

PLANTING IDEAS • BEAUTIFUL GARDENS • EXPERT ADVICE

# GARDENS

ILLUSTRATED

## Dream gardens

Design ideas for early summer

Rediscovering  
the historic  
**Foster  
irises**

How to  
grow  
**verbena**

**'Encombe is a world  
within a world'**  
*Tom Stuart-Smith's restoration  
of a Georgian estate*

**James  
Basson's**

Beautiful, sustainable design  
in the South of France

9 OF THE BEST  
**outdoor ovens**

# Contents

JUNE 2020

## Plants

- 26 **Plantsman's favourites** Wildside's Keith Wiley chooses his ten favourite plants for June
- 56 **Plant profile: *Verbena*** Plantswoman Marina Christopher highlights versatile vervains – one of her favourite plants for the garden
- 64 **In the genes** How gardener Lucy Skellorn unearthed the fascinating history of her iris-breeding ancestor
- 82 **True to nature** On a farm near Bath, Emorsgate Seeds collects its seeds from wildflowers grown with conservation at the fore
- 130 **Kalanchoe** An undemanding houseplant that you may not be able to keep your hands off

## Places

- 36 **New romantic** With a brief to create a romantic garden for a 15th-century manor house, Katie Guillebaud has adeptly combined cottage garden style and New Perennial planting to masterful effect
- 46 **Another world** In his redesign for an 18th-century estate in Dorset, Tom Stuart-Smith has added a magical, enclosed garden that creates a world within a world
- 74 **Place setting** For her own Somerset garden, designer Libby Russell has used two distinctive styles that work together in harmony
- 88 **Savoir flair** Combining artistic flair with an expert knowledge of what plants are best suited to a dry climate, designer James Basson has created a sensuous garden on the French Riviera

## People

- 72 **Who's who** The renowned plantswoman Rosy Hardy, on the importance of finding the right plant for the right place

## Design

- 99 **Design update** Including a reflecting pool for one of London's pocket parks
- 104 **Design ideas: using sculpture** Finding the right position for a piece of garden art is as important as choosing the piece itself, argues designer Andy Sturgeon
- 111 **Design sourcebook** Nine of the best outdoor ovens

## Regulars

- 3 **Editor's letter**
- 6 **Contributors**
- 13 **Dig in** This month: a public forest in Northumberland and a new orchid species
- 20 **Subscription offer** Save money when you subscribe to the digital edition of *Gardens Illustrated* this month
- 23 **Kitted out** For growing and cooking from the garden
- 32 **Reap the rewards** Although there is still much work to do, Great Dixter's gardener cook Aaron is enjoying some of the alpine fruits of his labours
- 35 **Gardening talent** Meet Chantal Rich, one of West Dean Gardens' latest trainees
- 113 **Books** New books, including *The Garden of Vegan* by designer Cleve West
- 117 **How to buy back issues**
- 119 **Crossword**
- 129 **Next issue** Don't miss our Plant Special



Pyramid yews underplanted with a mix of soft planting in Libby Russell's Somerset garden, page 74

## Subscribe & save

take out a digital subscription to *Gardens Illustrated*  
SEE PAGE 20

**COVER IMAGE**  
Yelford Manor,  
by Jason Ingram, page 36

## ON THE COVER

Dream gardens, pages 36, 46, 74, 88  
Encombe, page 46  
*Verbena*, page 56  
Foster irises, page 64  
James Basson's sustainable garden, page 88  
Outdoor ovens, page 111

## EVENTS AND OFFERS

- Join us on a four-day tour of the South West's most exciting kitchen gardens – page 11
- Save money when you subscribe to the digital edition of *Gardens Illustrated* – page 20
- Get free UK p&p when you order the new *A Year in the Edible Garden* special edition – page 121
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† Reader offers available to UK readers only.

