

Slowrise

Designer James Alexander-Sinclair is happy to allow his new Oxfordshire garden to evolve slowly over time

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IN BRIEF

Name Green Rise.

What Sheltered, private garden of designer James Alexander-Sinclair.

Where Oxfordshire.

Size Half an acre.

Soil Mixture of good, sandy loam and clay.

Climate Temperate.

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

A walk around Green Rise leads to the surprise of an elegant pond, hidden away behind the arc of a mound and surrounded with jungly planting. Large stones were salvaged from Cleve West's 2016 RHS Chelsea Flower Show garden, one of them making a contemplative seat that faces towards the afternoon sun.

Perched on a grassy knoll in an Oxfordshire hamlet, the home of garden designer James Alexander-Sinclair is known as Green Rise. In name and style it is the opposite of Blackpitts, which readers of his blogs and other writings will remember as his former family home in Northamptonshire. Slightly further south, Green Rise is a more traditional house and garden, with no plant life transferred from Blackpitts at all, except for some poppy seeds.

Opium poppies, in shades of amethyst and plum, are one link with Blackpitts, and so it seems, is rubble. Having dealt with a surplus of concrete in the old garden, a grass-covered bank of builder's rubble from the 1970s greeted the Alexander-Sinclairs at Green Rise: "So we continued that tradition and put all our rubbish in as well," notes James. A broader take on gravel gardening, rubble gardening might not be to everyone's taste but plants seem to like it, appreciating the drainage. In joining two piles of rough ground together across the lawn, James has created a graceful arc that prevents the whole garden from being given away. "This is the surprise; you come round the corner and boof-boof, there's the pond."

Around a quiet piece of water, a jungle of *Tetrapanax papyrifer*, Sichuan pepper (*Zanthoxylum simulans*) and persimmon (*Diospyros kaki*) jostle among rare cultivars of garden regulars. Overlooked by a couple of big-leaved *Paulownia* trees, it is like a dream of a pond, in an English rainforest. A sense of grandeur is due in part to some well-placed rocks that once adorned Cleve West's show garden at the 2016 RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Sheltered from the house, and facing south, an oblong stone is just the place to perch at water's edge: "Because sitting and looking at fish is something that appeals to one more and more as one gets older," says James.

James is a free-thinking designer and lively communicator, with a sense of fun that audiences appreciate on his many speaking engagements. It follows then that his kind of plants have a certain pizzazz. "Tastefulness is fine but you can be tasteful at the same time as being zingy," he says. "Colour makes people feel alive; they are sometimes scared of that sort of thing and they shouldn't be." He is also attracted to unusual plants, which he mixes up with superior versions of common wildflowers such as *Digitalis lutea* or selected *Centranthus lecoqii*. "The way to find good plants is to go to nurseries and say, 'Show me >



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Looking "slightly alien yet completely at home" a large rusted ball from Capital Garden Products covers a patch of ground that is matted with the roots of some old birch trees. On the edge of the kitchen garden, a site-specific Hartley Botanic glasshouse was made using local stone.

▷ something I've never seen before," he explains. The renowned plantswoman Marina Christopher has bred many favourites by the pond. "If it's good enough for Marina," he says, "it's good enough for me."

On looking for a new place to live, the Alexander-Sinclairs' hoped to find a stream, a wood and a view of the sunset. They did get some trees, too many laurels and a loitering clump of *leylandii*. Offending shrubs and trees have been thinned out or excised, a laurel bed on the boundary being replaced slowly with more interesting evergreens, such as *Podocarpus salignus*, *Osmanthus yunnanensis*, *Viburnum cinnamomifolium* and *Quercus myrtifolia*. An "annual cascade" luxuriates in a newly created sunny patch at the front of the border, which is courtesy of James's wife Celestria, who focusses on detail while James ponders the wider picture. "Big gestures are done by me and constructive criticism comes from Celestria," he explains. "She is my most observant client."

