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In brief
WHAT Private garden designed for 'entertaining and enjoyment'.
WHERE Near Reigate, Surrey.
SIZE Just over 2 acres.
CLIMATE Susceptible to high winds.
SOIL Flinty clay on top of chalk.
POINTS OF INTEREST Relaxed, contemporary planting within an existing Arts & Crafts layout.

To the bidder *the spoils*

When Pam and John Kay won an auction for the services of designer Nic Howard, they got more than they dreamt possible

WORDS JODIE JONES PHOTOGRAPHS LEIGH CLAPP

A carnival of colour includes late-flowering plants along with those offering long-season interest, such as monarda and sedum seedheads.



Lavender-coloured *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch' brightens swathes of grasses, with *Panicaria amplexicaulis* 'Fat Domino' dominating the foreground.

Until 2008, the only thing Pam and John Kay had ever won at auction was a giant Toblerone, but when they heard that garden designer Nic Howard was offering his services to raise funds for the NSPCC they were determined to enter the highest bid.

"We only wanted help with one border," recalls Pam. "The rest of the garden was working pretty well but the bed adjoining our newly installed summer house had proved hard to get right." Nic, however, arrived on site and was instantly struck by its possibilities. "I wanted to take what was here and reignite it," he says.

The Kays' Surrey home is a mellow brick villa dating from 1901 and the garden layout reflected an Arts & Crafts aesthetic. Steps led from a narrow terrace of brick and grass to a sunken garden which in turn gave on to the main, formal lawn. However, Nic could see that the terrace was too narrow for the scale of the property, as were many of the flower beds, and a large number of trees and mature shrubs had grown to oppressive proportions.

Surprise plans

His plan for the garden took his clients by surprise, and family circumstances forced them to put the work on hold. Yet just three years later, the garden has been transformed into a haze of perennials. Geraniums and *Nepeta*, Lady's mantle *Alchemilla mollis* and *Calamintha* covered in honey bees form a rich palette of colour, accented here and there with clumps of fresh white *Lysimachia* and *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Old Court'.

Grasses are used carefully, in particular *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Malepartus', low mounds of *Anemanthele lessoniana* and flamboyant *Panicum virgatum* which, with its plumes of pinkish flowers, looks fantastic alongside the deep red monardas, which are such a feature of this garden in early autumn.

Drumstick alliums, fennel and verbena are stitched through the scheme to introduce a vertical contrast to the billowing mounds. It seems incredible that the garden was just 12 months old when it was photographed. >



The bottlebrush flowers *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune', here at the centre of the bed, provide vertical interest, even as the blooms fade.



Purple *Verbena bonariensis* mingles gently with white *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Beauté Niveloise'.



The stone wall with its chunky stone steps leading up from the lawn is an original feature retained for its character.

“I spend a lot of time talking to the client about how much time they will be able to give the garden. There is no point me putting in difficult plants if no one has the time to look after them”

▷ Nic attributes its rapid establishment to good soil preparation. “Lorryloads of spent mushroom compost got everything off to a flying start. It’s nothing to do with overplanting – I generally stick to three plants per square metre.”

Tough choices

Clearly, the old adage of choosing the right plants for the place has also helped. “I do love my plants,” says Nic. “That is where it all starts. I spend a lot of time talking to the client about their preferred colour schemes, and how much time they will be able to give the garden. There is no point me putting in difficult plants if no one has the time to look after them. But I never, ever draw planting plans first. I like to set myself up with an interesting palette of plants and then just start laying them down, visualising how they will interact.”

Pam and John had seen other gardens Nic had created, and were happy to trust his judgement. Which was lucky, because the first step was to cut down a lot of trees. These were mostly unloved and unlovely conifers and sycamores, although the Kays did worry about felling one large oak. “That was a hard decision to take,” says Pam. “But now we can see how it has transformed the site, and we’ve kept the trunk to make into a piece of furniture for the garden.”

Year-round beauty

Where possible, existing plants were redeployed. The large stand of mature rhododendrons, which runs down one side of the garden, has been enhanced with an underplanting of hostas, ferns and epimediums moved from elsewhere in the garden.

Where he did create a blank canvas, at the heart of the garden, Nic defined generous planting areas where bold groups could create an inviting display for almost 12 months of the year. “The early months are pretty easy to get right, but it is harder to make a garden sing through August and on into autumn. I rely a lot on foliage. The perennials I use must have good leaf as well as attractive ▷



5 ways to make seating areas work

1 Furniture is worth investing in. The Kays have built up a collection of Gaze Burvill oak furniture which, after 20 years outdoors, is still looking good (www.gazeburvill.com).

