

Fresh beginnings

An Arts and Crafts garden in Suffolk has been given a striking new lease of life by garden designer Sue Townsend

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR
PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS

The train trundles past arable fields, occasional estuaries and through gentle valleys. All very lovely, but the reason for this little pootle down the East Suffolk line is to visit a garden with its roots in the Arts and Crafts movement of the early 20th century, but whose structure and planting has been yanked firmly into the 21st century through a close and careful collaboration between the owners and the designer, Sue Townsend (who carried off two prizes at last year's Society of Garden Designers Awards, including one for the planting in this very garden).

Sue has been a full-time garden designer for the past 14 years, following a career as a political lobbyist. The love of plants came as a bit of a surprise to her family. "My parents laughed at the idea as I had paid absolutely no attention at all to plants while I was growing up," she says. She has embraced her new career with gusto, even to the extent of treading in the hallowed footsteps of Percy Thrower by becoming the *Blue Peter* gardener for a while.

She only started work here in 2008 but an awful lot has happened over the past seven years. Looking around there is not much left to tie in with the original architect's plans – the house remains relatively unchanged but around it everything is fairly recent apart from the moat. The idea of a moat may make you think of battlemented strongholds, but this one is not at all baronial and instead serves to neatly divide the garden.

Sue takes me on a sweeping walk through the gardens. Starting at the front of the house we walk under a well-proportioned oak pergola with *Wisteria floribunda* 'Yae-kokuryu' coiling up the timbers and the scent of *Rosa* 'Paul's Himalayan Musk' filling the air. It is surrounded by classic early summer planting – alchemilla, delphiniums and



In brief

What A contemporary garden in the grounds of an Arts and Crafts manor house.

Where Suffolk.

Size Four and a half acres.

Climate Dry and windy.

Soil Heavy clay.

Hardiness rating USDA 9.

Oak sleeper and ravel steps lead down to the Arts and Crafts house through lush plantings of the blue daisy *Aster x frikartii* 'Jungfrau', the airy grass *Pennisetum* 'Fairy Tails' and rich pink *Sedum* 'Matrona'. Behind these the red spikes of *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Firetail' and blue globes of *Echinops ritro* 'Veitch's Blue' provide the backdrop to a dining terrace.



How to make a garden your own

When taking on a new garden there are a few things – apart from, obviously, consulting a designer – worth considering

- Try and live with it for a year without making too many drastic changes – watch what grows and how the garden is affected by the weather and the seasons.
- Other people's taste is not always yours. Make sure that all the existing features of the garden work with the way you live your life.
- At the same time don't just clear everything without consideration. Trees in particular may be there as windbreaks or to obstruct eyesore
- Do things slowly as this gives you the chance to change your mind. As the saying goes: fools rush in...

▷ nepeta. Everything here is beautifully kept. "The owners are very keen gardeners and are out here in all weathers," says Sue. "It is always a pleasure to design for clients that take such an active interest in the garden." Beyond the pergola we cross the moat via a fine wooden bridge in the Arts and Crafts tradition.

On the other side of the moat, the planting is much looser as a way to link the garden with the wider countryside. It was not always so – when Sue first arrived the garden was suffering from an excess of neatness. She explains, "It was all mown very short – now we have let the grass grow a bit longer and have laced it with mown paths leading in a wide arc around the garden." En route we pass a small, newly planted pinetum: this is not something that you often find nowadays but the owners were very keen on the idea, and there is a lot to be said for the multitude of shapes available and the advantages of a bit of winter structure. "The idea came about because of the existing cedar," remembers Sue. "I did loads of research to find trees that would do ▷

Clockwise from above

Curved brick steps leading down from the lawn to the dining terrace are part of an earlier design by local landscape architect Nicholas Newton.

An olive tree and exuberant plantings of *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote' give this slick contemporary courtyard a cool Mediterranean feel.

In the hot border, colourful dahlias, the orange 'David Howard' and red 'Bishop of Llandaff', mix with the yellow of *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm' and orange bobbles of *Hemerocallis* 'Aztec Firebird'.

A row of *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Umbraculifera' provide a stylish end to the courtyard garden where a rill is lined by swathes of *Iris* 'Silver Edge'.

Statuesque pink plumes of *Miscanthus transmorrisonensis* help keep this terrace private. In front is an airy mix of flowers, including the blue bobbles of *Echinops ritro* 'Veitch's Blue' and red spikes of *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Firetail'.



Iris, Centaurea, characias, flourish be that give sh front of the

Four combinations from the garden

1 A shady corner underneath the acer allows the planting to be a little calmer. The grass in the lower left is *Hakonechloa macra* 'Nicolas' (1) which nudges up to one of the very best autumn anemones, *A. x hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert' (2). The fern in the corner is the lovely shuttlecock, *Matteuccia struthiopteris* (3) and then the fluffy, plumed, chestnut-leaved *Rodgersia aesculifolia* (4).

2 A classic perennial border for late summer, with the blue-flowered *Aster x frikartii* 'Jungfrau' (1) sits alongside the salmon-pink of *Sedum* 'Herbstfreude' (2). It is the ideal place to put a grass so there is one: the soft and wavy *Pennisetum* 'Fairy Tails' (3). Across the path is the pink *Echinacea purpurea* 'Leuchtstern' (4) and the red *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Firetail' (5).

3 Another tumble of late summer perennials. Here the airy grass *Pennisetum* 'Fairy Tails' (1) provides the perfect foil for the globes of *Echinops ritro* 'Veitch's Blue' (2) their blue made all the more vivid by the sultry, dark pink of *Sedum* 'Matrona' (3), and the gorgeously rich ruby red of *Echinacea purpurea* 'Ruby Giant' (4).

4 A snapshot of the hot border, which can be seen from the front door. A bright-red *Dahlia* 'Bishop of Llandaff' (1) and the ever-reliable *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm' (2) draws the eye. Then the oranges kick in with *Dahlia* 'David Howard' (3) and a tall *Kniphofia* 'Nobilis' (3) alongside Jaffa cake-coloured heleniums.

▷ well on this soil." Now there are young specimens, including *Pinus nigra* subsp. *nigra* and *Sequoiadendron giganteum* 'Glaucum'. You get occasional glimpses of countryside, but Sue has planted a thick bank of native shrubs as a windbreak as the North Sea is not far away.

Popping back across the moat we arrive at a neat vegetable garden and from there into an orchard where the original trees (including quince and medlar) have been augmented with apples, pears and plums. Our final stop is the pool garden, designed to look its best in late summer. There are great froths of *Miscanthus transmorrisonensis* and *Pennisetum* 'Fairy Tails', which not only provide excitement but also privacy. We descend some beautifully designed oak sleeper and gravel steps surrounded by an avalanche of late flowering perennials.

From there it is but a small step to the slick contemporary courtyard, which was Sue's original brief. There is an L-shaped rill which echoes the shape of the moat overlooked by a crisp stone terrace. The planting is dominated by a row of the parasol acacia *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Umbraculifera' and six noble olives.

A moat, areas of wild grass, a pinetum, an orchard, vegetable garden, deep and capricious plantings, a courtyard, a rill, a hot border, and a spring garden. Squeezing all these elements into one garden without one crashing into another or diffusing the impact is what good designers do: Sue Townsend does not disappoint. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Sue Townsend Garden Design

Tel 01728 648790.

Website suetownsendgardendesign.co.uk

