

**In brief**

NAME The Old Rectory.  
WHAT Rural hillside garden.  
WHERE Coombes, near Lancing, Sussex.  
SIZE two and a half acres.  
CONDITIONS Sheltered by hill behind it, this east-facing slope has its own microclimate. It's sunny and hot in summer, with its own well in case of drought.  
SOIL Alkaline loam above greensand.  
FEATURES Relaxed gardening style in which naturalised bulbs and self-seeding plants thrive.

# The easy life

Plants thrive under Robin and Brianne Reeve's relaxed style of gardening, on a gentle slope overlooking rolling fields

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS RACHEL WARNE

Bright narcissi and primroses bloom in an orchard of old plum and apple trees, including 'Peasgood Nonsuch' – "a magnificent dessert apple", according to owner Brianne Reeve.



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Many people when they take over a new house or garden are eager to stamp their own identity on the place: to redecorate or to embark on a big landscaping project. But what happens if you arrive and quickly realise that everything works fairly well and there is nothing in particular that you either need or want to change – except the mildly impractical 1950s kitchen? This is what happened to Robin and Brianne Reeve when they moved into the Old Rectory in 1976. “The previous owners, Commodore and Mrs Knowles, had lived here since about 1948 and they seemed to have got it all pretty well right,” explains Robin, “they had spent much of their time in the middle East and wanted to create a perfect cottage garden.”

The house is snuggled into the crook of the Sussex Downs and dates from Tudor times when it was the rectory for the charming 11th-century church next door. It was rebuilt in the 15th century and remains pretty much unchanged: lots of oak beams, Tudor brickwork and knapped flint.

Brianne stumbled across the house when out bird watching. “Nobody knew it was here as it was hidden from the road and completely obscured by giant elms – which all had to come down soon after we arrived.”

When the Knowles’ arrived, the garden consisted purely of grassy hillside. Over the course of at least a year they put in a series of flint and brick retaining walls to sculpt a habitable garden from the turf. There is a stone-backed amphitheatre on the north side of the house and a large paved terrace and curving lawn to the south.

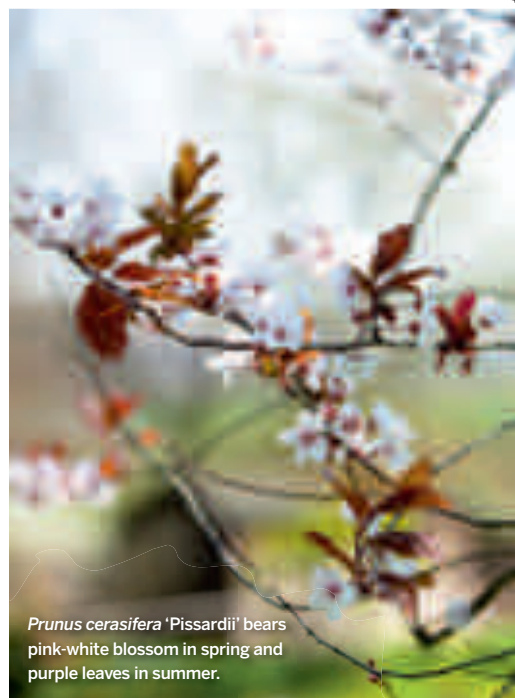
This is a hot garden, and the only shade on this terrace comes from a line of plum

trees. There is also a formal herbaceous border backed by a rope-swagged pergola, orchards, vegetables and a woodland garden.

By 1976 this was a garden in decline so the first few years of the Reeves’ tenure consisted mostly of back-breaking work knocking back undergrowth and cutting grass. They have changed some, but by no means all, of the planting as they went along. In fact Robin takes pride in pointing out the things that have remained unchanged. “This *Hydrangea* and these roses are original,” he cries enthusiastically “and these pots are in exactly the same position as they have always been.” The most dramatic structural change has been the removal of a couple of ailing rose beds. This makes it all sound a bit regressive but that is far from the case. However, the revolution has been not in changing the fabric of the garden but in its management.