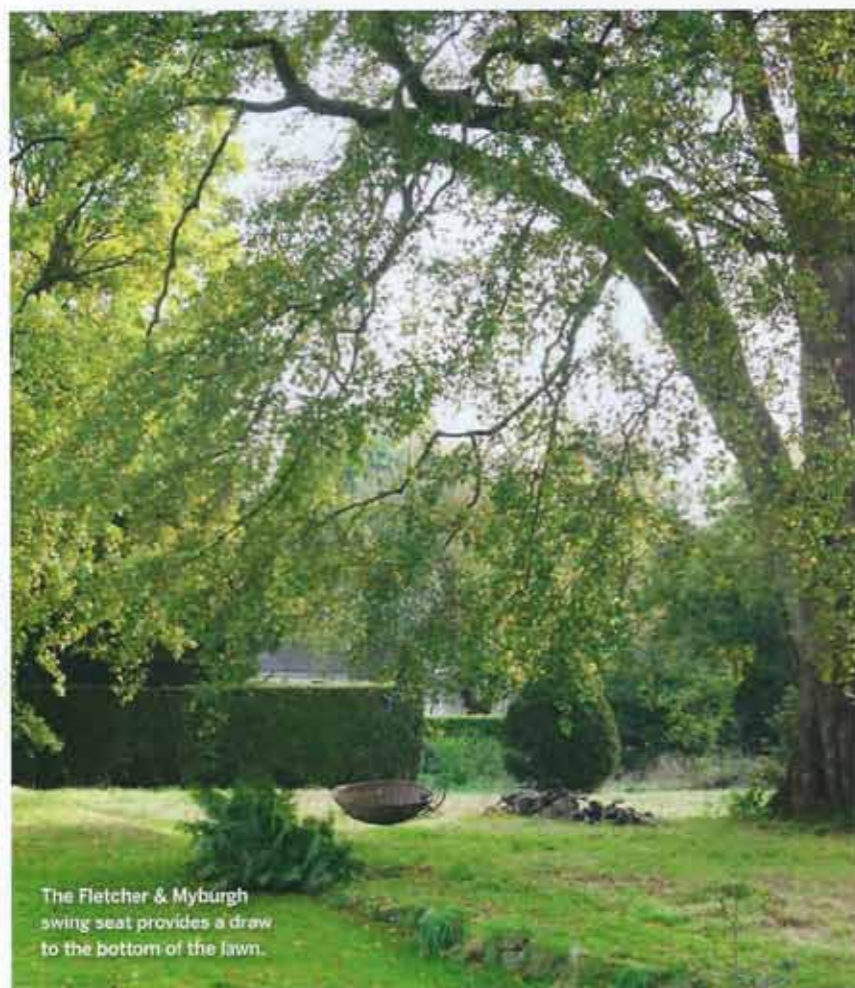
2 Try to provide a choice of seating areas, suited to different times of day and degrees of privacy. The Kays' dining terrace is close to the kitchen for practical reasons, but the 'White Wine Bench' is at the end of the formal lawn, which is the perfect spot to catch the early evening light.

3 Work the seating areas into your plan from the outset and they can do double duty as attractive focal points within the garden. The Kays' dining table is prominently displayed because Nic convinced them that they needed something large to catch the eye in this calm oasis of paving.

4 Remember that seating does not have to be on the ground. The Kays have a Fletcher & Myburgh swing seat that Pam fell for on a trip to Chelsea Flower Show. The Jasmin Swing costs £2,750 (www.myburghdesigns.com).

5 Siting benches and other furniture on some sort of hard surface – paving slabs or gravel – will significantly increase their life span. Damp ground is the primary cause of rot.

The sunken seating area gives the sense of being among the plants. The black metal urli (Indian cooking pot) provides an onward focal point.



The Fletcher & Myburgh swing seat provides a draw to the bottom of the lawn.

9 of Nic Howard's favourite late-season plants

1 *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Fat Domino'

An easy-to-please perennial that produces showy spikes of red flowers from summer until well into autumn.

2 *Alchemilla erythropoda*

Better behaved than the ubiquitous *A. mollis*, this has blue-green foliage and small clusters of flowers that turn russet with age.

3 *Penstemon* 'Andenken an Friedrich Hahn'

Fantastic wine-red variety, possibly the best of the penstemons. May be sold as *P.* 'Garnet'.

4 *Verbena bonariensis*

The airy perennial just keeps on flowering from June to September, but may need a little winter protection in exposed sites.

5 *Erysimum* 'Bowles' Mauve'

This perennial wallflower will flower almost all year round with little or no attention, but may succumb in a hard winter.

6 *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch'

One of the earliest asters to flower, usually in July, it then goes on throwing out lovely lavender blue flowers until October.

7 *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Beauté Nivelloise'

The eccentrically shredded petals of this lovely shasta daisy make a real statement, and the flowers are produced from June to October.

8 *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna'

With its deep purple flower spikes on black stems, 'Caradonna' has been the salvia of choice for a few years now, and combines brilliantly with silver foliage.

9 *Anemanthele lessoniana*

An excellent evergreen grass that will thrive in both sun and shade, and becomes suffused with rich coppery tints in autumn.

▷ flowers. I use a lot of sedums, and heucheras are great, have you ever looked closely at a spent flower head? It is a real thing of beauty. It's surprising how attractive certain plants are in their faded, end of season form. For example, I love *Monarda* 'Fireball', which looks stunning for months. After flowering it often gets blasted by mildew, but this gives it a wonderful silvery appearance which looks amazing alongside *Stachys byzantina*.

"In the past, gardeners were too quick to cut everything back for winter. We leave as much as possible, and the ornamental grasses in particular look sensational till the end of January."

February, the month allotted for a big clear up, is John's least favourite time of year. "It's always a bad moment when they cut everything back. Since we've had the garden done I love my grasses and I can't bear to see them hacked back, even though I know that within a week or two they'll spring back better than ever."

The new intensity of pleasure they get from their garden has surprised and delighted the Kays. "There's a dreaminess about it that keeps rolling on through the year," says Pam. "Whatever time of day or month of the year you are doing the dusting, a glance out of the window always lifts your heart. It is a perpetual pleasure." □



DESIGNER PROFILE

Nic Howard has built up a successful practice in Surrey, where he combines contemporary design solutions with soft, cottage-style planting tailored to the client's requirements.
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