



Run of the mill

To plan a garden for an Oxfordshire water mill, a young designer went by the brook. By Maureen Cleave

It is hard to imagine a better gift than an idyllic small garden, attached to an 18th-century water mill, bordered on one side by a swift, noisy brook and on the other by an orchard. This is what the painter Maryrose Hodgson gave to her husband as a reward for converting the five-storey mill, at East Hanney, in Oxfordshire. She engaged the young designer Jinny Blom and gave her a free hand except for two caveats: no lawn, and no yellow. On May Day 1997 Blom and Hodgson began – putting in 3,500 plants – and for the next three weeks it rained in a thoroughly satisfactory manner. Today the garden is ravishing.

It has been a joint effort. Blom came up with the ideas. Hodgson, who the age of 11 won the school prize for her Coronation garden (a patriotic mixture of white alyssum, blue lobelia and red salvias), put them into practice. And Robert, Hodgson's husband (a former estates bursar at Merton College, Oxford), did much of the hard landscaping. On one occasion, Blom decided on a terrace outside the front door; Robert had some old York stone to hand. 'The next time I came,' says Blom, 'there was the terrace.'

Blom started her gardening career in a south London mental hospital, working with elderly men who passed their days chain-smoking in front of the television. Gardening got them outdoors and, from this positive experience, Blom decided to take up garden design. The mill garden was the first commission she undertook alone, and it's a triumphant start. She has bold views about her chosen field. 'I am bored rigid by plant collecting. I don't give a monkey's where things come from,' she says, adding that if she hears another word about *genius loci* – the spirit of place, now all the rage – she will scream.

The triangular garden is about 44 yards long and 22 yards at its widest point, tapering to a sycamore tree. A low Victorian wall separates it from the orchard. 'I wanted a stock-proof fence

For the garden she designed for the millhouse (above left) at East Hanney, near Abingdon, Jinny Blom laid three circles of herringbone brick to mimic the eddies of Letcombe Brook, around which she planted *Euphorbia palustris* in yellowish mounds, fluffy pink *Fillipendula rubra* 'Venusta' and dark crimson *Knautia macedonica*







Clockwise from above: the spires of *Digitalis ferruginea* tower over red *Knautia macedonica*; Robert and Maryrose Hodgson with their dog Leeloo; sedums and *Sambucus nigra* 'Guincho purple', still in bud; fluffy white aruncus and purple *Salvia verticillata* 'Purple Rain' flank the curved path; *Verbena bonariensis* and the plate-like yellow flowers of bronze fennel; *Miscanthus sinensis* var *condensatus* 'Gracillimus', *Verbena bonariensis* and *Darmara peltata* form a lively display





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along the wall,' says Blom. 'We used indigenous planting: hawthorn, viburnum, dog roses. The horses in the orchard keep most of it down.'

It was the brook and its swirling eddies that inspired Blom's overall scheme: the garden would mimic the brook. 'People gather in eddies, too,' she says, 'so we have three rings in herringbone brick, one after another, laid by Robert, each slightly bigger than the last, the connecting paths forming a slight curve.' The steps up to the first circle are made from railway sleepers. It is encircled by slender posts – Victorian telegraph poles topped with finials – the ropes slung between them festooned with the dark wine-hued elematis 'Madame Julia Correvon'. In the second circle is a table, a cable drum half submerged under the brickwork. The third circle, with a little seat shaded by the sycamore, is planted with ferns and comfrey.

Here the ground slopes down to the brook in what Blom calls 'the psychological bleed-out into nature,' which is to say one would not notice a garden there from the outside. 'To separate it from nature I use buffer planting,' said Blom. 'On the wet side I put in the coyote willow *Salix exigua* and *Iris pseudacorus*, *Darmera peltata* for its huge russet leaves in autumn, and *Euphorbia palustris*.' (This last, she admits, is slightly yellow.)

'I like to use plants that have native counterparts,' Blom continues. 'The white *Filipendula ulmaria* occurs in the hedgerows, so I have used a cultivar, the giant pink fluffy *F rubra* "Venusta". You see scabious and elder on the Ridgeway across the top of the Downs, so I've used the little crimson scabious, *Knautia macedonica*, and an elder, *Sambucus nigra* "Guineho purple", with purple leaves and pink flowers.'

The colour scheme is 'moody,' says Blom, designed to fit in with the mill's brick walls: pinks and purples and browns, creamy aruncus with its Prince of Wales plumes, dark red *Origanum laevigatum* 'Hertenhausen', *Verbena bonariensis* with its mauve topknots, *Digitalis ferruginea*, a little apricot foxglove from the Mediterranean, *Salvia verticillata* 'Purple Rain', buff pink *Achillea* 'Lachsschönheit', and terracotta *Euphorbia griffithii* 'Fireglow', which matches the red oxide paint on the mill's iron balcony. All this and the murmuring brook: it is hard to imagine a setting to better it. Even the soil – fine silt washed from the Berkshire Downs – is perfect.

Among the grasses – *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster' and *Miscanthus sinensis* var *condensatus* 'Gracillimus' – Maryrose Hodgson (who gardened surreptitiously all the time as we wandered around the mill garden, dead-heading, weeding, noting gaps) tackles some couch grass. 'I get more and more ruthless as I get older,' she admits, pulling out a stray frond.

'The gardener is the garden,' Blom observes, watching her. 'Once the gardener goes, the garden goes too.' ■

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