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# Place setting

In her own Somerset garden, designer Libby Russell has created a unified sense of place in a garden of two distinct halves

WORDS JODIE JONES PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM

## IN BRIEF

**What** Private family garden.  
**Where** Somerset.  
**Size** Three acres.  
**Soil** Alkaline in the upper garden, varying to acidic pockets lower down.  
**Climate** Temperate.  
**Hardiness zone** USDA 9.

Batcombe House sits snugly in its valley setting, backed by a shelter belt of native woodland. The gardens to the south of the house are cool and calm, with a stone-framed border of *Leucanthemum vulgare* outside kitchen windows swagged with later-flowering rose, and the sloping lawn is carved into architectural swatches to form a contemporary amphitheatre.



**T**his is a magical place and I wanted to create a garden that was part of that,” says Libby Russell of her rural Somerset home. When she first set eyes on Batcombe House, Libby saw that its ancient valley setting had the potential to contain something really special, and she has spent the past 19 years perfecting that vision.

The 18th-century building, sensitively restored and stylishly extended, is now embraced by a garden of two halves, divided by a retaining wall of soft local stone. To the south and west, lawns punctuated by hummocks of box rise in an amphitheatre of curves scythed into the slope. This cool, modernist space conjures the aesthetic of contemporary land forming, fringed with deep, undulating borders planted in a harmonious sweep of cool greens and whites with touches of colour.

To the north, the style is more classic country estate. There is a herb garden just a short step from the kitchen, a formal lawn framed by gravel pathways, and a spring-fed water tank (full of native crayfish) set within a deep herbaceous border. On this side of the house, the rising land is retained by a beautifully crafted wall of local Doubling stone and wide steps that lead past a tumble of roses to an impressive kitchen garden crammed with vegetables and flowers in a riot of rich colour. Further up the slope the garden gradually quiets back down, through a swimming pool garden backed by wildflower banks, hiding a tennis court, an orchard and then the fields beyond.

There is an underlying logic to the progressions and connections between these various garden elements that make it hard to imagine the space ever looked different but this, of course, is the hidden hallmark of excellent design. “Grading the site was pretty complicated,” says Libby.

Fortunately, she was well equipped for the task. Libby has an MA in Landscape Architecture from the University of Greenwich and spent many years working with garden designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd before setting up her own design partnership, Mazzullo + Russell, with Emma Mazzullo six years ago. “Although it is rather different being ▶

**Above** In the deep border, which runs either side of the stone-walled water tank, the elegant, clipped, silver-leaved *Pyrus salicifolia* ‘Pendula’ complements soft lavender, alliums, deep purple spikes of *Salvia nemorosa* ‘Caradonna’, *Rosa* ‘Felicia’ and *Nepeta* ‘Six Hills Giant’.

**Right** Leading towards the kitchen garden steps is an avenue of pyramid yews, underplanted with a pointillist mix of santolinas, alchemillas and *Phlomis tuberosa* ‘Amazone’, punctuated with *Linaria maroccana* Little Sweeties mixture and *Lychnis coronaria* Gardeners’ World (= ‘Blych’) among others.



The 18th-century building, sensitively restored, is now embraced by a garden of two halves

Repetition introduces a sense of harmony, as the sloping site means each garden area can be seen from every other



▷ your own client. We could only do the garden in stages, as funds allowed, but everything was set out on a masterplan before the first bit of work began.”

With the site perfectly graded and landscaped by some exceptional local contractors, Libby approached the planting with relish. She is passionate about finding the best forms of truly garden-worthy plants. “I don’t want alien exotics here. It is important that this remains a garden of this place, but I also want it to speak of where plants are going today.” Inevitably, at this time of year it is the roses, in a palette of pink, peach and soft white, that catch the eye. “I often use one key plant to create harmony around the amphitheatre, such as the large-flowered *Rosa* ‘Sally Holmes’, or *Rosa* ‘Felicia’ set off by masses of *Alchemilla mollis* and various forms of nepeta,” says Libby, who is currently co-chairing an RHS trial of nepetas with Great Dixter’s head gardener Fergus Garrett. “These are all plants that feel at home in a rural setting.” But she might choose *N. x faassenii* Junior Walker (= ‘Novanepjun’), instead of the more familiar *N. racemosa* ‘Walker’s Low’, and also has stunning blue *N.* ‘Weinheim Big Blue’, floriferous dusky pink *N. racemosa* ‘Amelia’, and July-flowering *N. nuda* ‘Romany Dusk’ with its dark stems and impactful lilac spires.

