

PHOTOGRAPHS: Rachel Warne
WORDS: James Alexander-Sinclair

A STEADY SUCCESSION

Coton Manor garden has been developed over three generations and is a masterclass in creative, dramatic planting schemes that keep going into autumn



The Pasley-Tylers

Ian and Susie Pasley-Tyler open the garden from Easter to the end of September, Tuesday to Saturday and Bank Holiday weekends, 12-5.30pm. www.cotonmanor.co.uk

PREVIOUS PAGE The garden slopes down through terraces and banks filled with colourful borders and planting beds
TOP LEFT The natural pond, stone walls and features have not been altered in almost 50 years
TOP RIGHT Borders featuring *Sedum matron*, *Aster x frikartii* 'Monch' and *Salvia involucrata*
BELOW A scheme with *Crococsmia* 'Zambesi', orange cactus dahlias, *Kniphofia caulescens*, perovskia, asters, verbena and nicotiana

You know the truism about owners looking like their dogs? They assimilate the drooping jowls of the bloodhound or the jaunty swagger of a small dachshund. The same can often be said about gardens: the longer an owner and a piece of land work together, the more similar they become. They adopt each other's foibles and strengths until they become one. This is true of Coton Manor in Northamptonshire which has been designed and gardened by Susie Pasley-Tyler and her husband, Ian, for the past quarter century.

When the house was first bought by Ian's grandparents the cattle grazed right up to the front door but the bones of a garden lay sleeping beneath the pasture: gently sloping, south facing ground, an abundance of natural springs and a wonderful view across the valley. After renovating the house they began to put in the bones of the garden but then the war came and gardening ceased until, in 1950, Ian's parents moved into the manor. From the tangled undergrowth appeared rose gardens, water gardens, shrub borders and orchards. In 1969 they decided to open the gardens to the public two afternoons a week in order to try and offset some of the running costs.

A family affair

Mrs Pasley-Tyler was the inspiration behind the planting while her husband concentrated on other things. As Ian puts it, "My mother's flair with plants brought lustre to the borders, my father's talents lay in landscaping and water engineering. Occasionally, however, his naval background demanded impeccable maintenance which clashed with my mother's more informal approach to gardening." He also supervised an ever growing collection of wildfowl, birds and (for a brief but glorious moment) sea lions and penguins.

In 1990 Ian's mother died and, with only six weeks' notice, Ian and Susie moved in and took over. Under their guidance the garden has gradually moved from being a good garden to being one of the finest in the country. The framework of the garden is much the same as it always has been: solid yew and holly hedges, stone retaining walls and a fine natural pond. It shows how strong the original design was that, no matter what changes and innovations have been introduced, there has been no reason to make any major structural alterations.

Susie's only quibble is that the terrace could do with being a bit bigger. But apart



"THE WAY TO DELIVER IS IN EXCITING AND UPLIFTING PLANTINGS THROUGHOUT THE SEASONS"

SUSIE'S PLANTING TIPS

STAGGER YOUR PLANTING

When planting a herbaceous border, plant one third which will flower before the beginning of July and two thirds to flower from July onwards. The green foliage in early summer provides so much colour, there is less need for flowers, whereas later, when the greens become duller, flower colour needs to be more dominant.

Early flowers such as Oriental poppies, lupins, aquilegias, delphiniums and such have a short flowering period of two to three weeks, while later-flowering plants such as penstemons, salvias, asters, heleniums, phlox, monardas, eupatoriums, dahlias, kniphofias, thalictrums, agastache, echinaceas and rudbeckias will flower for two to three months if deadheaded.

BE RUTHLESS

Cut back plants like hardy geraniums, *Viola cornuta*, nepeta, early persicarias and brunnera before they finish flowering to encourage a second flush.

LESS IS MORE

This is a useful maxim to bear in mind, especially in late summer/autumn when large groupings look better than lots of smaller or individual plants.

ADD IN SOME POTS

We use a lot of pots of tender plants. They are invaluable for providing colour and interest from midsummer onwards, coming into their own in August and September. Mostly they are pots of one variety, which I group with other pots of similar or complementary colours.