#### A relaxed way of life

When first constructed you can bet that this place was gardened to within an inch of its life. Lawns would have been manicured, paths raked, edges razor sharp and any sign of dissent firmly whacked down. Today Robin and Brianne have changed to a much more relaxed way of gardening: lawns are allowed a bit of freedom and nobody loses sleep over the odd weed. As a result nature has responded sympathetically. The top lawn has been colonised by hellebores on one side of the garden and by tens of thousands of primroses on the other. “It is difficult to walk up there in the spring without treading on them,” says Robin. Interestingly, Brianne has noticed that “Primroses spread downhill and hellebores uphill.” In other parts of the



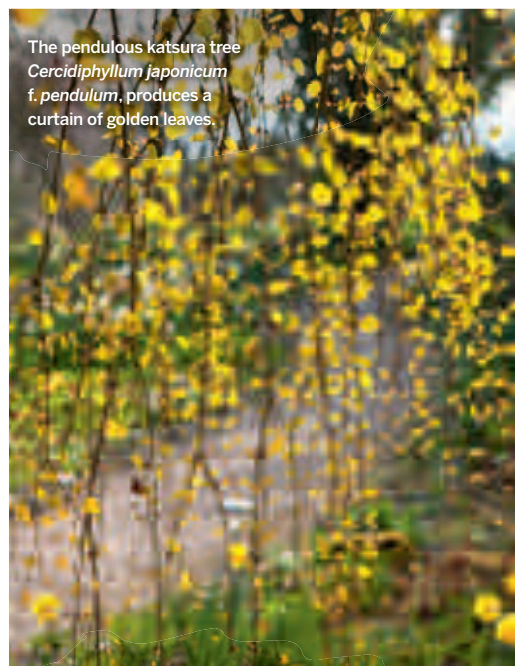
*Prunus cerasifera* ‘Pissardii’ bears pink-white blossom in spring and purple leaves in summer.



Parts of the house date back to the 15th century, with additions in the years since. RIGHT *Fritillaria persica* thrives in a sunny spot with damp, free-draining soil.



west sussex garden



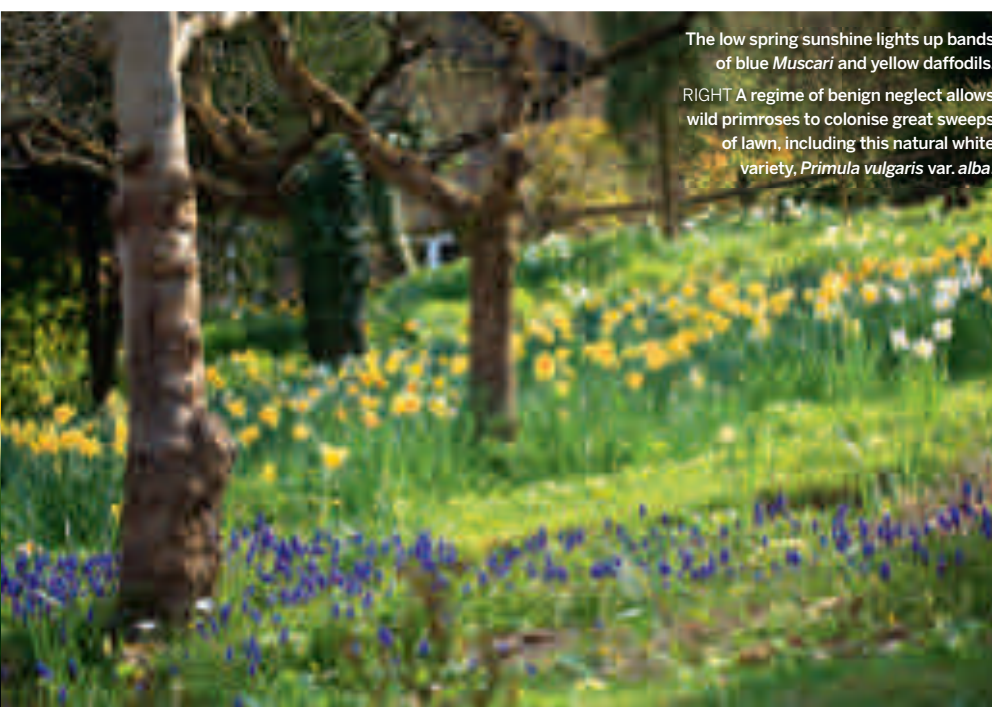
The pendulous katsura tree *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* f. *pendulum*, produces a curtain of golden leaves.



