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# GARDENS

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## NATURAL BEAUTY

JINNY BLOM'S WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY DESIGN FOR AN ENGLISH COUNTRY GARDEN

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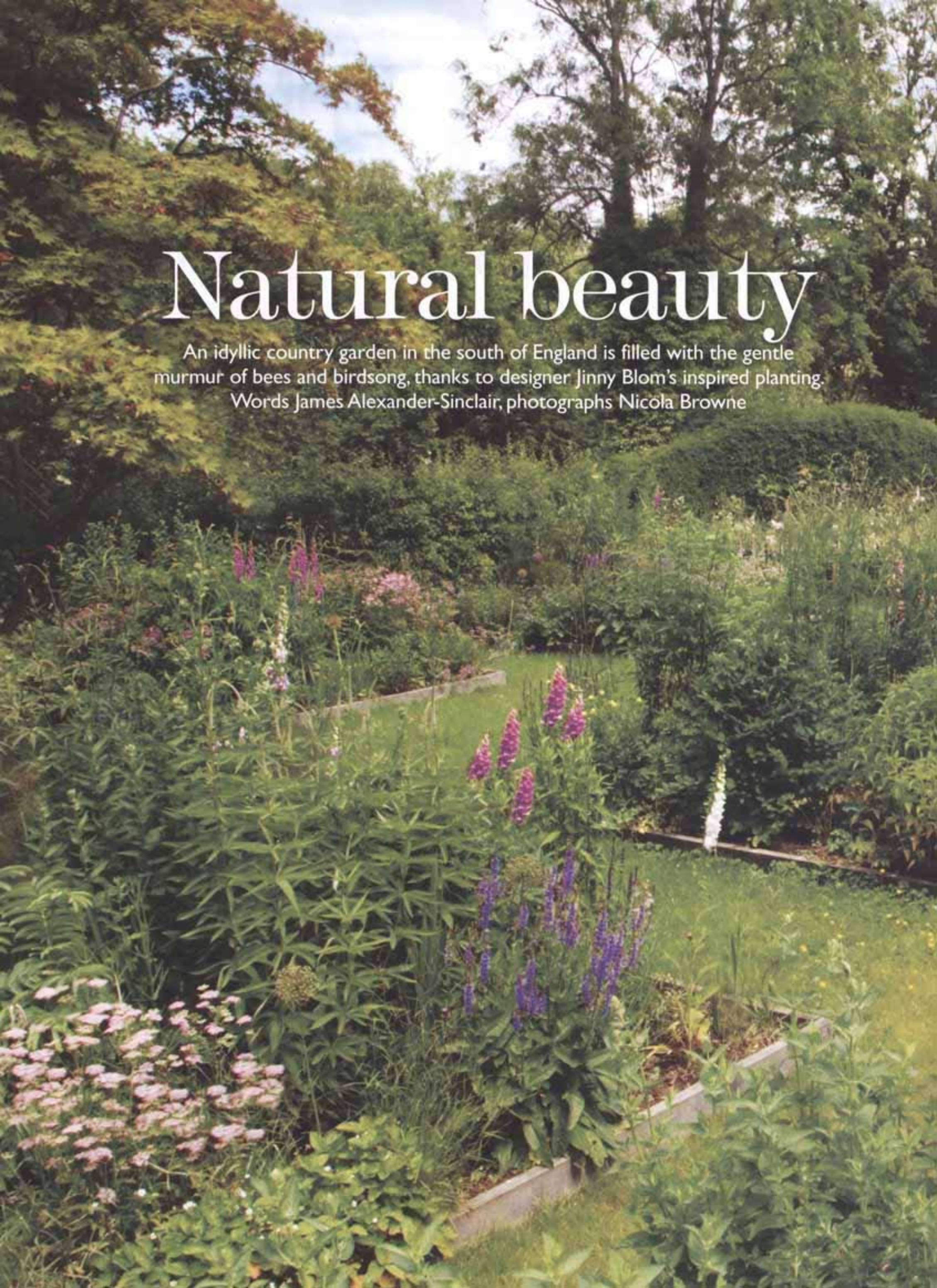
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# Natural beauty

