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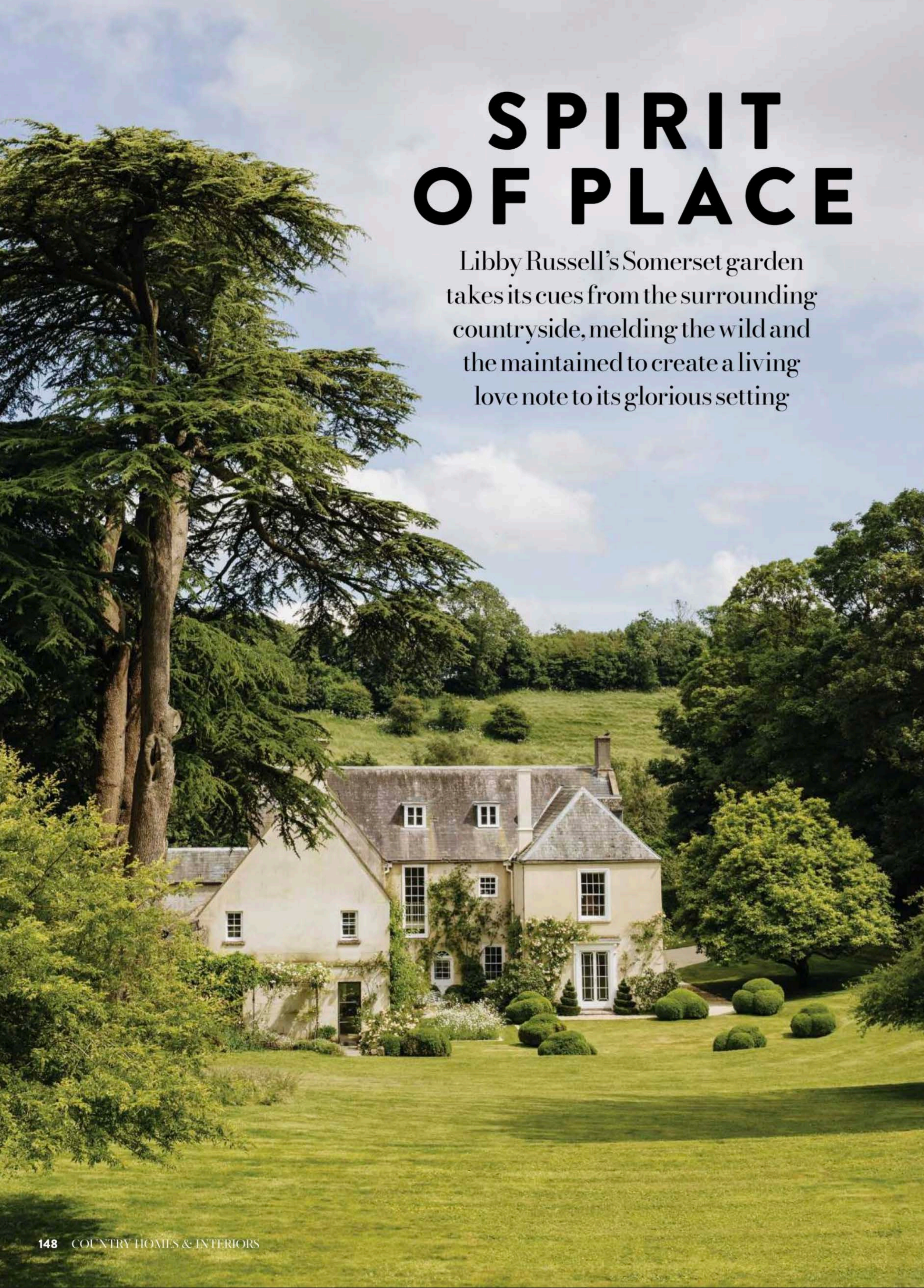
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SPIRIT OF PLACE

