but I still want the wildlife to feel at home, too. I want that balance.'

Sarah opens her garden for the NGS several times throughout the year. On 29 October she hopes to be able to hold a 'talk and walk' on 'Grasses and the Autumn Garden'. To find out more, visit ngs.org.uk and search for St Timothee.

ON OUR DOORSTEP...

Visit... 'Waltham Place (01628 825517, walthamplace.com). A biodynamic garden designed by Henk Gerritsen that's all about working with nature.'

Go for a meal at...

'Stubbings Garden Centre (01628 825454, stubbingsnursery.co.uk).

A family-run garden centre with freshly prepared, home-cooked food. Great for breakfast, lunch and coffee, and welcoming to dogs.'

Shop at...

'The Plant Specialist (01494 866650, theplantspecialist.co.uk).

In the pretty village of Great Missenden, this is a wonderful place to find more unusual plants, and there's a small show garden, too.'