

This page Flamboyant planting in the terrace borders, with persicaria and *Salvia* 'Amistad'.

Opposite The Urn Garden, its central feature filled with bacopa.



Performance PIECE

The gardens at Glyndebourne have to look good for the famous opera programme all year round, but thanks to inventive planting and plenty of colour, autumn here hits a particularly high note

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS MIMI CONNOLLY



Glyndebourne is known across the globe for its world-class opera and fabulous music. The idea came from John Christie and his wife, the noted soprano Audrey Mildmay.

They built their first theatre in the house itself, a small 300-seat number that hosted the first festival in 1934. This building was enlarged piecemeal over the years and gave both Joan Sutherland and Luciano Pavarotti their big breaks. However, it eventually became so popular that it outgrew the space so, in 1994, an exquisitely designed new theatre was built to hold an audience of 1,200.

Since then, it has gone from strength to strength, welcoming around 150,000 people a year with more than 120 live performances. I have been to Glyndebourne but, embarrassingly, I cannot remember which opera I saw – although I do remember ending the evening in a bathing-suit-optional hot tub somewhere in Sussex accompanied by a large plate of oysters. This was all many, many years ago, I hasten to add – but I think it is probably sensible to draw a heavy red velvet curtain over that and move on to the gardens.

Performances at the festival have an extended 90-minute interval, which allows the audience (all dressed in full black tie and taffeta) to picnic on the sweeping lawns and beside the lake, looking out onto parkland. The idea of a softly setting sun, a crustless sandwich, the last chords of *La Nozze de Figaro* (other operas are available) bouncing around your brain, a glass of something chilled and sparkly and the company of friends is pretty much irresistible, whether you are an opera buff or not.

Around the lawns and lake are a series of gardens planted so that they are in peak condition whenever there is a performance. The audience are given free rein before, during and after the performance, so the gardens have to look pretty darn good. The man responsible is head gardener Kevin Martin who arrived at Glyndebourne in 1993 – just before the new theatre opened – and has had his hand on the horticultural tiller ever since. “We have had help,” he explains. “The late Christopher Lloyd (of Great Dixter) assisted with some of the older gardens, then we had help from Lady Mary Keen. Fergus Garrett helped in the Urn Garden and John Hoyland has done great work in the Rose Garden.” He welcomes fresh pairs of eyes but the everyday work is mostly up to him and a team of five other gardeners.

The gardening crescendos are designed to coincide with the big Glyndebourne dates. The main festival programme is every day for about a month from the end of July and then the touring opera returns in October for more performances. In the interim there is a busy schedule of rehearsals and education programmes, not to mention dedicated garden tours. It is a late season, so all those classic English garden



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Above The large leaves of vigorous climber *Vitis coignetiae* develop rich crimson and rust tones as autumn progresses.

staples – bulbs in spring and the soft blowsiness of June – are long gone. The borders rely heavily for colour on reliable annuals and tender perennials.

Kevin and the other gardeners have an admirably democratic arrangement where they all contribute new planting ideas. “We are all pretty good plantspeople so it is a group effort: everything is grown, to organic principles, in the greenhouses here, either from cuttings or seed.” The carefully