An idyllic country garden in the south of England is filled with the gentle murmur of bees and birdsong, thanks to designer Jinny Blom's inspired planting. Words James Alexander-Sinclair, photographs Nicola Browne





This part of the garden was originally a neatly mown lawn flanked by a straight yew hedge. Designer Jinny Blom has now removed such restrictive corsets so that lawns and hedges run wild while the Cutting Garden, intended to provide autumn flowers, is a riot of *Amsonia tabernaemontana*, *Sanguisorba tenuifolia* 'Alba', and the bold spires of *Digitalis purpurea* (B on plan).

SOME GARDENS ARE IMPOSED upon their surroundings. You know the sort of thing: majestic lawns, deeply luxurious herbaceous borders and cool shrubberies; in other words, all that we love most about classic English gardens. Other gardens are more subtle and their claim on the countryside is less brazen. Like chameleons, they insinuate themselves into the landscape.

There is no doubt whatsoever into which camp Jinny Blom's design for this Sussex garden fits. At the end of a winding track through a coppiced woodland, the garden suddenly opens out into an idyllic landscape of water meadows, lazily twisting streams, ancient pastureland and mooching deer. All this is part of 400 very lovely acres of farmland that are carefully monitored by a conservation manager whose mission is to create an ideal environment for all wildlife to thrive unmolested by the agrochemical hand of man.

Within this natural buffer and gathered around a neat Tudor farmhouse sits the garden. It has been created relatively quickly (since 2002) by Jinny, in close and affable collaboration with her enlightened and enthusiastic client.

When the project began, a more conventional garden already existed on the site. Terraces of York stone had been laid, walls had been built and there was a lot of closely mown grass. Between them, designer and client decided to create a completely different sort of garden: they were looking for what the client rather eloquently described as "a certain cheery, tramped-about haphazardness". At the same time they set themselves some strictly self-imposed criteria: most notably the decision was made to conserve all the hard landscaping. As Jinny explains, "The temptation, particularly in London, is to rip out everything that was there before in order to scrape the site back to blank canvas. As a result, many tonnes of perfectly usable stone and timber ends up in the skip.

"Although much of the structure here was not what I wanted, it had to stay. After all, a terrace is not a painting – it is only there to stand upon." As a result of this, Jinny has had to amend her proportions in order to fit into the existing corsetry of walls and pathways – although she has allowed nature to muffle the edges by setting thyme in crevices and permitting grass to colonise paving joints.

### SIMPLE, LOCAL AND EDIBLE

This condition has not noticeably harmed the design of the garden. The intention was to create a garden which wherever possible adhered to three basic principles, "simple, local and edible". Jinny has fond childhood memories of wandering around her uncle's large garden grazing on randomly planted salad leaves and plump berries. Food is everywhere: as you wander up the drive to the house (E on plan) there are nuts, raspberries grow around the swimming pool (M on plan), currant bushes edge pathways and where once there were strict drifts of leathery *Bergenia* there is now ►





1 The vegetable plots (O on plan) are the only area in the garden managed traditionally. Beyond them lies the espalier pear enclosure, where things loosen up again.

2 "The garden has softened," says Jinny of this view from the Cutting Garden (B on plan), "and found a new capacity to blend with the countryside."

3 Valerian (*Centranthus ruber* 'Albus') and a blue and pink stippling of scabious *Knautia macedonica* Melton pastels blend with rough grass that was once a lawn (D on plan).

4 "Astrantia major 'Roma' is a fabulous, tall, long-flowering Piet Oudolf selection, and very beautiful," says Jinny.



