

BURNING BRIGHT

Blending perfectly into the Sussex landscape, the naturalistic maturity of this hillside garden belies its relatively recent origins

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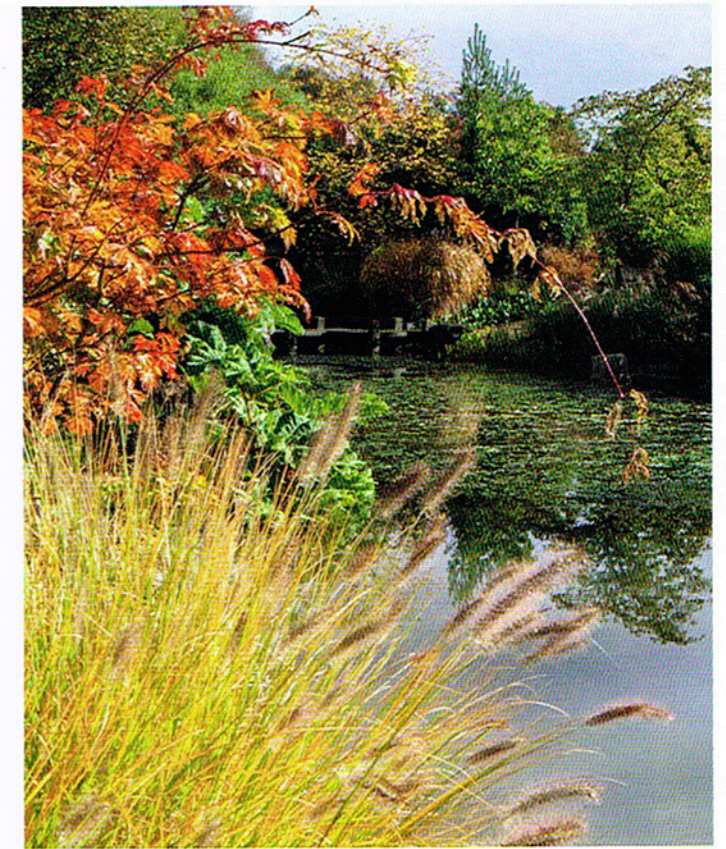


Around the middle pond, richly coloured grasses and trees such as *Acer japonicum* 'Aconitifolium' (foreground) and *Liquidambar styraciflua* 'Worplesdon' (background) give this garden strong autumn colour



The term 'blank canvas' has become a cliché in garden design, but it really is the most appropriate way to describe the original state of this garden, which has literally sprung from nothing over the course of a decade. Though you can hardly believe it now, 10 years ago this beautiful hillside plot in the Sussex High Weald was nothing more than a building site. When the current owners bought the land, they demolished a run-down bungalow and built a new house, designed in the local vernacular style using reclaimed materials. Then local garden designers Acres Wild were called in to make a garden on the scarred slope that was left around the house, with the brief 'to make it look 'as if it had always been there'.

'It was immensely satisfying to create a garden with such a strong sense of place where there was none before,' says Ian Smith of Acres Wild. 'The site had so much character with amazing views, and we knew we had to create something that fitted into the landscape, that felt appropriate. We needed to maximise those views while at the same time creating shelter, as the site is so exposed.' Today, the house and garden look so comfortable in their environment that it is impossible to date them, and the garden in particular seems incredibly mature, thanks to its natural-looking ponds and the generous drifts of plants that cushion the whole property.



OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The view from the kitchen garden, which is surrounded by walls of reclaimed brick. Flowers mix with vegetables in raised beds. An urn provides a focal point in front of an arch through to the kitchen garden. THIS PAGE *Pennisetum alopecuroides* is one of many grasses that bring colour in autumn (above). The wooden zig-zag bridge (below) links with the Japanese-themed area at the top end of the garden



Around the lower pond, miscanthus grasses, including *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Malepartus' and tall *Miscanthus sacchariflorus*, soften the edges. In the foreground, seedheads of *Phlox russeliana* will remain intact all winter





With four acres available, the clients wanted a pool, tennis court and vegetable garden, all of which Acres Wild incorporated into the design. Nearest the house, the style is formal, with a terrace and pergola made from reclaimed bricks and timber, leading to an enclosed garden with a small parterre and central urn. This is a quiet antechamber before the pièce de résistance – the beautiful walled vegetable garden, which could almost pass for a genuine Victorian kitchen garden, its reclaimed brick walls with climbing roses and ivy adding to the patina of age. Below the terrace, lawn gives way to meadow with a brick retaining wall neatly defining the level change, giving uninterrupted views out over the hills.