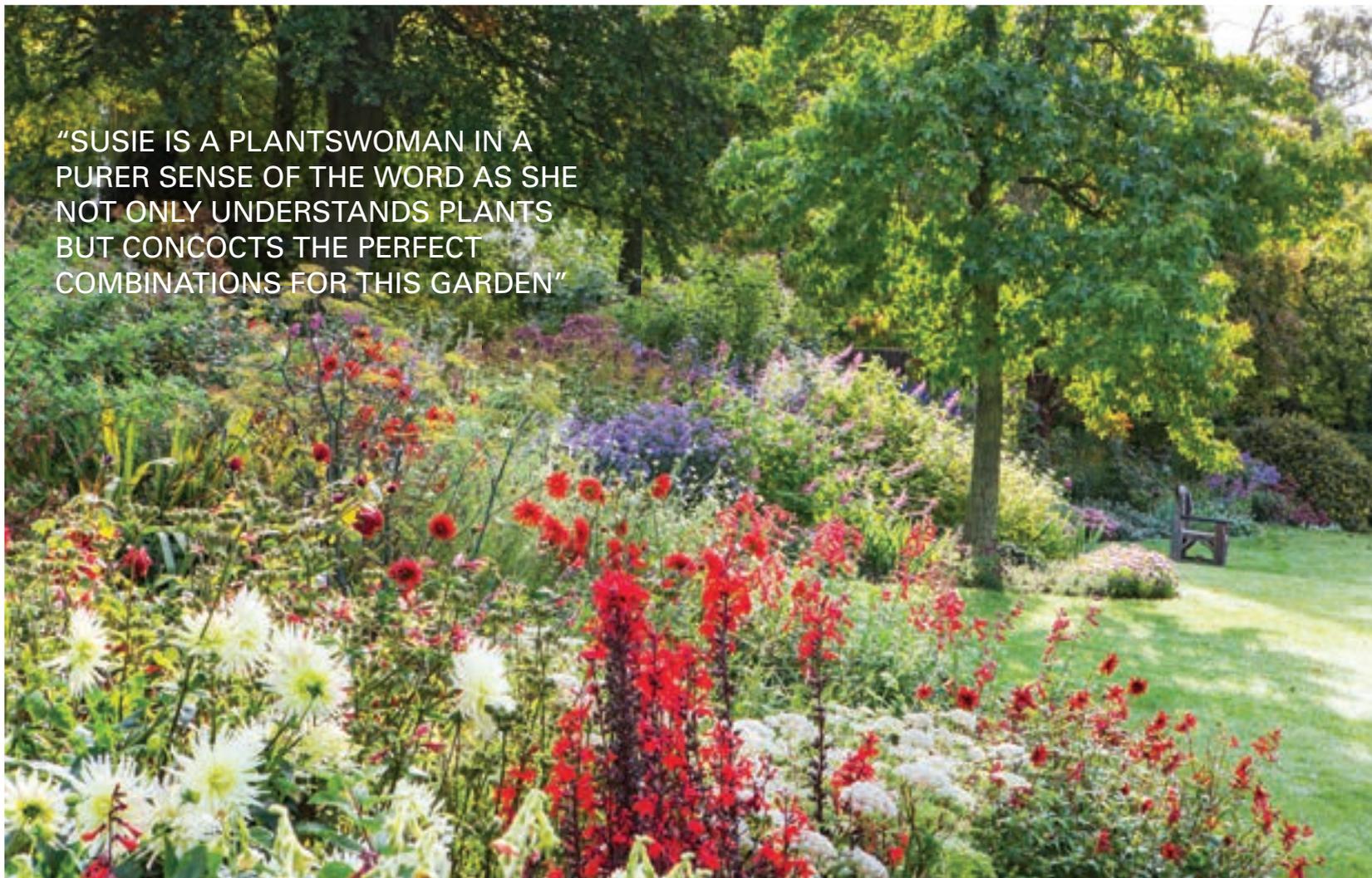
TOP SWAPS

I remove tulips including 'Spring Green', 'Nightrider', 'Ballerina', 'Orange Emperor', 'Blue Heron', 'Black Hero' and 'Gavota' after flowering to replace with dahlias like 'Ragged Robin', 'Witteman's Best', 'Shooting Star', 'Purple Gem', 'Apache' and 'Allan Sparkes'.

COMBINATION STATION

My favourite late-summer combinations include *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune' with *Crococsmia* 'Zambesi', and *Dahlia* 'Le Baron' with *Cleome hassleriana* and *Nicotiana mutabilis* 'Marshmallow'.

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from that, “the scale is really good and the existing structure and slope pleasantly constricting. One of the things which has happened more by accident than design in this garden is the number of large green areas – the main lawn, the woodland garden, the orchards, what we call the goose park in the lower part of the garden. When there is such an abundance of colour you need green spaces in order to rest your eyes”.

New beginnings

Aided by two full-time gardeners who have been with her since the beginning, Susie has gone through the garden breathing extra life and some dramatic combinations into the planting. She is a perfect example of a natural-born gardener having arrived at Coton with no training and only the experience of a small London garden. Since then she has developed into a powerful creative force in this garden with a remarkable sense of colour and an encyclopaedic plant knowledge. She has achieved this not just by reading but mostly by doing, as Coton is one of the very few places in the country where the owner is also one of the head gardeners. If ever you need to

find her she will always be head down in a border somewhere.

From the more formal areas adjoining the house (including a box-edged herb garden and a gravel garden built in the old sea lion pond) the garden wanders down the slope in a series of terraces and banks, through orchards and borders until it arrives at a wildflower meadow. It is these wilder margins of the gardens that give her the most pleasure. “My favourite place to work is in the woodland garden: it progresses through a herbaceous woodland – which makes the most of the *Erythroniums*, primroses and whitebells – to a more naturalised part reclaimed from the field.” From there you just follow the water: streams run through the water gardens to emerge into the bog garden and is also directed down a formally stepped rill (designed and built by head gardener, Richard Green) through the orchard. At the end of the journey are five acres of beech wood that, for a glorious few weeks in spring are a sea of bluebells.

Great expectations

Any garden that’s open to the public cannot really have an off day. Visitors keep coming and they expect the garden

ABOVE Red *Penstemon* ‘King George’, cream *Dahlia* ‘Shooting Star’, red *Dahlia* ‘Apache’ and *Dahlia* ‘Ragged Robin’, and white umbels of *Selinum walliachianum*

to be on spanking form – no point in telling them that they should have been here last week. The way to deliver is in the planting – to have a steady succession of exciting and uplifting plantings throughout the season.

“We plant dahlias where we have had tulips,” explains Susie, “and have stepped up the number in recent years as there are so many good varieties.” There is a softness about late autumn that is always a delight: “whites, for example, can be very glaring in summer but come into their own at this time of year. All that combined with the turning leaves and the fruit ripening on the trees makes this time of year special.”

The title ‘Plantswoman’ (or, indeed, ‘Plantsman’) is sometimes glibly given to people who have lots of different plants in their gardens. Susie is a plantswoman in a purer sense of the word as she not only understands plants but concocts the perfect combinations for this garden – they might not work as well in a city courtyard or high on a Cumbrian Fell but right here in the deep bucolic loveliness of Northamptonshire, they are absolutely on the money. It is the person and the place in perfect harmony. ○