



ROSES IN JO THOMPSON'S GARDEN, FROM FAR LEFT: ISPAHAN, THE LARK ASCENDING, GHISLAINE DE FÉLIGONDE. BELOW LEFT: CHARLES DE MILLS

'Don't look over there! It's chaos,' warns Jo Thompson as we wander over the small but perfectly formed lawns surrounding her cottage in East Sussex. 'Oh god, I think that's a weed. I'll deal with that shortly. But come and look at this rose... it almost floats.' For a Gold-medal-winning garden designer with a dazzling (and discreetly

kept) client list, Thompson is unexpectedly relaxed about her own home turf.

In part, this is because she currently has bigger things on her mind: last night she had her first Chelsea Flower Show nightmare about the preparations for the leafy miniature landscape she has masterminded for Wedgwood. More broadly, this is Thompson's way: her approach to gardening is characterised by down-to-earth pragmatism and rule-breaking romanticism. If mint and mar-

joram let rip across her borders, the more the merrier – think of the scent! Should traditionalists frown on the Mexican daisies and quaking grasses she encourages to self-seed on her paved terrace, so be it – they bring meadow-like texture, movement and a habitat for wildlife. And she makes a logical case for defying the old diktat never to underplant roses: 'A fluffy hardy geranium or lovely catmint hides all those twiggy stems.' Roses are, in fact, a particular favourite: any day now, the highly perfumed Ispahan and a deliberately

unpruned cloud of the sunny yellow Lady Banks' variety around the back of the house will burst into bloom. 'I suppose my style is a contemporary take on the rambling English cottage garden – I love a foxglove,' she says. 'My aim is always to conjure an atmosphere.' Making something magical from

whatever you have is one of Thompson's guiding principles. As a student in Rome, she was intrigued by how Renaissance engineers had crafted the astonishing *giardini*, with more than 50 fountains, at the Villa D'Este, before electricity had even been invented. Following brief stints in fashion and as a drama teacher in the 1990s, a lightbulb moment came when she visited north London's Clifton Nurseries in the vague hope of finding inspiration for how to spruce up the roof of her tiny flat in Little Venice. 'One of the team asked if they could help, and started sketching a little layout on the back of a piece of paper,' she remembers. 'I suddenly realised the possibilities of plants: gardening isn't just about horticulture, but what you can achieve by cleverly organising a space.' Several weeks of lugging compost up five floors and strategically sowing seeds around the chimney pens later, Thompson had successfully created a small open-air salon above her home, and promptly enrolled at the English Gardening School, graduating in 2003. As a new mother, she needed flexible hours and so worked for herself from the outset, taking on one garden at a time, and through word-of-mouth recommendations, the business slowly blossomed.

Accordingly, it was through a mutual friend that the hair-styling supremo Sam McKnight was introduced to Thompson at the Chelsea Flower Show. 'We got on like a house on fire,' McKnight recalls, and he asked if she would help turn the backyard of his new London house into a smaller version of a bucolic country garden. 'I was obsessed with Great Dixter and Sissinghurst, and I was after chaos, fragrance and colour all year round,' he says. 'Jo totally got that – and she has indulged me ever since.' The result is spectacular: McKnight's borders erupt with floral fecundity every season, from camellias in spring to a sweep of sweet peas

in summer and a cocktail of dahlias in September. 'She's such a good teacher – we keep in constant touch,' he says. 'And she's brilliant on Instagram too, as she divulges information in such a poetic and understandable way.'

Making gardening more accessible is clearly another of Thompson's many skills. She regularly leads planting classes at Kew, and is keen on nurturing young talent in her own nine-strong team, who have taken on everything from bijoux Parisian *jardins* to a sculpture park in Sussex,



THOMPSON IN SAM MCKNIGHT'S GARDEN (ALSO PICTURED ABOVE)

the magnificent estates of the A list, and the terrace of her local pub, the Bell.

From May onwards, the public will have the chance to experience some of Thompson's magic as they pass through a new walkway by Chelsea Barracks, where she has designed striped flower beds inspired by Bridget Riley artworks, and installed wild woodland shrubs along the neighbouring Embankment. Meanwhile, she is in the midst of restoring an English country

parkland created by the legendary 18th-century landscaper Humphry Repton, and reviving a lost garden originally conceived by Vita Sackville-West in Sevenoaks. 'We have records that she devised it, and there are parallels with the Long Barn, but we have no idea why or for whom, so we have been joining the dots together via archives and the local records office,' she says.

As I prepare to leave the blossom-heavy trees and birdsong of the designer's Sussex haven to catch a train back to London, we pass through a glorious pergola woven with the rambling Adélaïde d'Orléans rose, Thompson pointing out a few works-in-progress as we go. 'Here's the rockery... which I know is a bit retro but I thought, "Why not?" This is a single pot of rosemary that has gone bananas, and that's a gorgeous clematis, which covers up the very useful but somewhat unsightly pizza oven,' she cheerfully explains, confirming her status as one of the most delightfully imaginative and least pretentious prize-winning plantswomen at work in Britain today. □

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THE PLANT WHISPERER

With a winning combination of inspiration and intuition, Jo Thompson brings a touch of magic to her enchanting designs

BY CHARLOTTE BROOK



THOMPSON'S 2015 CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW GARDEN



COTSWOLD BEAUTY VERBASCUMS AT CHELSEA IN 2014



WHITE VALERIANS WITH HAIRY CHERVIL AND A COMTE DE CHAMBORD ROSE AT CHELSEA IN 2015

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