

Gardening

► Cold comfort: Alex Northover went from a small garden with a few pot plants in London to a one acre site in Kent with room to design a space to enjoy in every month



Eleven years ago, Alex and Daniel Northover moved from a property in London, with a back garden measuring 15 square feet, to a house in Sevenoaks, Kent, set in one acre of lush green.

The couple wanted to turn the new garden, which at that time consisted mostly of grass edged with fir trees, into an attractive family space for themselves and their sons, Oscar, now 11, and Harrison, nine.

Alex and Daniel knew nothing about gardening, beyond "looking after a few pot plants in a small border in London", she says, so they asked garden designers Debbie Roberts and Ian Smith of Acres Wild to help. The result is a garden with all-year-round planting, thanks to its clever design, which makes it as appealing in the winter months as in any other season.

The brief

The garden is on chalk, and the main part of it is at the front of the house, in a sunny position. To ascertain the kind of planting they wanted, Alex and Daniel searched through pictures of gardens and designers' portfolios, and settled on Acres Wild because they liked their naturalistic style.

"We like prairie planting; we wanted lots of different grasses that look natural," says Alex. However, they preferred a controlled, contemporary look to a rampant, self-seeding style.

They wanted a lawn for the children and as a focal point, and also some cloud-pruned shrubs, but they didn't want high-maintenance plants. At the time, they didn't consider how it would look in winter but, for the designers, a garden that looks good all year round is of course an important matter.

"If you're not experienced in gardens you assume that in winter there's nothing there, but there's an awful lot there," says Ian. "It's a more subtle look in the wintertime obviously, and it has a different character."

The secret, he says, is to select plants with more than one season of interest in them. Evergreen and deciduous grasses in particular offer a strong winter look because they retain structure and texture, and give colour, movement and height. In addition, their seedheads can be left uncut until the spring.

The design

Getting the bare bones of a garden right is essential, says Debbie, especially for the winter, when the structure becomes more apparent.

"Plants are a huge part of it, but there's an awful lot more under the surface that makes a garden successful," says Ian. "You need to arrange the different spaces into a solid framework. The planting gives the character on top of that."

Hard landscaping

Bare, hard landscaping looks harsh, so Acres Wild remodelled the terrace of the new orangery that Alex and Daniel had added, and introduced beds against the house to soften the look.

They planted four parasol-pruned London plane trees in the terrace, which give shade in the summer, and whose bare winter branches hold sculptural interest.

Lawn shape

A lawn should be a statement in itself whatever the time of year, says Debbie: "We think of a garden as a completely planted space, out of which we carve a lawn, or a terrace."

The lawn becomes a positive shape that draws the eye." Alex and Daniel's lawn is geometric and offers a simple, smooth contrast to the mixed textures, shapes and colours of the planting around it.

We created a garden for all seasons and, yes, it's beautiful in winter too

A one-acre family-friendly natural haven in Kent was cleverly designed to provide interest and inspiration all year round, discovers Sharon Smith

Added features

The winding paths that twist through the garden already existed, and were left in place. "We often put stepping stones through borders because they're useful for access, less expensive than putting in paths, and kids love them – it's like a little adventure," adds Ian.

Mixed borders

Alex and Daniel did not specify a particular palette. Instead, they wanted swathes of colour in a bold and sweeping design.

Due to the overall size of their garden, the borders encircling the lawn reach a depth of 20 feet in places, with varieties of plants grouped in sets of 20 to 40. Size is not essential, says Ian, and borders should be proportionate to the size of your garden.

It is the choice and layout of plantings that achieve the look. Alex and Daniel's controlled naturalistic style uses a limited palette of mixed plantings.