Hard surfaces have been handled with James's customary light touch. A flight of Corten steel steps near the pond seems to hover like a staircase in a Busby Berkeley musical, while a large metal ball emerges from Celestria's flowers, covering uncongential tree roots.

"There's no hurry for this garden," says James. It is a salient lesson for those in recent possession of a house with a patch of grass. He and Celestria continually assess and, when something isn't working, reject ideas. They had to make some early decisions when the builders were in: how to get to the front door, how to connect odd bits of paving – but ideas have been allowed to present themselves in their own time. Plants and hard materials have been reduced, reused and recycled. "The design of the garden is evolving; we're putting things in slowly over the years," says James. "A garden should be happy – not over thought but slightly instinctive." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about James's work at jamesalexandersinclair.com

Turn the page for 24 key plants from Green Rise

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The pink and peach of *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis' adds zing to an already colourful border between the garden and the house. Along the wall by the driveway is a rambling rose, *Rosa* 'Cooperi'.



The way to find good plants is to go to nurseries and say, 'Show me something I've never seen before'

Herbaceous planting is approached in a relaxed way; pale-yellow *Digitalis lutea* originated from a seed packet on the cover of *Gardens Illustrated*. Further along, unpredictable hues of annual *Papaver somniferum* mix with mutating colours of *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis'.



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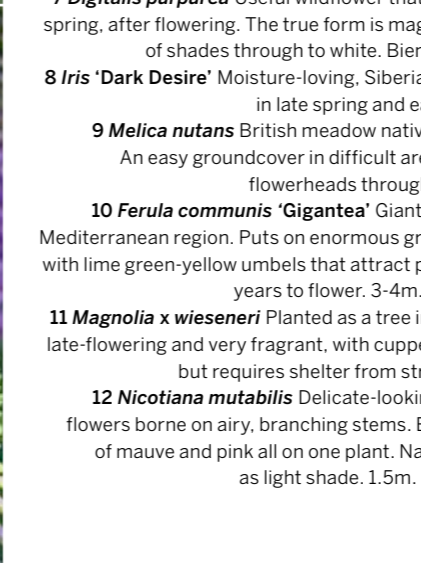
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24 KEY PLANTS

1 Rosa 'Moonlight' An old, hybrid musk shrub rose that also works well as a climber. Semi-double, creamy flowers are borne on long reddish stems, flowering all summer and into autumn. 1.5m. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b¹.

2 *Centranthus lecoqii* Good variation on common red valerian (*Centranthus ruber*), mauve valerian is native to Mediterranean regions and enjoys a home that is sandy and free-draining, in full sun. Clump-forming perennial. 60cm.

3 Iris 'Jane Phillips' Well-loved, tall, bearded iris of clear blue. Freely flowering with good foliage, rhizomes need to bake in the sun. 1.2m. AGM*. RHS H7.

4 *Papaver somniferum* Plants with the best colours are selected, from seeds originally collected at an early Dan Pearson-designed garden. Easygoing in full sun or semi-shade, these glaucous plants make structural seedheads. Young plants need to be thinned. 1.5m.

5 *Calycanthus floridus* Tall, wide and long-flowering, this deciduous shrub bears scented, wine-coloured blooms, 10cm across. Trouble-free but requires shelter. 3m. USDA 4a-9b.

6 *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis' "A rose of which I'm inordinately fond as it just flowers forever," says James. Its colouring is also an attraction: large, single flowers change from peach to deepening shades of pink, offset by purple stems. Lax, almost thornless shrub. 1.5m. AGM. RHS H5, USDA 5a-9b.

7 *Digitalis purpurea* Useful wildflower that can be directly sown with fresh seed in late spring, after flowering. The true form is magenta but inter-pollination produces a variety of shades through to white. Biennial. 1.5m. RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b.

8 Iris 'Dark Desire' Moisture-loving, Siberian flag iris that thrives near a pond, flowering in late spring and early summer. 90cm.

9 *Melica nutans* British meadow native grass, tolerating dry shade and wind. An easy groundcover in difficult areas of the garden. Produces arching flowerheads throughout summer. 30cm.