## DESIGNER PROFILE

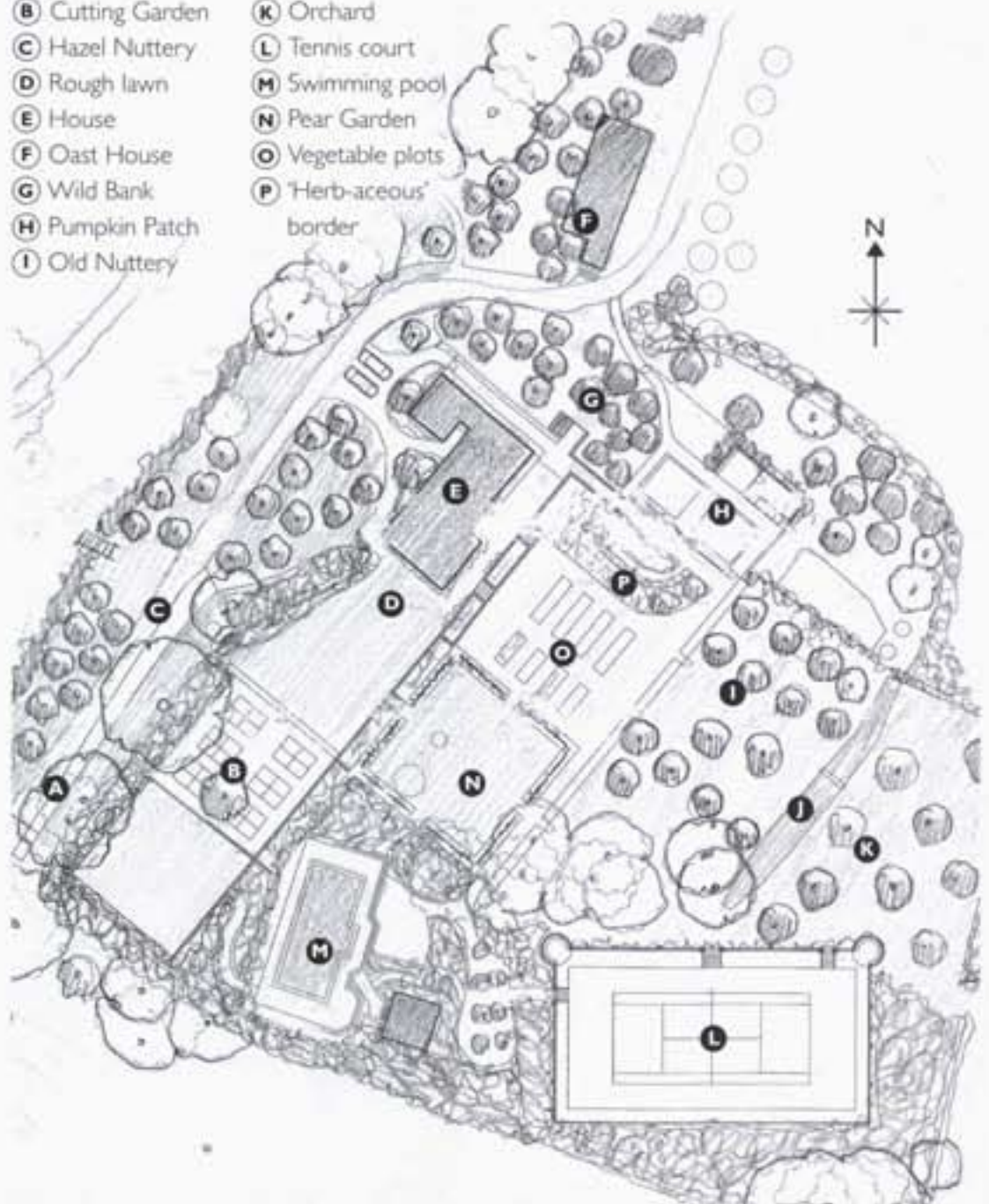
Jinny Blom is one of Britain's most exciting garden designers. She set up her London-based practice 12 years ago (having worked as an assistant to award-winning designer Dan Pearson). Since then she has designed two Chelsea Show Gardens (The Healing Garden with HRH The Prince of Wales in 2002 and the Laurent Perrier Garden in 2006) and has made a number of superior gardens all over the country. Her clients have included institutions (Maggie's Centre in Sheffield and The Henry Moore Foundation), architects (Michaelis Boyd and Eldridge Smerin) as well as individuals. Her basic philosophy is "keep it simple and do it well".

