

PASTURES NEW

Known for commissioning Piet Oudolf's first UK garden, plantsman John Coke has moved on and created a brand-new, personal garden on the South Downs

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IN BRIEF

What A naturalistic garden around a converted barn and agricultural outbuildings.

Where East Sussex.

Size Two acres.

Soil Poor when the owners arrived, but they have improved it by adding plenty of loam.

Climate Very windy with gusts coming up the valley from the nearby English Channel, with above average sunshine and temperatures, and below average rainfall for the UK.

Hardiness zone USDA 8b.

In his South Downs garden overlooking Firle Beacon, plantsman John Coke has created a double-sided border featuring *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna', *Viola* 'Belmont Blue', *Verbascum bombyciferum* 'Polarsommer', *Achillea* 'Moonshine' and x *Cotanthemis* Susanna Mitchell (= 'Blomit'), among clumps of *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Bergfreund', as a tribute to striking verge planting along the Brighton Road.



Grasses including soft *Stipa calamagrostis* 'Algäu' and perennials such as *Verbena hastata* f. *rosea* and *Calamintha nepeta* 'Blue Cloud' line a path of limestone pavers that runs alongside the new barn extension, looking north to a breakfast area.



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At the garden's edge, John has mixed grasses such as *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light' with golden verbascums, field scabious and yellow *Coreopsis grandiflora* to blend with the hedgerows and surrounding fields.

Where do you go next after owning one of the most notable gardens of recent decades? That was the question facing John Coke and his wife Suzanne. The couple are known for their garden Bury Court in Surrey, the first garden in the UK designed by Piet Oudolf – New Perennial planting with a distinctly English twist.

At Bury Court, where a dynamically curving hedge of clipped yew provided a foil for naturalistic planting, the couple opened their garden to visitors by appointment, alongside running John's nursery, Green Farm Plants, and Suzanne's wedding venue business. They also set up a small country house opera company to champion emerging talent.

Around five years ago, however, they decided they wanted to move somewhere more private, where the garden would be for their personal enjoyment alone. Both felt a magnetic draw to an area among the rolling fields of the South Downs in East Sussex – an area that they knew well thanks to their good friend Graham Gough, the opera singer turned nurseryman who used to run Marchant's Hardy Plants (now sadly closed) in the village of Laughton.

As soon as they saw Narrowways Barn, John and Suzanne knew it was the right place for them. It had been converted by the previous owners from an old agricultural barn and was known by the rather grander name of Beddingham Place, but they preferred the original moniker found on maps. Sited at the end of a winding country lane between Brighton and Eastbourne, the house looks across fields of rippling wheat up to the impressive escarpment of Firle Beacon.

Charleston Farmhouse (see feature on page 20), the one-time country home of artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, is just a few minutes' drive away, and Furlongs, once home to artist Peggy Angus and famously painted by Eric Ravilious, is just across the fields.

To start with, John and Suzanne's attention was focused on renovating the house, but once a plantsman, always a plantsman, and John couldn't resist the lure of the garden for long. He enlisted the help of Debbie Roberts and Ian Smith at landscape and garden design practice Acres Wild to give the garden a more contemporary feel, while being natural and comfortable in its downland setting. "The design pulled the house into the garden and the garden into the landscape. We provided the spaces into which [John] could plant," explains Debbie.

John soon discovered the planting needed to be able to withstand the surprisingly strong winds that whip through the valley. "I wanted to keep the feeling of this being a very simple agricultural place, so I've used almost entirely very natural-looking plants, lots of grasses and umbellifers, which echo the hedgerows," he says.

At the more sheltered front of the house, he has put in a bed of the deciduous perennial grass *Calamagrostis* x *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', which grows to almost two metres, creating a screen around the entrance. Gravel paths edged with Corten steel – a nod to the site's agricultural heritage – run between beds filled with Korean angelica (*Angelica gigas*), valerian, giant fennel (*Ferula communis*), white nepeta and sweet cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*). The annual daisy fleabane, *Erigeron annuus*, grows like a weed here, self-seeding and reaching 1.8m tall. John ▸

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In the shelter of the barn's weathered brickwork, John has laid 15cm of gravel to grow alpines including *Armeria maritima* 'Düsseldorfer Stolz', *Delosperma sutherlandii*, dianthus, sedums and two types of artemisia.

Sometimes the simplest things are the most effective. I wanted to have quite formal, clipped shapes, but also in a few years' time they will help as windbreaks.

WAYS TO USE GRASSES

John uses many different grasses at Narrowways Barn, all chosen to fulfil one of three main functions.