10 *Ferula communis* 'Gigantea' Giant fennel, at home on stony ground in the Mediterranean region. Puts on enormous growth by late spring, feathery foliage crowned with lime green-yellow umbels that attract pollinators over a long season. Can take a few years to flower. 3-4m. RHS H3, USDA 4a-8b.

11 *Magnolia x wieseneri* Planted as a tree in James's lawn to block a view, this hybrid is late-flowering and very fragrant, with cupped white petals and red stamens. Fully hardy but requires shelter from strong winds. 5m. USDA 6a-9b.

12 *Nicotiana mutabilis* Delicate-looking annual with billows of single, tubular flowers borne on airy, branching stems. Blooms open white, changing to variations of mauve and pink all on one plant. Native to Brazil, thriving in full sun as well as light shade. 1.5m. RHS H2, USDA 10a-11.

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24 KEY PLANTS CONTINUED

13 *Aquilegia vulgaris* var. *stellata* 'Ruby Port' A columbine cultivar standing tall on stiff stems with attractively divided foliage. Sulphur-coloured stamens shine out amid dark, nodding, double flowers. 90cm. RHS H7, USDA 3a-8b.

14 *Papaver somniferum* (naturally mutated) As opium poppies cross-pollinate they create myriad jewelled colours, with occasional mutations in shape, resulting in serrated edges and/or fully double flowers that are rounded like pompoms. 1m. RHS H5.

15 *Digitalis lutea* The leaves reveal that this isn't an ordinary foxglove but something more refined, with small, glowing, tubular flowers of pale yellow. Agreeably versatile, growing in any aspect. 60cm. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 3a-8b.

16 *Thalictrum* 'Black Stockings' Lacy foliage and tall, dark stems make this an attractive plant even before flowering. Small, luminous purple flowers throughout summer. Meadow rue likes moisture and sun or dappled shade. 2m. RHS H7, USDA 5a-9b.

17 *Pisum sativum* Peas, along with borlotti and French beans, scramble up an iron mesh tunnel. Peas do well in cooler temperatures but they require an open, sunny position. Regular watering is required during flowering, and while the peas are ripening. 1.2m. USDA 2a-11.

18 *Erigeron karvinskianus* Useful groundcover for edging or in cracks, a long sequence of small daisy-type flowers open white, turning to shades of pink. These South American plants require full sun and any soil with good drainage. 15cm. AGM. RHS H5.



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19 *Salvia* 'Royal Bumble' Searing red petals emerge from dark calyces on purple stems in early summer. Long flowering and hardy. 60cm. AGM. RHS H4.

20 *Buddleja alternifolia* Graceful arches of pale mauve flowers distinguish this from the ordinary butterfly bush. It is just as tough, taking any soil and any aspect although it is happier with sun and reasonable drainage. A deciduous shrub that responds well to a hard prune in spring. 3m. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

21 *Philadelphus delavayi* f. *melanocalyx* 'Nyman's Variety' "Seriously wonderful shrub," says James. "Unusual and gorgeous." The limitations of mock orange as a shrub are usually made up for in fragrance but this cultivar ticks both boxes. Highly scented white flowers are held in purple sepals. 3m. AGM. RHS H6.

22 *Iris* 'Butterscotch Kiss' Tall bearded iris from the 1950s, with yellow-orange beard. Requires full sun and well-drained soil. 90cm. RHS H7.

23 *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna' Long-flowering Balkan clary, with vibrant purple flowers on dark stems that attract pollinators from June to October. It will tolerate exposure and some shade. 30-50cm. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 4a-8b.

24 *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* 'Eva' Darkest purple stems and foliage contrast with pale buds and pink flowers. Leaves are deeply dissected and benefit from full sun for the richest colour. Dark berries in autumn are nourishing for birds. 3m. RHS H6, USDA 5a-8b.



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The charm of common foxgloves is amplified by opium poppies (*Papaver somniferum*), in this case selected forms chosen for their jewel-like colours. The seeds originated from a friend whose garden was designed by a young Dan Pearson and filmed for television.