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## GARDEN PLAN

- (A) Drive
- (B) Cutting Garden
- (C) Hazel Nuttery
- (D) Rough lawn
- (E) House
- (F) Oast House
- (G) Wild Bank
- (H) Pumpkin Patch
- (I) Old Nuttery

- (J) Water Garden
- (K) Orchard
- (L) Tennis court
- (M) Swimming pool
- (N) Pear Garden
- (O) Vegetable plots
- (P) 'Herb-aceous' border





5 *Rosa 'Madame Alfred Carrière'* smothers what was once the garage. At its feet lie ox-eye daisy and currants. "Fruit bushes are found in profusion all over the garden to feed humans and birds alike," says Jinny.

► sorrel and mint. Most remarkably there are ten oak-boarded rectangular vegetable beds right outside the house (O on plan) – in exactly the place where, in a less unorthodox garden, you would perhaps find a formal knot garden or rioting herbaceous borders.

From almost every important window, the client can look out at swelling radishes and pouting cauliflowers marshalled into Orwellian order. All of this contrasts markedly with the joyful exuberance of the rest of the garden.

### THE 'HERB-ACEOUS' BORDER

Flanking the vegetable plots is what Jinny calls the "Herb-aceous Border" (P on plan) – a lousy pun but a good idea, brimming with culinary herbs and the odd cardoon (*Cynara cardunculus*). This curves around a retaining wall topped with buzz-cut lavender, a chubby pumpkin patch and a frame of thriving vines – more food. This border meets a steep bank that wraps round the side of the

(continued on page 30) ►

### GARDEN NOTES

Jinny Blom's advice for attracting wildlife to your garden:

- **The first priority in any garden I make is bees.** Hazels are very early into flower and attract bees to their pollen-filled catkins. This nourishment makes bees ready for action as other flowers come to life in spring. Nutteries are a must, even in the tiniest garden.
- **Water is, as we know, imperative for life.** Add water wherever you can. In a large garden many ponds could be introduced – shallow-edged for birds, mammals, amphibians, and insects to take advantage for drinking, bathing and breeding.
- **Try not to be too tidy.** It's quite alright to leave planting to its natural cycle – it has its own beauty of fresh spring growth, flowering, drying off and scattering seed in late summer; straw is taken by all manner of creatures for winter bedding, or provides a safe route through the garden for tiny mammals and self-mulching over winter. A quick clean up in February starts the year off again.
- **Birds need peace and quiet and plenty of food.** I invariably plant a good mixed fruity hedge. Lots of blossom, followed by fruit, feeds the multitude and gladdens the heart. A dense hedge with a good leaf mouldy base will attract shy slow worms that can hide until dusk when they emerge to snack on slugs in the damp open grass.
- **Choose wildlife-friendly plants.** Umbellifers are beautiful, adaptable and an excellent food source for many insects, including hover flies. Moths love ivy flowers and ivy is a splendid host for many creatures including moths, spiders and birds. If you have a tiny garden, one oregano plant will astonish with the crusting of butterflies when it is in full bloom. Herb gardens are a magnet for all sorts of insects, including the wonderful humming bird moth.

6 All the gates and fencing are made from local chestnut and oak coppice to give a low-tech appeal.



7 The tall pink spikes of common foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*) aren't as wild as they look. Jinny scattered seeds widely to assist the "randomness of nature".





Venerable oaks, gnarled and craggy, frame the buildings and "give them back their true scale and intimacy", says Jinny. Abundant productivity in the vegetable plots (O on plan) is mirrored in bird and insect activity on the Wild Bank (G) and lavender borders, which now teem with life.



'An extraordinary laissez-faire attitude pervades this garden. It is without doubt beautiful and idyllic and welcoming'

► (continued from page 27)

house (E on plan): formerly more mown grass, this is now a frothing turmoil of ox-eye daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) and *Rosa* 'Stanwell Perpetual' (a fiendishly thorned rose of palest pink).

