

# A bit of rough

It's the horticultural equivalent of 'shabby chic' – a garden that looks as if it has run riot, but in reality is carefully thought through. Rae Spencer-Jones reports. Photograph by Nicola Browne



**W**hen landscape designer Jinny Blom first visited her client's East Sussex farm in 2002, the three-acre garden was beautifully manicured, with well-groomed flower borders and lawns in neatly mown stripes. "Most of my projects are about designing nice, tidy gardens," says Blom, "but this client wanted to rough hers up and create a sense of wilderness."

The current owner has made it her mission to turn the agricultural land on the farm over to conservation. In the garden, Blom's challenge was to convey the illusion that here, too, nature was in charge. This didn't mean simply sowing a few wild-flower seeds to create a meadow. "I think people are beguiled into thinking that meadows just happen," says Blom. "I say, think again! Meadows are the product of a strictly

husbanded landscape, which is fine, but only if you have the time or labour to maintain it properly." Instead, the designer has put elements in place that invite nature to take its course, and which require only gentle management to prevent them from getting out of control. An example of this is the new planting of hazelnuts that flank the driveway just outside the house. As well as intending that the nuts will

mature to form an attractive tunnel that echoes the chestnuts growing up the driveway, Blom has another agenda. "Nuts help to starve the soil," she explains. "Eventually they will reduce the grass, which will be replaced by wild flowers such as bluebells. Hazels also produce their catkins very early. They make good food for bees, which are then encouraged into the garden to pollinate the fruit and vegetables."

While the environmental agenda was the priority, Blom also noted that the house was isolated from the existing gardens. "It was just sitting in a sea of lawn," she says. This determined the garden's new layout. To draw the garden in around the house, Blom subdivided the lawn by building walls and steps from local ironstone, creating compartments and defining levels. She then overlaid the whole

**Method in madness: Now is a good time to plan a garden, when plants can be moved and landscaping done. Part of the original lawn (above, in June), shows the raised beds of the cutting garden and a yew hedge left to grow wild**

with a mass of productive plants: fruit, vegetables, herbs and flowers for cutting.

"Almost everything in the garden is edible to man or beast," says the designer. Hence, instead of a traditional floral display outside the patio doors, you look out over a "vegetable lawn" consisting of raised borders stuffed with every kind of root and salad vegetable.

Yet, even in this most cultivated part of the garden, plants are allowed a certain amount of freedom. A curved border originally planted with a variety of herbs has been swamped by tansy, valerian and alchemilla. "There were many more herbs in here," says Blom, "but we let the plants in the garden fight it out, and they fight it out honestly."

Elsewhere in the garden, nature is in full swing. In June this year, Blom installed and planted a simple square pond. The plants – among them forget-me-not, sagittaria, water mint and the lesser bulrush – are so well established that they could have been there for years. "It was extraordinary how quickly things came to live in it," says Blom. "While we were building it, we could almost hear creatures lining up to move in."

Despite the wild feel to the place, it is prevented from dissolving into an untidy mess. To keep it in check, the herbaceous border is cut back in January and the roses lightly trimmed; climbers are pruned and tied in as necessary, and all the borders are mulched with compost. The lawns, with the exception of those around the raised beds (which are mown regularly) are cut only twice a year. The rest of the time they are left to their own devices.

Although most wild fauna are welcomed in the garden, deer are the exception to the rule. But even keeping them at bay has been turned to an advantage with the introduction of more voluptuous hedges of local species: brambles, rowan, cherry plum, wild apple (*Malus communis*), pear (*Pyrus communis*) and viburnum. "I wanted the hedges to be big, thorny, flowery and fruity," says Blom. This once sterile landscape has been truly unshackled.