

From empty field to *plantaholic's delight*

A derelict farmhouse in the middle of a field has been made into a family home with a garden of exciting plants – a process that has taken one couple nearly 50 years

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Norfolk farmhouse garden

In brief

NAME Chestnut Farm.

WHAT Private farmhouse garden with extensive plant collections.

WHERE North Norfolk.

SIZE Three Acres.

CONDITIONS Windy with mild winters.

SOIL Medium loam over sand and an almost impenetrable clay marl.

SPECIAL FEATURES Herbaceous borders, small arboretum, unusual flowering shrubs and spring bulb collections.

LEFT The Fountain Garden was planted in memory of Judy's mother and is filled with herbaceous plants including *Astrantia major* 'Alba', *Scabiosa* 'Butterfly Blue', ajuga and clematis.

BELOW The view towards the back of the farmhouse, where the ground level was lowered a couple of feet to create a lawn.



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orfolk: a county blessed with spectacular beaches, fertile farmland, the particular blessings of the Cromer Crab – and gardens. Among them Chestnut Farm stands out: it is a solid, unpretentious farmhouse garden but if you are likely to be whipped into a frenzy by interesting plants, then this is the place to go.

John and Judy McNeil-Wilson have lived here for all 47 years of their married life. “When we arrived,” remembers Judy, “the house had been derelict for six years. We bought the land in order to extend our farm and the house came with it. There was no garden to speak of, just a field hedge and a few trees, although we did have bindweed growing in the dining room!” It is a special thing to see a garden that has had nearly half a century of continuous care from the same owners. They were not, like most people moving into their first house, complete novices. John had a family background in agriculture and Judy had studied horticulture. There was no grand plan for the garden and there still isn’t; it has had the luxury of evolving over the years and it also maps the continuous passions and fleeting dalliances of an irredeemable plant fanatic.

The first task was the planting of stout windbreaks: an essential for any Norfolk garden as the wind whips in straight off the North Sea. Although these have sheltered the garden

LEFT Looking from the orchard to the straight path edged with pleached limes and clipped box vases.

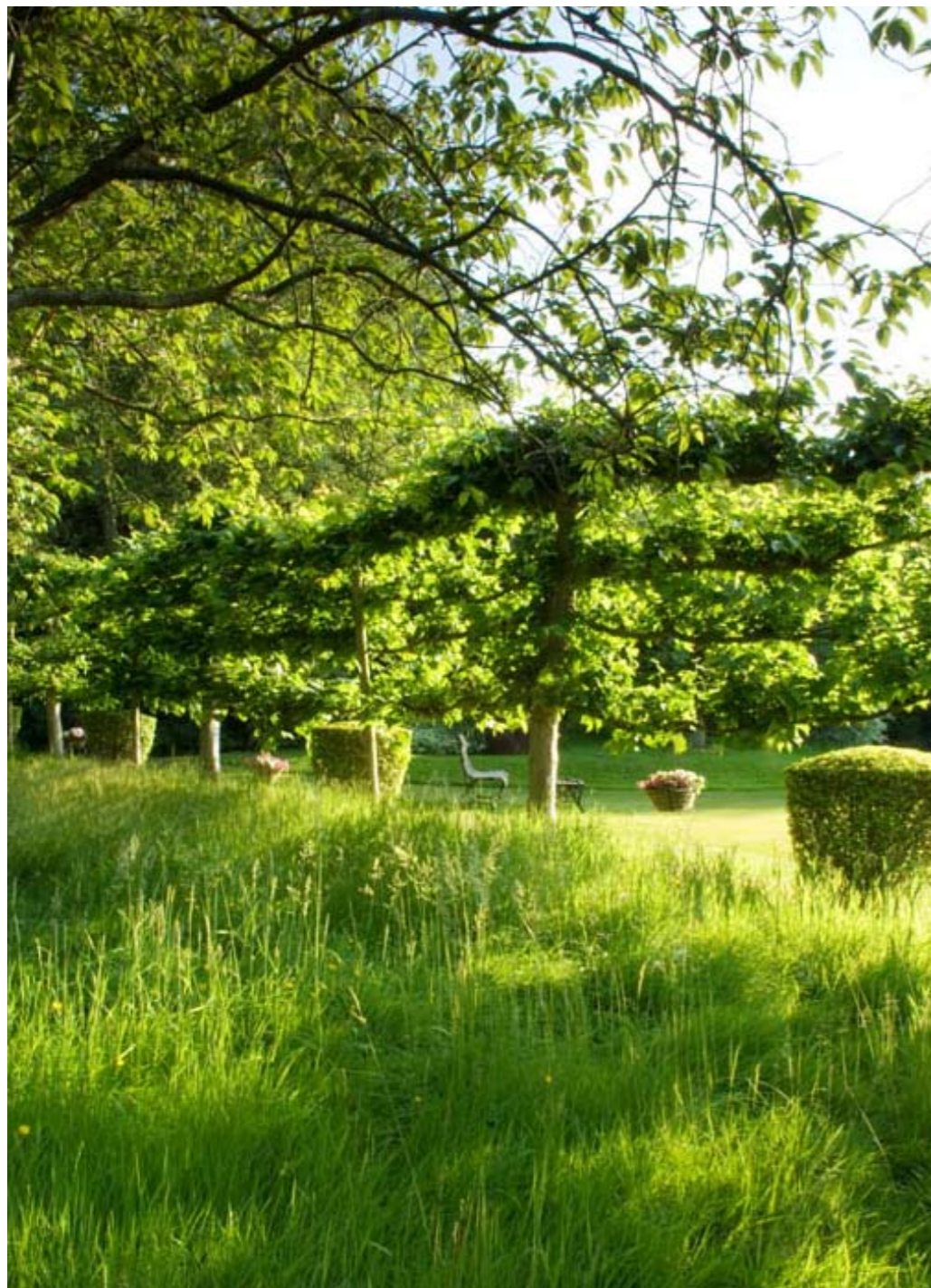
BELOW The large tree at the back of the Fountain Garden is a *Crataegus persimilis* ‘Prunifolia’ that was planted by Judy and John. In the foreground is an un-named alstroemeria with a large clump of purple *Geranium Patricia* (= ‘Brempat’) behind.