Along the ridge of this slope (and indeed throughout the garden) are some gnarled fruit trees that, despite appearances, are all new to the garden, having been salvaged from a redundant fruit farm. At the back of the garden lies an even wilder area, which Jinny calls the Old Nuttery (I on plan), where an old drainage ditch forms a Water Garden (J) heavily planted with water lilies, and a flock of Sussex hens scratch about. The garden is constantly threatened by deer and rabbits: there is fencing for the latter and Jinny has planted a humungous hedge to deter the former. "We hated the idea of a Stalag-Luft deer fence so went for this option: initially visitors complained that we had blocked the view but we decided that we would rather have a happy garden than what was, in reality, a rather mediocre view."

### A HONEY-BEE'S HEAVEN

On the other side is the Pear Garden (N on plan) – a square of grass surrounded by some magnificent espaliered pears, gatherings of pillowy box balls and a couple of hybrid tea roses (pink 'Paul Shirville' and the gingery 'Just Joey'). Most of the grass throughout the garden is only mown twice a year and, as a result, has become a mass of clover and buttercup and is generally a greenkeeper's nightmare (but a honey-bee's heaven). From here it is a stroll to the swimming pool (M on plan) surrounded by more box, lilac and the heavy-hipped *Rosa Corylus* (= 'Hazel le Rougetel'), and a hop to the cutting garden (B) – six raised beds and a long (and quite conventional) herbaceous border.

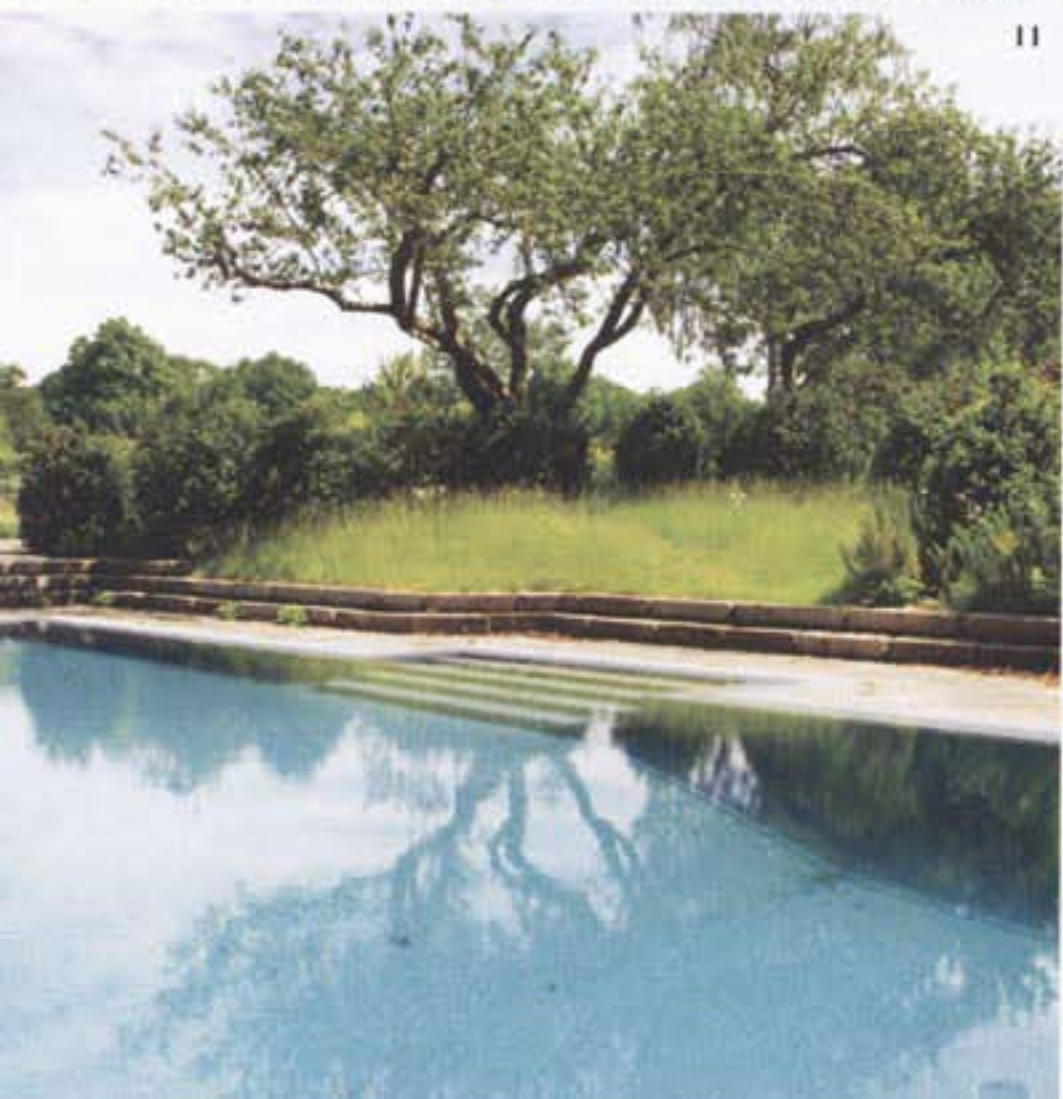
This was never going to be easy as the soil is, to be perfectly frank, disgusting: heavy acid clay which is waterlogged in winter and iron-hard and deeply fissured in summer. It needed a designer with vision and a client with imagination – and will always require a gardener with an extraordinarily sympathetic touch.