Further away from the house, the garden is much more relaxed, blending into the landscape with its naturalistic planting. The addition of water to the garden was a stroke of genius. Shaped organically to make them look as natural as possible, the three ponds define the character of the place, reflecting sky and landscape, bringing new wildlife and playing to the senses. They are linked by narrow streams and waterfalls that meander down the slope to feed the lower pond, to be pumped back up and filtered through a reed bed in the top pond. It all works beautifully. Where the water-course narrows, the path crosses over with stepping stones or, in the Japanese garden at the top end of the property, a simple, wooden zig-zag bridge. 'The

THIS PAGE The top ponds are edged with large rocks and surrounded by a mixture of grasses, small trees and shrubs. **OPPOSITE** CLOCKWISE FROM TOP A snake of cloud-pruned box follows the shape of a line of rocks. At the upper pond, the Japanese garden is surrounded by pines and undulating *Hebe parviflora* giving the impression of a distant forest. Water descends from upper to lower ponds via a series of waterfalls, and is then pumped back up to the top

zig-zag idea comes from the Japanese, who believe that spirits and demons can walk only in straight lines,' says Ian. 'But we like it as it slows people down. We were really playing on the idea of creating lots of different routes and crossings, making different journeys around the garden.'

With a mixture of small trees, shrubs and grasses, the planting around the ponds echoes the wooded hills beyond, and comes into its own in autumn. Specimen trees including *Acer palmatum* 'Bloodgood' and *Liquidambar styraciflua*, deep crimson in colour, are positioned carefully to draw the eye, while grasses such as *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln' and *Molinia caerulea* create eye-catching hummocks of ochre and gold – like miniature versions of the autumnal trees in the borrowed landscape. Around the lower pond, taller grasses on the far bank shimmer in the wind, their silver seed-heads shining like halos, providing a link to the grassy pastures beyond. 'Grasses are perfect for this site, which is on clay soil,' says Ian, reeling off the names of five or six different species, including the unusual *Miscanthus sacchariflorus*, a dramatic giant grass with bamboo-like canes, ideal for planting next to water.

Most things are planted en masse for strong visual impact. 'We take a very visual and structural approach to planting, and tend to plant in big drifts,' says Ian. 'We don't use a large matrix of plants but often plant maybe 40 or 50 plants in a block so the effect is much more concentrated.' A bank of *Phlomis russeliana*, for example, fringes a view of the lower pond, with long seams of wine-coloured *Sedum* 'Herbstfreude' and *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire' behind, creating a layered effect. Another planting theme that echoes round the garden is the cloud-pruned greenery. In the Japanese garden, irregular hummocks of box echo the shapes of boulders in the pond, and clipped *Hebe parviflora* is designed to resemble a distant hillside, like a scene from a Japanese painting. Other plants such as *Lonicera nitida* 'Maygreen' and *Hebe raikensis*, are planted in bulk and clipped into low mounds. It's easy on the eye and much less time-consuming to maintain than a traditional herbaceous border.

This is an artful garden. Everything has been meticulously planned, but it looks effortless. 'We didn't want it to look over-designed,' says Ian. 'There's nothing too attention-grabbing, nothing that intrudes.' And this is the garden's triumph. It has a timelessness that makes it feel entirely comfortable in its setting – a garden that looks as if it has always been there □

Brightling Down Farm Garden is open through the NGS by appointment for groups, June to October (01689-852144; www.ngs.org.uk)