Libby Russell's Somerset garden takes its cues from the surrounding countryside, melding the wild and the maintained to create a living love note to its glorious setting



Opposite The garden is divided into two halves. This side consists of a grass amphitheatre and a cedar tree planted around 1785

This page Roses are a feature of the garden, including Rosa 'Buff Beauty' planted close to the house to bring calming colour

Libby Russell is no stranger to incredible landscapes having grown up on Leicestershire's Belvoir estate and at Haddon Hall in Derbyshire. Later, around 2001, when she and her husband, Alexander, were looking to relocate, they searched for a similar sense of beauty – an amalgamation of the light, the views and the colour of the stone particular to a place. 'We'd been living near the

coast in Kent,' says Libby, one half of Mazzullo and Russell Landscape Design. 'But the land there was very flat and trees struggled to grow. I wanted to find beautiful natural countryside, not too far from London, which we could afford and that I could fall in love with.'

Their search led them to Somerset, to a Georgian rectory built onto a 17th-century farmhouse with about 100 acres in the village of Batcombe. 'Before showing us the house, the vendor dropped us at the top of the land across the valley and suggested we walk back,' says Libby. 'We saw the fields buzzing with insects; the amazing wildflower meadows alive with bellflowers, ox-eye daisies and yellow rattle; the stream crossed by a bridge of Douling stone – the stone used in Wells Cathedral. From the top of one of the hills, we saw the views straight across to Glastonbury Tor. Of course, by the time I'd got to the house, I'd fallen madly in love – it's such a beautiful part of the world.'

The sloping garden behind the house, when they finally reached it, had less to recommend it. Apart from an imposing cedar planted by the vicar in about 1785, there was a small area enclosed by a yew hedge and then 'not much more than two asymmetric rectangles of lawn up a hill'. Firm believers that 'so long as the setting is right, you can make a house and you can make a garden,' the Russells put in an offer. Then Libby set about designing what she describes as an 'essential Somerset garden', complete with hoggin paths, wicker gates and local stone. 'Somerset is not all lined up and perfect,' she explains. 'It's rolling and soft with winding roads and quirky charm. I wanted something that had that atmosphere and which spoke to the landscape around it – connecting the garden to the other side of the valley,

to the wildflowers in the fields and the striations in the limestone hills made by centuries of grazing sheep.'

There was a huge amount of hardcore to be removed – Nissen huts had been built on the land for the Americans stationed here during the Second World War. An unexploded shell was found when preparing the top borders and the bomb-disposal unit had to be called. The listed cedar restricted the siting of retaining walls. But, most testing of all were the wildly differing levels and the drainage they demanded. 'The whole garden has been an exercise in how you go up a hill,' explains Libby.

Her solution has been two-fold. On one side of the garden, she has built a series of gently curving grass banks that both echo the contours of the landscape beyond and act as a visual trick, shifting the axis to make the house feel centred in the space, 'which it absolutely isn't', she laughs. On the other, she has opted for steps and a succession of terraces, starting with a herb garden outside the kitchen and gradually revealing a kitchen garden, a swimming pool, tennis court and an orchard laced with colourful wildflowers.

Both sides have been designed to indulge Libby's passion for plants (she is a long-standing member of the RHS Herbaceous Plant Expert Group). The amphitheatre garden erupts with major displays, or 'whammies', every six weeks or so, ranging from magnolias and narcissi in spring, through to asters and grasses in autumn, whereas the terraced garden is managed more intensively. Here, deep borders burst with generous plantings of *Rosa mundi*, *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant', *Papaver somniferum* 'Lauren's Grape' and artemisia. There are beds displaying a more delicate Pointillist style, where *digitalis* and *stachys* mix with *astrantia* and *agastache* against a backdrop of ➤

Opposite top *Rosa* 'American Pillar' and 'de Röscht' grow up the old stables

Right The garden includes deliberate 'untamed' areas, featuring wildflowers and a

succession of *Martagon* lillies, valerian and scabious flowering in the long grass

