

Kentish belle

Shrubberies as islands of dense planting punctuate undulating swathes of lawn, creating privacy and enabling views in this garden designed by Jo Thompson in the Weald of Kent

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IN BRIEF

What A large, south-facing country garden, designed by Jo Thompson, surrounded by ancient oak trees.

Where Kent.

Size Just over one acre.

Soil Heavy clay.

Climate Temperate.

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

The view from the house down a gentle slope is framed by several island beds featuring shrubs and grasses. Here, black elder (*Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* 'Eva') and *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo' are interspersed with grasses *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Transparent' and *Panicum virgatum* 'Shenandoah'.



Texture-rich beds are crammed full of Great Dixter-inspired planting that provides interest all year, from bulbs in spring to constantly moving grasses

Hidden deep in the Kentish countryside, somewhere between Great Dixter and Sissinghurst, lies an idyllic, small field of gently undulating pasture bound by brooding, mature oaks and surrounded by grazing sheep. With a brief to create a series of notional spaces for entertaining, while still respecting the Wealden location, garden designer Jo Thompson has been working on this project off and on over the past ten years.

Her initial reaction was to do nothing. “When I visit a scene like this, my first instinct is to leave it alone, with, at most, some gentle intervention.” But the field on two levels, surrounding a farmyard with a newly built house above and the remains of a 14th-century barn below, is owned by a family who wanted space to eat and cook outside, a pool, and, above all, privacy.

The house, now happily settled, and with its reclaimed Kent peg tiles and red brick, rustic shiplap and Arts and Crafts leanings looking as though it has always been there, is separated from the barn (now barely recognisable with its modern surround of glass and timber) by a

sloped series of three brick-faced terraces. The texture-rich beds are crammed full of Great Dixter-inspired planting: high-waving *Molinia* grasses, architectural *Euphorbia x pasteurii* and airy *Cephalaria gigantea* are punctuated with large pittosporum balls, creating a see-through hedge that both links and divides the two living spaces. The owner explains: “Looking out at the terrace from my office in the barn, the planting provides interest all year, from bulbs in the spring to grasses constantly moving in the wind.”

Moving on across York stone terraces that cover a former farmyard, there’s a change of mood. Here a tranquil, shady spot with a fountain in a formal garden of box-surrounded, pleached hornbeams, backed with *Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’, and climbing star jasmine and *Clematis* ‘Alba Luxurians’, overlooks an understated swimming pool. This is surrounded by a low, beech hedge punctuated with sanguisorbas, *Verbena bonariensis*, *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’, fennel and bistort, all late-summer stalwarts to see the family through the summer holidays.

The view from all three bases – house, barn and pool – stretches across a green sward, originally on two levels, now landformed

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Above The outdoor kitchen arena and firepit are surrounded with texture-rich clumps of *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’, and *Molinia caerulea* interspersed with evergreen *Euphorbia x pasteurii*.

Right above The formal garden features half a dozen pleached hornbeams, with *Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’ behind and low beech hedging *Fagus sylvatica* f. *purpurea* in the foreground.

Right below A low border of orange and yellow *Helenium* ‘Waltraut’ and *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *deamii* with *Verbena bonariensis* curves round behind the outdoor kitchen, with ancient oak trees behind.



Jo's colour inspiration

In her recent book, *The Gardener's Palette* (Timber Press, 2022), designer Jo Thompson describes a secret garden she visited, where 'the greens and greys and browns were speckled with oranges and yellows, reds and pinks. But these weren't coming from flowers: they were the result of light and shadows as they played on different surfaces.' She wonders whether it is just colour that creates atmosphere, or whether there are other elements at play – location, light, climate or cultural references.

The triumph of this garden's palette is in referencing the colour that comes from the shadows created by the oaks that surround the garden. By using dark reds, almost-blacks and deep purples, as well as the terracotta that incorporates the colours of the building materials, the plants merge and do not distract the eye or break the ambience. The owners also had a dislike of pastels, which have mostly been avoided in the island beds, terraces and pool surrounds.

The formal, white garden creates a different mood. Here, the owners wanted a tranquil, bosky spot to relax in, among a combination of green foliage and white flowers. The pool garden colouring was apparently inspired by the merging tones of a Battenberg cake: the copper of the beech, the pool's expanse of blue-green, and the fresh, green leaves of the pleached hornbeam.

The top terrace features an avenue of birches to the left and twin herbaceous borders of *Eutrochium dubium* 'Little Joe', *Helenium* 'Waltraut' and *Agastache* 'Blackadder', which frame the view from the house and offer routes down to the lower garden.



It struck me that we could make a feature of the space in front of the boundary by creating island beds that can be enjoyed from all sides



▷ with a gentle slope uniting the upper to the larger, lower lawn. Both lead the eye gently to a quintessentially English view of dark oaks silhouetted against blond, cut meadows edged with cleft-chestnut, two-bar fences.

In order to create privacy without destroying the view, Jo has created several shrubberies. She explains: “A hedge wouldn’t have been practical and wouldn’t have grown under the trees. It struck me instead that we could make a feature of the space in front of the boundary by creating island beds that can be enjoyed from all sides. I wanted to pick out the deepest shades of the trees that create the shadows – the purples, oranges and deep reds. So I planted *Physocarpus opulifolius* ‘Diabolo’, then *Acer palmatum*, *Abelia* ‘Edward Goucher’ and *Hydrangea quercifolia*, dotted with shimmering *Molinia caerulea* and *Panicum* grasses, all together in a series of island beds.”

The upper terrace of the garden running along the back of the farmhouse is bordered by a yew hedge fronting deep oak woodland. This frames views from the house and here Jo has created a bit of formality – with stepped ways down to the rest of the garden, the first a small, classic pair of twin herbaceous borders with a bed at the end to give “a green full stop”, and the second an avenue of *Betula utilis* subsp. *jacquemontii*. Both encourage

a circular, flowing route around the garden without blocking the main view.

Scalloped into the landscape below this level is a no-nonsense, outdoor kitchen with dark, slate worktops, stainless steel cupboards and built-in Fire Magic Echelon ovens besides a curved, seated brick arena formed around a large fire bowl. Like much else in this garden, the attention to detail here by David Milloy of Abbey Garden Landscaping has been outstanding.

The garden flourished with inbuilt irrigation during its first few years of growth, but since then the plants have had to survive the ever-changing vagaries of the weather unaided. With continuing plans for a pool house and vegetable plot, this garden still has new secrets to reveal and was recently awarded a Gold Medal by the American Association of Professional Landscape Designers.

One of the advantages of a co-operative project such as this is that over the period of its genesis the owner has developed a love not just of the garden, but of gardening itself: “I’ve found gardening a great way to relax. I love seeing how our garden evolves from year to year.” □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Jo’s work at jonthompson-garden-design.co.uk

Above The avenue of white-barked *Betula utilis* subsp. *jacquemontii* ‘Doorenbos’ slopes gently down, showing the landformed slope from the upper level to the lower lawn.

Right above The pool terrace surrounded with late-summer flowering perennials: *Sanguisorba officinalis* ‘Red Thunder’, *Bistorta amplexicaulis* ‘Blackfield’ and *Foeniculum vulgare* ‘Purpureum’, by the side of the barn.

Right below The view of the countryside beyond is interrupted by island beds full of shrubs, the colours of which pick up shades of dark purple, red and bronze taken from the shadows of the oak trees, using *Magnolia Black Tulip* (= ‘Jurmag1’), *Acer palmatum* ‘Bloodgood’, *Cercis canadensis* ‘Forest Pansy’ and *Pittosporum tenuifolium* ‘Golf Ball’.