Whatever she is planting, Libby uses bold repetition to introduce a sense of harmony, since the steeply sloping site means each garden area can be seen from every other one. The amphitheatre borders remain calm throughout the year but the northern side of the garden starts in June with a palette of soft pinks building to a unified crescendo of saturated colour as autumn comes. Libby aims for a progression in colour and interest every six weeks. It is a complicated exercise, but one she constantly seeks to refine. “I think being a gardener is like being a painter with a 3D printer. You have to work with colour and form, but also with time. The practicalities of site and soil underpin everything, but a good garden should express a series of moments within an unchanging place.” □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Mazzullo + Russell’s work at [mazzullorusselllandscapedesign.com](http://mazzullorusselllandscapedesign.com)

Turn the page for eight key roses from Batcombe

**Above** Pretty, apricot-pink *Rosa* ‘Sally Holmes’, spires of *Campanula latifolia* var. *macrantha* ‘Alba’, ornamental grasses and spears of iris foliage are framed by a froth of *Centranthus ruber* ‘Albus’ in the foreground.

**Left** The sinuous borders framing the sculpted lawns make good use of selected hardy geraniums, including *Geranium* Rozanne (= ‘Gerwat’) and *Geranium* ‘Blue Cloud’, and interesting foliage as varied as the glaucous *Hosta sieboldiana* var. *elegans* and chartreuse *Euphorbia palustris*.



1



2



3



4

## 8 KEY ROSES

**1 Rosa 'Buff Beauty'** A classic hybrid musk rose with the best buff colour. It repeats well and will form a vigorous, medium-sized shrub. 1.2m. AGM\*. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b<sup>†</sup>.

**2 Rosa Lyda Rose (= 'Letlyda')** A romantic small rose that looks like a wild rose but repeats. It associates well with ox-eye daisies and wildflowers. 90cm. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

**3 Rosa 'White Grootendorst'** An elegant relation to the pink version, with frilly flowers that are wonderful for picking. It will continue flowering right into autumn. 1.2m. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

**4 Rosa Awakening (= 'Probuzeni')** The double version of pink 'New Dawn'. Continues to flower throughout the season, even on a north-facing wall. 3m. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

**5 Rosa gallica 'Versicolor'** (*rosa mundi*) A favourite historic rose. Its highly fragrant pink flowers are striped and spotted with crimson. 1.2m. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b.

**6 Rosa Perennial Blue (= 'Mehv9601')** A lovely magenta rambler with a delicate fragrance that repeats really well. Healthy but, unlike some ramblers, will not rampage out of control. 3m. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

**7 Rosa 'Sally Holmes'** Its large, soft-white to apricot-pink flowers are almost luminous around the banks in this garden and it repeats reliably. 1.2m. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

**8 Rosa 'Felicia'** Libby's favourite pale-pink hybrid musk rose, with a wonderful fragrance. A vigorous cultivar that repeats so well and is a perfect warm pink. 1.5m. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

\*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.  
<sup>†</sup>Hardiness ratings given where available.



5



6



7



8

A gardener has to work with colour and form, but also with time



Either side of the kitchen garden steps, historic *rosa mundi* sits comfortably next to the 20th-century cultivar 'Felicia'. *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' washes the foreground with blue, while variegated *Philadelphus coronarius* 'Variegatus' and towering foxgloves draw the eye to the upper level.