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July 2026

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# SLOPE & GLORY

What was once “a really tricky site” is now a beautifully layered Somerset garden where clever design has tamed a steep and soggy hillside plot

WORDS Sharon Amos

PHOTOGRAPHS Eva Nemeth



*Nepeta 'Six Hills Giant', Geranium sanguineum cultivars, stachys and santolina edge the romantic rose-filled borders*

**LOCATION**

Batcombe House,  
Shepton Mallet, Somerset

**STYLE**

A mix of contemporary design  
and colourful exuberance

**SIZE**

Three acres, including an orchard, meadow,  
kitchen garden and grass amphitheatre

**VISIT**

Open under the National Garden Scheme on  
13 June and 12 Sept. For details, see [ngs.org.uk](https://ngs.org.uk)



ABOVE Sculpted grass banks break up the slope down towards the house to create an amphitheatre effect BELOW A border frothing with *Ammi majus* and poppies is in complete contrast to the contemplative amphitheatre

Libby Russell's garden at Batcombe feels as though it has always belonged in its Somerset valley setting, surrounded by wild-flower meadows in full bloom. It looks idyllic now. However, when Libby first arrived, it was anything but. "It was a really tricky site," she says, describing two asymmetric rectangles on a wet hillside with "quite a lot of soggy ground at the base". Turning it into the garden it is today has been a triumph of clever design on a challenging slope.

The house, a former rectory, sits towards the bottom of the valley, with the garden rising steeply behind it, so there are no sweeping views to capitalise on. Instead, Libby focused on creating a design that frames the house while tying the garden into the wider Somerset terrain of the valley opposite. As a

landscape architect, Libby relishes a challenge. Her solution was to divide the space into two contrasting areas that work together. "It's a garden of two halves, yet it still feels harmonious," she says. To the left of the house, the mood is calm and contemplative, dominated by an ancient cedar planted in the 1780s. To break up the space, Libby has sculpted a series of grassy banks. "It was a real trick of engineering levels," she says. "The banks have got three different curves and three different falls." The effect is like a grass amphitheatre, cascading down to the back of the house.

At the very top of the curvaceous banks sit big bold borders, deliberately scaled up so they can be seen clearly from the house. Generous swathes of 'Sally Holmes' roses and hydrangeas are designed to bloom in gentle waves every four to six weeks, with evergreens threaded through for winter interest.

Close to the property, beneath the kitchen window, is one of Libby's favourite features. A platt, originally conceived simply to break up an expanse of grass, has become a focal point. Essentially a living picture frame, it's a rectangular bed edged with a double border of stone and planted successively with a range of varieties that echo the native Somerset flora. "By framing things, you look at them differently," Libby says. "And wild flowers are as beautiful as anything else, if not more so. It's not what you do, it's how you do it. And it's a very simple device."

In summer, the platt froths with wild ox-eye daisies, giving way to devil's bit scabious. Libby isn't entirely strict about the wild theme, however. "I've put some summer hyacinths in for the mid- to late-summer period, when there's a little bit of a lull and nature's having a rest." The platt is ideally placed outside the kitchen window. "When I make my morning cup of tea, I can see what's in season." The kitchen, as well as being the heart of the house, forms the link between the two halves of the garden. "I wanted to connect them ▶



"We experiment  
with the planting  
all the time. It's a bit  
of a horticultural  
playground"

Libby's kitchen garden is a riot of vegetables, flowers and edimentals (plants that are both ornamental and edible). The steps, framed by *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant', *Rosa mundi* and *R. 'Felicia'*, lead up to the potager

“Vegetables can be as beautiful as flowers. The key is how you put them together”

Sweet peas are a big feature of the potager in summer, with annuals such as *Ammi majus* and *Papaver* ‘Amazing Grey’ threaded between the vegetables

RIGHT Ox-eye daisies put on a show in the platt with Rosa ‘Madame Alfred Carrière’ on the wall behind  
BELOW The herb garden is in exactly the wrong place horticulturally (it’s low-lying, damp and a frost pocket), but it’s right where Libby wants it, by the kitchen door

◀ through my kitchen. Plus it’s always been my dream to live in the middle of my garden.”

On this side of the garden, the slope is broken into terraces supported by old stone retaining walls and linked by steps. Here, the mood shifts to colourful exuberance, with a glorious mix of annuals, biennials and edimentals, vegetables chosen as much for their looks as their flavour. “I think vegetables can be as beautiful as flowers. The key is how you put them together. So we design in colour, texture and pattern. If I’m planting lettuce, I’ll probably have three different colours in rows, coordinating with annuals such as ‘Amazing Grey’ poppies. And I love beetroot as much for the leaf colour as for the actual beet.”

Hoggin paths weave between the beds where billowing phlox, salvias and autumn dahlias create shimmering pointillist effects of colour and movement. Nothing is left to chance. Even the sweet peas are colour coordinated to balance the palette, while trained fruit provides structure. “We experiment with the planting all the time. We’ve got cordon currants and gooseberries in the shade. We’ve got goblet pears, espaliers and pleached malus. It’s a bit of a horticultural playground.”

Libby is helped in this meticulous planning and planting by head gardener Tom Price and part-time trainees from the Work and Retrain as a Gardener Scheme (WRAGS). Some helpers are more impromptu, like the 150 jackdaws living in the cedar, enthusiastic hunters of slugs and snails.

As she reflects on the garden today, Libby sums it up simply: “It’s a very soft place. Nothing’s hard about it. There isn’t a straight line or a harsh edge. It has been a 25-year labour of love and it’s been worth all the effort.”

Libby Russell is a founder and director at Mazzullo + Russell (info@mazzullorussell.com).



## LIBBY’S TIPS FOR CREATING A WILDFLOWER PLATT

### Choose a spot on your lawn

Ideally you’ll want to see it from the house. Don’t make it too small: 4m x 2m will give you space to be creative with the planting. Mark out the space with string and pegs.

### Start by framing your platt

I used stone slabs lightly set into the soil, but you can use anything you have to hand: brick, pebbles, even wood, though it may not last as long. For a formal effect, you could even use water, if you’re prepared to dig and line a channel.

### Plan for a successional display

I have snowdrops in spring, followed by aquilegias, then ox-eye daisies in summer and devil’s bit scabious in late summer. Use plants that echo your local native wild flowers, without being too strict. You may prefer to substitute a closely related garden species, typically if there’s a gap in summer flowering.

### Watch out for thugs

In my platt, creeping buttercup can be more than a little too successful, so I usually weed it out before it gets a foothold. The ox-eye daisies also need controlling every now and then.