Far right A kitchen garden was a long-held dream for Libby, while greenhouses add to the harvest



'I love plants that are happy in a place, and roses do so well here. They love the soil and the sun, and they do give that amazing oomph, that first celebration of summer'



pyramid yews. A long espalier of apples (*Malus toringo*, a species Libby loves for its blossom and the deep-red, long-lived apples) leads through to the vegetable garden, where the patterned beds vie for attention with goblet-trained pears, cordons of currants, wigwams of sweet peas and a hazel tunnel smothered in gourds, borlotti beans and *cobaea*. 'That's how I like to design,' she reveals. 'I like a strong structure and then I let the plants go mad.'

Partly because the garden is open for charity and tours, it is designed to have a long season. Helped by head gardener Tom Price and assistant gardener Sue McCardle, greenhouse-grown annuals and biennials are added to the displays, with dahlias and salvias parachuted in and out of the borders as the year progresses. 'We're always trying to find plants that are "good doers",' Libby adds, 'particularly as I'm often away with work.' Roses, of which the garden has an abundance, have proved such a plant – from 'Climber Madame Caroline Testout' or rambler 'Ghislaine de Féligonde' to shrub roses 'Felicia' and 'Buff Beauty' in the borders. 'I love plants that are happy in a place and roses do well here. They love the soil and the sun, and they do give you that amazing oomph, that first celebration of summer.'

Whichever plants she chooses, Libby is keen that they work with the relaxed,

natural atmosphere of the garden. That could mean wildflowers, such as ox-eye daisies and devil's bit scabious – used to great effect in the grass-framed plot to one side of the kitchen. Or it could mean finding cultivars that have the feel of wild plants, but which perform better: umbellifers such as *ammi* or *orlaya*, redolent of clouds of cow parsley, or the beautiful *Rosa* 'Lyda Rose'. 'That's wonderful with ox-eye daisies,' says Libby. 'It looks like the best wild briar rose, but is in fact a repeat-flowering shrub rose. There's a harmony there, an ease, and one that I hope is true to the essence of this place.'

For information on visiting Libby's garden, see ngs.org.uk ->

This page At the rear of the house, shaggy terraces connect the garden to the pastoral Somerset landscape beyond

Opposite top Espaliered fruit trees frame the French-style potager garden, with lettuce, beetroot, chard, spinach and

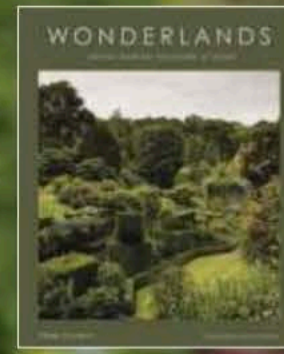
annuals for cutting, as well as asparagus beds and rhubarb

Opposite below *Papaver* 'Amazing Grey' and *Cynoglossum* 'Mystery Rose' bring purple drifts to the borders, while sweetpeas bring colour and texture to the courtyard



SOMERSET GARDEN

This page Clipped bay trees and cloud box topiary forms are used to bring year-round interest to the garden



These photographs by Eva Nemeth appear in *Wonderlands: British Garden Designers at Home* by Clare Coulson (£40, Hardie Grant Books)

LIBBY'S GARDEN RESOURCES

Artorius Faber A great source for garden stone, be it for paving, walling or incidental detailing; artoriusfaber.com

Special Plants A wide range of interesting herbaceous plants, shrubs and seeds from plantswoman Derry Watkins; specialplants.net

Lichen Garden Antiques Garden urns, planters, statues and benches, together with York stone; lichengardenantiques.com

Junker's Nursery Specialist growers of shrubs and trees with a 40-acre garden – a real help in seeing the shape and habit of mature specimens; junker.co.uk

Arvensis Perennials A trade nursery that specialises in herbaceous perennials; arvensisperennials.co.uk

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