An extraordinary laissez-faire attitude (the client even likes mole hills, for goodness' sake) pervades this garden. It is without doubt beautiful and idyllic and welcoming and all those wonderful things that a garden should be, but one should be under no illusions about the amount of effort that goes into making something this good. ■

• James Alexander-Sinclair is a garden designer and BBC TV presenter.



- 8 The Water Garden (J on plan) was, until recently, an old drainage ditch. It still collects run-off water from the orchard but now provides a useful watering hole in the midst of the garden. Wildlife abounds and the little bridges are perfect for lying on and watching what's going on.
- 9 The old Oast House (F on plan) previously sat on a plateau of lawn. Now vines and figs cover it, and a bevy of doves have nested there.
- 10 The ubiquitous ox-eye daisy is "the star of the garden" according to Jinny, who says "it creates tidal waves of sunny white flowers all over the place" and yet still manages to appeal close-up.
- 11 The beautiful shape of the mature Bramley apple trees beside the swimming pool (M on plan) is a sign of years of careful pruning, says Jinny, who calls the grassy area beneath them "the hairy lawn".



11

PICTURES IN BOX: ROSA 'SIR CEDRIC MORRIS' / HOWARD SOOLEY; ALL OTHERS BY THE GARDEN PICTURE LIBRARY

## PLANT NOTEBOOK

Jinny Blom highlights some of her favourite plants. These hardworking species all look ornamental, and many also provide food both for the garden's owners and for wildlife:



*Rosa 'Sir Cedric Morris'*

### *Rosa 'Sir Cedric Morris'*

"Because it is big and beautiful"

A towering 10m-high climber with great bunches of fragrant white flowers in late summer. Heavenly foliage with purple tints.

### *Fragaria vesca* (strawberry)

An enthusiastic groundcover plant. Little pink flowers followed by tiny alpine strawberries.



*Fragaria vesca*

### *Leucanthemum vulgare* (ox-eye daisy)

The classic native meadow flower: "Terry the gardener calls it 'white mess' and we have made a right mess everywhere with it," says Jinny.

### *Cydonia oblonga* (common quince)

A small tree bearing pinkish flowers followed by golden pear shaped fruit. Makes great jelly and 'membrillo' (quince cheese). The word 'marmalade' originally meant 'quince jam' (from the Spanish for this fruit, 'marmelo').



*Cydonia oblonga*

### *Corylus avellana* (hazel)

Fantastic leaves, delicious nuts (if you beat the squirrels) and good as plant supports. "It is a fabulous plant, incredibly useful and strips energy from rich soils allowing a good woodland floor to develop."

### *Primula* (primrose)

"A perfect early spring flower for woodlands but mostly because they are so sweet."

### *Origanum vulgare* (oregano)

"All the herbs do brilliantly but especially oregano. It is alive with butterflies and bees in summer."



*Corylus avellana*

### Currants

"We grow red, black and white currants not just for the taste but also the heady smell."