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Dreaming of
FAR HORIZONS

Massed late-season perennials against a linear design make a striking whole in Sue de Wit's Kent garden

Words & Photographs LEIGH CLAPP



bought it, but it was a really scrappy garden,' recalls Sue. With such a large expanse to work on, Sue and Peter called in the services of Surrey garden designer Nic Howard and the hard landscaping started in 2011. 'I like using traditional plants in a contemporary way and quite Dutch perennial, successional planting – so this was a perfect match with Sue and Peter's backgrounds, and what they like as well,' says Nic.

Priorities for Sue and Peter were areas for outdoor entertaining around the pool and tennis court, with plenty of opportunities for dining alfresco or just sitting out. The terrace from the

'We replaced the leylandii with a lower hedge, which allows us to enjoy the vistas to the landscape beyond'

house was extended with Indian sandstone paving, the slope terraced to give two large flat lawns and allow plenty of garden beds, and it was decided to remove the boundary hedge to open out the view. 'Nic came up with this fabulous idea of a long row of pergola arches at the base of the garden, to weight the house and make a real feature of the bottom of the garden. Roses are important to me so we have planted them on the timber posts, while on the boundary we have replaced the leylandii with a lower hornbeam hedge for privacy from the neighbours, which opens out the garden and allows us to enjoy the lovely long vistas to the landscape beyond,' says Sue. ➤



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Wafting clouds of *Verbena bonariensis*
ABOVE A gravel path edged by billowing perennials and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', leads to the wisteria-clad pergola, a shady spot by the pool for entertaining guests

Australian-born, retired physiotherapist Sue and her Dutch husband Boudewijn Peter Theodoor de Wit (just called Peter, for obvious reasons) have led a fairly itinerant lifestyle since they met and married in Melbourne in the 1970s. After living in America, followed by yo-yoing between the UK, Australia and Holland, since 2010 they have put down roots on the edge of the Georgian spa town of Royal Tunbridge Wells, in Kent. Home now is a sloping, south-facing plot, of around an acre, with a 1930s house at the top overlooking a wooded valley and farmland. After renovating and extending the house, the couple turned their attention to the garden. 'This is our first real garden and the largest plot of land we have lived on, giving lots of scope to combine our love of outdoor leisure with a pool

and tennis court, and bring in elements from my childhood country garden by the sea, which was full of roses, lavender and agapanthus,' says Sue. Kent's relatively mild climate perfectly suits the couple and their planting choices. 'There is only fleeting frost in winter, as the aspect is open with low winter sun, and rainfall is generally abundant, with plants only needing watering in until established. As the property is located on part of the South Downs, the soil is heavy clay with pockets of sandy soil set on a sandstone ridge, and there are underground springs with a high water table making it wetter at the bottom of the garden. The existing garden was rather underwhelming, with a tall boundary leylandii and thuja hedge obstructing the views, sloping lawns, some trees and a native hedgerow. 'There were lots of daffodils, as we saw it in spring before we

TOP RIGHT Creating levels with an expanse of lawn and beds makes better use of the sloping site. Splashes of yellow *Rosa* 'Graham Thomas' and *Phygelius x rectus* 'Moonraker' contrast with the massed *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire'
MIDDLE RIGHT Sun-loving grasses and *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' are planted in large blocks along the paths
RIGHT The lawn is edged with repeated *Carpinus betulus* (hornbeam)



Key facts
Character Framework of 'rooms'
Size One acre
Aspect South facing
Soil Heavy clay with pockets of sandy soil
Owners Sue and Peter de Wit
Date of house Built in the 1930s



In the area

- * **Wych Cross Nurseries** Rose specialist, with about 500 varieties to choose from. Wych Cross, Forest Row RH18 5JW. Tel 01342 822705; wychcross.co.uk
- * **Sussex Country Gardener** Independent family-owned garden centre with a wide range of plants and workshops. Mark Cross, East Sussex TN6 3PJ. Tel 01892 852828; sussexcountrygardener.co.uk
- * **Scotney Castle** Romantic garden and woodland set around a 14th-century moated castle. Lamberhurst, Tunbridge Wells TN3 8JN. Tel 01892 893820; nationaltrust.org.uk



An eye-catching element, and a favourite spot to sit, is a decked gazebo that bridges the levels surrounded by a fringe of textural planting. 'I like to use different materials and textures interlinked, with timber, paving and gravel,' says Sue.

Planting for a succession of interest was important. With the Dutch influence, masses of tulips were essential and are planted each year. Sue also loves irises, alliums and roses through summer. Late in the season the voluptuous massed perennials, such as burgundy sedums, *Monarda* 'Fireball', zingy orange heleniums, handsome *Euphorbia x martini* and fiery crocosmias against an array of parchment grasses, take centre stage. Colours through August, September and into October are a blaze of crimson and orange, anchored with clumps of burgundy *Heuchera* 'E and I' and shades of purple, from plants such as the tactile *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire' and the rather promiscuous *Verbena bonariensis*.

'There has been a conscious choice to use plants that work in the climatic conditions and don't need to be covered or dug up for winter. To keep a touch of home, Sue has also planted two *Eucalyptus gunnii*, as their scent transports her back to Australia. There is a feeling of openness to the design, reminiscent of the laid-back, relaxed style that Sue grew up with. 'I can walk around it and there is always something to enjoy.' >

OPPOSITE The decked gazebo is a delightful spot to sit surrounded by texture and colour from choices such as feathery *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau' and beautiful crimson *Penstemon* 'Garnet'

ABOVE Garden designer Nic's idea for the series of pergolas gives a sense of journey through the space. The palette of plants is continued with choices such as persicaria, nepeta and *Heuchera* 'E and I'

ABOVE LEFT Massed *Crocosmia* 'Orange Devil' adds warmth

BELOW LEFT Tactile *Monarda* 'Fireball' and *Allium sphaerocephalon* make a stunning late season combination