

In brief

Name Stavordale Priory
What Private garden surrounding a former priory.
Where Somerset.
Points of interest Far too many to mention, but topiary, cloister garden, kitchen garden, orchards, lakes and ponds, grottoes, statuary, woodlands and exuberantly planted borders, are a good start.
Size 12 acres.
Climate Sheltered position.
Soil Clay with some greensand.
Hardiness rating USDA 8a-9b.

Play's the thing

In his Somerset garden – once the home of designer Georgia Langton – Michael Le Poer Trench has added a host of playfully romantic touches that make this spectacular space sing with creativity and invention

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM

In the cloister garden tall, columnar, Irish yews and beautifully clipped box hedges keep the rambunctious perennials in check.



MICHAEL LE POER TRENCH

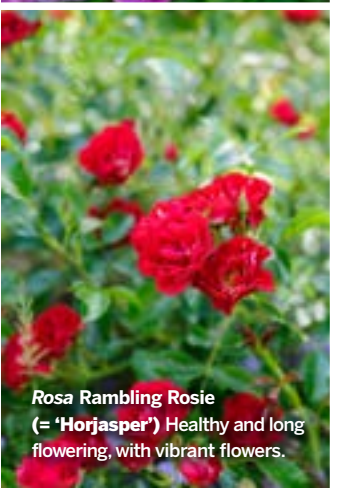
The relaxed meadow adjacent to the more formal rill is studded with roses 'Complicata' and 'Scintillation' and bordered with Gallica rose 'Tuscany Superb'.



Rosa Purple Skyliner
(= 'Franwekpurp') A reliable climber with soft purple flowers.



Rosa Gertrude Jekyll
(= 'Ausbord') Shrub or climber with pink, fully double blooms.



Rosa Rambling Rosie
(= 'Horjasper') Healthy and long flowering, with vibrant flowers.



Rosa 'Phyllis Bide' A fragrant, repeat-flowering climber with small, semi-double flowers.

I quite often get asked about my favourite garden: a question that is almost as impossible to answer as what is your favourite food or which is your favourite child. It varies from season to season and from year to year: we have the right to be fickle and our affections flit capriciously from one place to the next. But, and this is a big but, if I were being forcibly pummelled and had to give an answer then the gardens at Stavordale Priory would be very high up on my list.

The next question, of course, is why? Perhaps that is a little bit easier to answer. The key to a good garden is down to so many things but most important of these is the feeling you get when you walk through the garden. I know that is woolly and not at all scientific but it is the way that most people evaluate gardens. Stavordale is a garden that wraps its hugging arms around you and makes you feel welcome. It is also the sort of garden that has so many disparate elements you can get happily lost discovering new things around almost every corner.

Michael Le Poer Trench and his partner, the theatre producer Sir Cameron Mackintosh, have lived here for more than 20 years. It is a building that brims with history: starting with the Augustinian canons who occupied the original priory for the first 300 years of its existence before it became a farm after the dissolution of the monasteries. In the early years of the 20th century it was converted from a farm to gentleman's residence by the architect TE Collcutt (who also designed the Savoy) >



Should we get rid of this light/camera?

An arch with **Rosa Purple Skyliner** (= 'Franwekpurp') leads through to the cloister garden planted with a row of **Rosa Sister Elizabeth** (= 'Auspalette') and the white spires of **Aconitum x cammarum** 'Grandiflorum Album'.



An elegant gate, designed by Cameron and commissioned from a local craftsman, frames the simple yet stylish rill.



Agastache 'Blackadder' Forms a mass of smoky-purple spikes. A butterfly magnet.



Papaver somniferum 'Lauren's Grape' Lovely ruby coloured self-seeding poppy.



Astrantia major Gill Richardson Group. Very attractive with pretty, wine-coloured umbels.



Salvia 'Amistad' A new, long flowering cultivar with stunning, purple flowers

Stavordale has so many elements you can get happily lost discovering new things around almost every corner

▷ Hotel and the Palace Theatre, where the musical *Les Misérables* played for 19 years). The majority of the garden we see today was created by designer Georgia Langton, Stavordale's previous owner for 15 years. Michael's enthusiasm and passion has fleshed out and extended her initial vision.

Near the house are the cloister gardens: tightly packed borders with sculpted hedges and stately Irish yews gathered into two formal gardens. Further along near the kitchen is a border as deep and tall and elegant as a barrow full of chorus girls. Wispy *Thalictrum delavayi*, throbbing *Monarda* 'Scorpion' and that sultriest of salvias, *Salvia* 'Amistad'. This encircles a quatrefoil pond (kept as dark as the river Styx by the regular application of black dye) and the first of many elegantly edged lawns. To be honest, this garden has so many delicious areas it is difficult to know where to stop. There are borders for all tastes and all seasons (including a rather striking orange number against the walls of the old chapel – lots of daylilies and kniphofias) and there are meadows, orchards (one of them studded with roses), rills, gates and even more plants, in particular there are clematis of all shapes scattered through the garden. Michael is ▷



Prunus lusitanica standards and the ancient Priory walls are reflected in the dark, inky waters of the quatrefoil pond.