“It is a special thing to see a garden that has had nearly half a century of continuous care from the same owners”

they have now reached the stage where they are too tall and cast too much shade. After creating windbreaks, John and Judy just kept on planting more trees and shrubs, many of which are now great towering giants. The couple are now moving into a higher stage of gardening, one that few of us ever attain in one garden, where the trees that they originally planted have become too old and have either fallen or been felled. This creates gaps which John and Judy fill with new plants. For example, where formerly there was a large conifer, Judy has created a theatre garden: with a backdrop of Irish yew and footlights of box, she has created a stage for the heavy red seedpods of *Sinopodophyllum hexandrum*, a scrambling *Bomarea multiflora* and other rarities.

Spoilt for choice

The garden covers about three acres radiating away from a wide lawn by the house. From here there are various options: the fountain garden (“a formal layout with informal planting that I laid out in memory of my mother”) or a wander up a straight path, edged with box vases and pleached limes, (“we planted them years ago but it took a while to learn how to prune them”) towards the vegetable garden. You can head off among trees and shrubs towards the ▶



9 of Judy and John's favourite plants

1 *Pterostyrax hispida*

"We planted this small 'epaulette tree' about eight years ago. It has white filigree fringed petals in racemes which can be appreciated from eye level," says Judy.

2 *Rosa 'Paul's Himalayan Musk'*

"Now 30 feet high, with a similar spread, climbing a flag pole cherry. It was planted about 40 years ago. Slight perfume but great display when in flower."

3 *Podophyllum versipelle 'Spotty Dotty'*

"This has the most spectacular foliage over a long period of time; and produces large red fruits after flowering. It is a very rewarding plant."

4 *Liriodendron tulipifera (tulip tree)*

"Imagine our excitement seeing the first flowers after waiting 20 or so years, and being able to peer into those lovely blooms."

5 *Ornithogalum magnum*

"This naturalised freely under *Paulownia tomentosa*. At this time of year it is a great favourite."

6 *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*

"This common spotted orchid follows the fritillaries and cowslips in a little grassy glade in company with magnolias and *Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis*."

7 *Philadelphus 'Belle Etoile'*

"We love this mock orange shrub

for its delicious perfume. We also have *P. 'Beauclerk'*, which also smells gorgeous."

8 *Dianthus carthusianorum*

"Useful because it creates a similar effect – although shorter – to that of *Verbena bonariensis*."

9 *Pinellia ternata*

"Rewarding for the number of spathes produced over a long period, whereas arisaemas seem to produce a single spathe which is short lived."

"They love their garden and adore all their plants, be they shrubs, trees, bulbs or climbers"

▷ paddock where you will find even more plants. These include a *Davidia* that makes Judy's heart flutter when it flowers; *Sinocalycanthus chinensis*; *Clerodendrons*; walnuts; exotic *Euonymus* (including the delicious *Euonymus cornutus* var. *quinquecornutus*); crab apples growing into arches and a handsome *Quercus frainetto* (Hungarian oak) planted by John for the millennium and remarkably strapping for one so young.

In winter there are birches, dogwoods and collections of snowdrops and hellebores, while in spring there are crocus and a meadow of fritillary. It is like a plant lover's treasure chest. Some plants-people become obsessed with a single genus while others are refreshingly polygamous in their horticultural relationships. John and Judy love their garden and adore all their plants, be they shrubs, trees, bulbs or interesting climbers. "We visit loads of gardens," explains John, so who can blame them for wanting to bring a little bit of each home to Norfolk? □

BELOW The herbaceous borders, with the orchard beyond. In the foreground is *Anthemis tinctoria* 'Sauce Hollandaise' with cottage garden plants that include geraniums, aquilegias and delphiniums beyond.

USEFUL INFORMATION

ADDRESS Chestnut Farm, Church Road, West Beckham, Norfolk NR25 6NX

OPEN Open for the NGS, with visiting nurseries, Sunday 22 July (11am-5pm). www.ngs.org.uk



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