At the end of the day the sun slips behind the steep slope that leads to Coombes Head, above the house. LEFT Robin Reeves has spent more than 30 years tending the garden.



Daffodils flower at the Old Rectory from February, with some cultivars blooming as late as May.



The low spring sunshine lights up bands of blue *Muscari* and yellow daffodils. RIGHT A regime of benign neglect allows wild primroses to colonise great sweeps of lawn, including this natural white variety, *Primula vulgaris* var. *alba*.



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▷ garden wild orchids have appeared (“both the common spotted and the pyramidal”) while fritillaries flourish in the damper parts and the place teems with wildlife.

#### Springtime prime

Although absolutely no slouch in midsummer, it is in the springtime that this garden looks at its best. “We start with a great bank of snowdrops down by the drive, followed by about 40,000 daffodils, swathes of muscari [grape hyacinth] and then bluebells underneath the beeches.”

Most of these bulbs were planted by the Reeves' predecessors, although Robin and Brianne have added more over the years. “We have planted some of the smaller cultivars such as 'February Gold' and 'Tête à Tête' to contrast with the larger originals.” The only problem they have had was when they ran a nursery school from the house and the council panicked that the children would start snacking

on daffodil bulbs. “They were given pretty short shrift by Brianne.”

This is a garden that is preserved but not pickled. It is gardened on the principle that if it ain't broke, don't fix it, but at the same time it is manifestly obvious that Robin and Brianne put a great deal of effort into keeping things on track. Instead of the slightly stuffy and contrived garden fashionable in the 1950s, it has metamorphosed into a place that is much more settled and comfortable with its surroundings. □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

ADDRESS Old Rectory, Coombes, Lancing, West Sussex BN15 0RS.

OPEN By appointment; proceeds go to Coombes' 11-century church, which is also worth visiting, for its unusual wall paintings. TEL 07889 775503.

**BBC** James Alexander-Sinclair is a garden designer who regularly appears on BBC gardening programmes.

## Naturalising bulbs

Naturalising means growing bulbs as they would occur in the wild rather than grouped in pots or borders. James Alexander-Sinclair explains how to naturalise bulbs in grass, where they look at their most natural

- **Bulbs should be planted randomly** in the grass in autumn: one of the best ways to ensure this is to throw handfuls in the air and plant them where they fall.
- **Try and plant cultivars of daffodil** that flower at slightly different times, for example *Narcissus* 'February Gold' (which actually flowers in March) followed by *N.* 'Mount Hood' (tall and white, from March to May) and finally *N. poeticus* var. *recurvus* (the pheasant's eye, April and May).

- **Other narcissi good for naturalising include** *N. jonquilla*, *N. bulbocodium*, *N. obvallaris*, and *N. tazetta* subsp. *lacticolor*.
- **For an earlier display** use snowdrops (which are best planted 'in the green' just after flowering) and *Crocus*.
- **Camassias, *Fritillaria melagris* and some species tulips** also naturalise well.
- **For shadier, woodland areas** plant bluebells, *Anemone nemorosa* and *Ornithogalum nutans*.

- **For autumn flowering bulbs** try *Cyclamen hederifolium* and *Crocus speciosus*.
- **You can deadhead daffs if you want:** personally I can always think of something more useful to occupy my time! It is not essential.
- **Once the leaves have died down** then it is safe to cut the grass. It will look a bit rubbish for a couple of weeks but will soon recover. Mowing too early may lead to weakened bulbs that will not flower as well the next year.



The sloping lawns contain a huge collection of 40,000 daffodils, most planted at least 35 years ago.



Brick-edged beds near the house contain yet more bulbs.



Vigorous grape hyacinths (*Muscari armeniacum*) have naturalised in the grass.



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Self-seeded *Helleborus x hybridus* hold their own among swathes of daffodils, beneath a mossy old plum tree and the golden flowers of a *Forsythia*.