Previous owner and designer Georgia Langton's love of structure and form is evident in the south lawn planting of *Pyrus communis* inside 'doughnuts' of clipped box.



Interestingly shaped box balls, referred to as 'The Bums', anchor the church buttresses under climbing 'Buff Beauty' roses.

There are clematis of all shapes scattered through the garden... draped elegantly across shrubs and twined around piers

▷ a self-confessed “group-three groupie”. A reference to the late-flowering/early pruned varieties that are draped elegantly across shrubs and twined around piers – for example *Clematis* ‘Rooguchi’, which is not one I had met before: it has nodding bell-shaped flowers the colour of deep-blue ink.

Turn one corner and you’ll find the Granny Pond – named for Georgia’s mother plantswoman Olive Taylor-Smith – surrounded by marginals and other plants; push through a path and there is an avenue (no less) of the gloriously plump-flowered *Prunus* ‘Tai-haku’. Round another corner is an immaculately ordered kitchen garden along with a cutting garden from which vases and vases of flowers are gathered for the house. Here you’ll find unbelievably cleverly engineered plant supports, fruit cages and sweet pea frames of Michael’s own invention. If you squeeze through a gap in the hedge you find yourself in a long rectangular lavender garden. Venture further still and you’ll come across Michael’s 50th birthday arboretum where most of the trees are presents from friends. There are also follies and grottoes and a lake with boathouse and wild shade planting. There is ▷



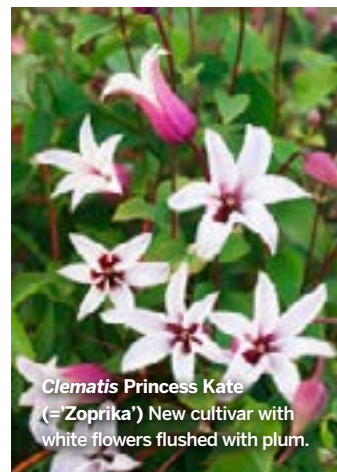
Through the subtly overgrown entrance to the Grotto can be glimpsed one of Michael's favourites: the red blooms of Rosa 'Rambling Rosie' overlooked by the fleeting Rosa 'Wedding Day'.



An opening night gift to Cameron from Andrew Lloyd Webber, the statue contemplates a shady corner of the Grotto.



A 'no-dig' method is practised for cultivation in the vegetable garden, which also supplies armfuls of cut flowers for the house.



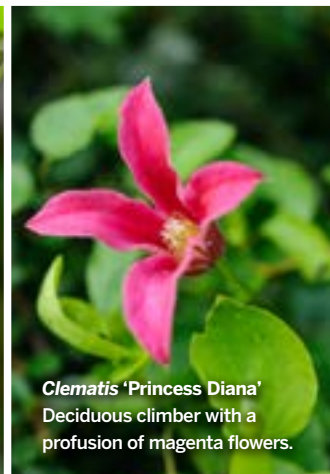
Clematis 'Princess Kate' (= 'Zoprika') New cultivar with white flowers flushed with plum.



Clematis 'Royal Velours' A medium-sized climber with velvety dark purple flowers.



Clematis 'Rooguchi' Shiny purple bells adorn this non-clinging herbaceous scrambler.



Clematis 'Princess Diana' Deciduous climber with a profusion of magenta flowers.

Stavordale is not really about spectacle (although there is plenty of that here), it's much more about creativity and gardening

▷ even an elephant: an enormous, larger-than-life-sized statue of an elephant. But as spectacular as these many elements are, they are not the most striking thing about this splendid garden. Stavordale is not really about spectacle (although there is plenty of that here), it's much more about creativity and gardening.

This is a garden that throbs with activity: everywhere you look you see evidence of someone gardening and having great fun in the process. There are old plants on the way to another home, new (beautifully labelled) plants going in, topiary being clipped (mostly by cloud-pruning specialist Jake Hobson, the master of the tonsured hedge), edges being edged and plans being laid for a new and exciting project.

The big problem with this garden is that there is far too much for anybody to take in during a single visit and no matter how many words I write it will take much more than just one article to do the place justice. I have seen a lot of gardens and to be immersed in so much beauty can sometimes make one slightly jaded but in the case of Stavordale I feel the need to go back many more times. It's a tough gig this garden writing game, but somebody has to do it. □



The Granny Pond is surrounded by moisture-loving primulas, irises, zantedeschias and ligularias, overlooked by the swamp cypress *Taxodium distichum*.