- **Architectural** These are the grasses John values for their structural qualities. *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', used here in a grid, is one he finds invaluable for its stiffly erect habit, making it the best subject for architectural or block planting. In this grid its height and form echo the wheat fields around the house, but in a more structured way, and the wind creates constant rhythmic ripples, that vary from block to block. It always bounces back after storms and looks good for six months. John also uses it at the front of the house, where it grows to around 1.8m tall, making the entrance more private.

- **Practical** John has used a variety of tall *Miscanthus* species to create a bombproof yet permeable windbreak from the end of June on, while not blocking the view in the earlier part of the year.

- **Aesthetic** Among the many grasses John has chosen simply for being pleasing to the eye are the elegant, well-behaved *Hakonechloa macra*, which forms low mounds of glossy green leaves that turn a foxy copper in autumn; and *Stipa calamagrostis* 'Algäu', with arching tan plumes that catch the morning light. John has also used the frothy green palm sedge *Carex muskingumensis* around an existing man-made pond.



To the west of the house, an enclosed courtyard garden surrounds a lawn. Here, John has created rhythmic planting patterns combining grasses with brightly flowered perennials such as *Salvia* 'Pink Pong' and *Verbena bonariensis*.

▷ hoes out most of the seedlings but leaves some because it looks “wonderfully hazy and ethereal”. An additional layer of privacy is provided by a mature field maple in front of the kitchen door.

To the east of the house, Acres Wild created a new kitchen garden around an existing well, adding a sheltered seating area set as far back from the prevailing winds as possible, and a greenhouse. Limestone paving, reflecting the chalk landscape, leads through new planting areas. A double-sided border of blue and yellow plants is inspired by the main road into Brighton, where the central and outer verges were planted with golden achillea and blue salvias. John has paid homage to this high-impact approach with a more varied range of plants from the same colour palette, including dark purple *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna', the pale-lemon perennial marguerite daisy, x *Cotanthemis* Susanna Mitchell (= 'Blomit'), tall golden verbascums, yellow yarrows *Achillea* 'Moonshine' and A. 'Credo', and *Viola* 'Boughton Blue'. There are also plenty of his trademark grasses with clumps of the purple moor grass *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Bergfreund' and *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light'.

In front of a new glazed extension housing indoor plants sits a bed of more umbellifers, including the architectural *Dorema ammoniacum* with acid-green umbels, striped hemlock, *Molopospermum peloponnesiacum* with feathery foliage and yellow, Sputnik-like flowers, and Wallich milk parsley (*Ligusticopsis wallichiana*), a long-lived perennial from the Himalayas with frothy white flowerheads. There are also clumps of *Stipa calamagrostis* 'Algäu', a grass with arching tan flowerheads from summer onwards.

Chunky oak steps lead up to a less formal area with a pond that was already there, around which John has planted the palm

sedge *Carex muskingumensis*. Beside this, the design incorporates a new grid of 16 4m x 4m blocks planted with beech and more *Calamagrostis* x *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'. An important part of this project was to echo the crops in the surrounding fields and bring them into the garden, but in a more structured way. “I wanted to have quite formal, clipped shapes, and in a few years’ time they will help as windbreaks. What it shows is how sometimes the simplest things are the most effective. Each block ripples in a slightly different way,” says John. Behind the grid is a mound formed from spoil from the pond, which has been reshaped to repeat the shape of the ridge of the Downs, and sown with a wildflower mix, providing some shelter from the prevailing southwesterly winds and traffic noise blown over from the coast road.

Nestling between the house and a generous-sized swimming pool is a more domestic courtyard garden where John has replanted existing beds with pink gaura hybrids, poking up through sedums, as well as *Thalictrum* 'Splendide', *Tulbaghia* 'Fairy Star', *Heuchera* 'Brownfinch' – one of Graham Gough's plants – and self-seeded oriental poppies.

While Piet Oudolf's influence can be detected in the planting, it is very much John's own. “I owe Piet a debt,” he says. “I'm always conscious of any new plant that I acquire having the qualities that I'm looking for, which might be broader than Piet's criteria, but I would hope they still reflect his philosophy of them being naturalistic.” □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about the work of Debbie Roberts and Ian Smith at acreswild.co.uk



Close to the side of the barn, John has created a clever mix of yellows and blues, with *Verbena bonariensis* and giant hog fennel (*Peucedanum verticillare*) floating above a sea of grasses, *Kniphofia* 'Tawny King', an unknown purple phlox and orange-red *Gladiolus* 'Atom'.



In this sunny border, John has blended hotter colours, including the bright orange and red flowers of *Salvia* 'Royal Bumble' and rusty orange of *Digitalis ferruginea*, with soft pink of *Betonica officinalis* 'Rosea' and yellow *Achillea* 'Terracotta', which tumble over the limestone pathway.

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