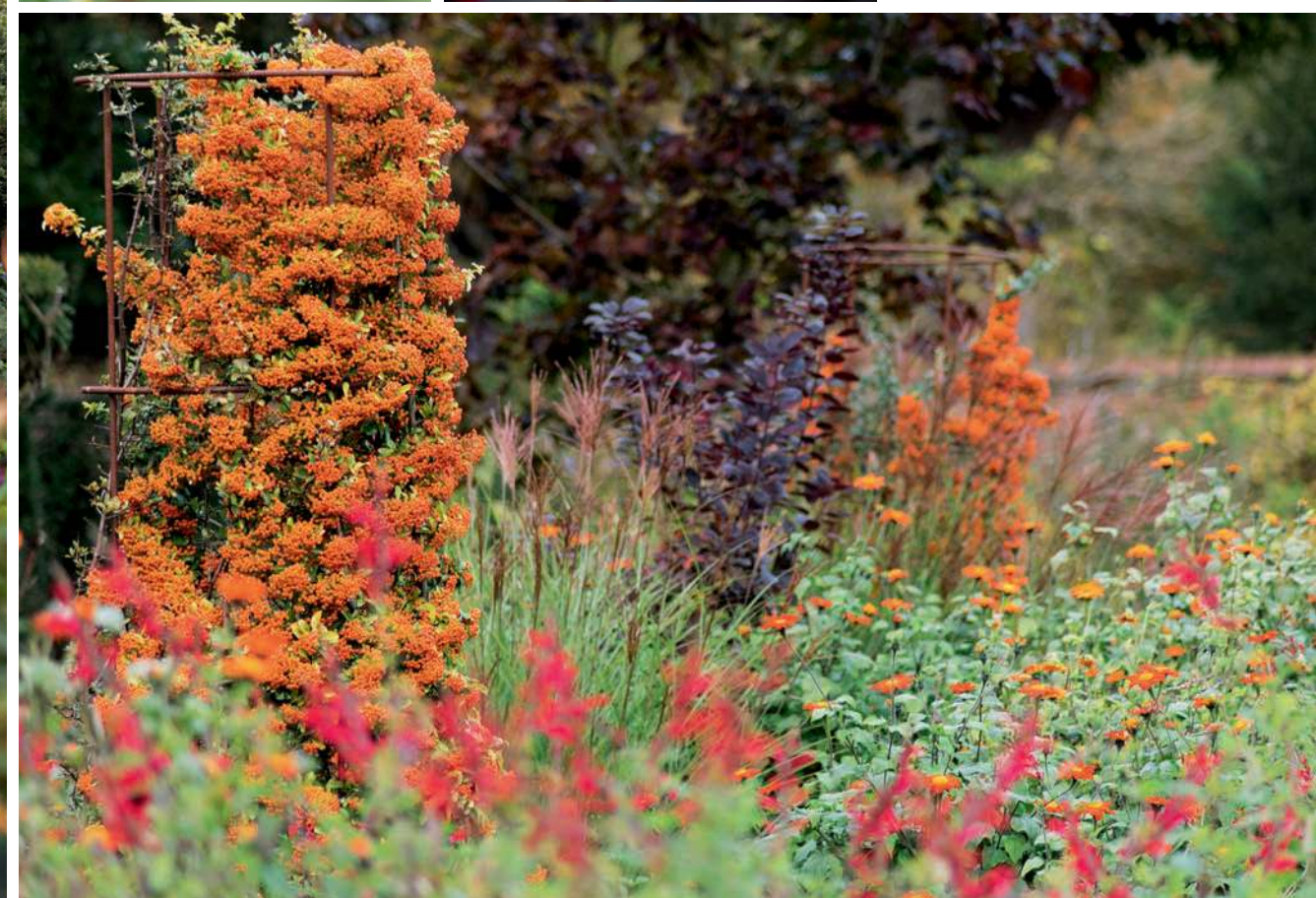
Far left Arching flower stems of hardy annual, *Persicaria orientalis*.

Left Ever-popular *Dahlia* ‘Bishop of Llandaff’ with its vivid scarlet blooms.

Below Rusted metal pillars support thorny pyracantha and their heavy load of berries.

Bottom right A clustered sedum flowerhead.

Bottom left *Nicotiana mutabilis* ‘Marshmallow’.



Glyndebourne's PRIMA DONNAS

There's room for more than one star turn in these annual- and perennial-packed borders



GOMPHRENA HAAGEANA
'STRAWBERRY FIELDS'

Sow this unusual annual in late spring for easy, bright flowers in borders or vases.



TITHONIA
ROTUNDIFOLIA 'TORCH'

One of Kevin favourites, 'Torch' is superb, with vibrant orange flowers.



CLEOME
'SEÑORITA ROSALITA'

Unlike other seed-raised cleome, this excellent variety is thornless.



VERBENA BONARIENSIS

The classic choice for adding height without bulk, thanks to its tall, slender stems topped with mauve flowers.



GERANIUM 'ROZANNE'

With its Award of Garden Merit from the RHS, this hardy geranium comes well qualified to fill gaps with blue flowers.



KNAUTIA MACEDONICA

Plant this perennial in sun and well-drained soil for a succession of crimson-red blooms from midsummer onwards.



COSMOS
ATROSANGUINEUS

This dark and dusky cosmos species is known for its flowers' chocolatey scent.



COSMOS BIPINNATUS
'VERSAILLES TETRA'

Easily grown from spring-sown seed for pink blooms with a darker central ring.



COMMELINA TUBEROSA

Simple, three-petaled flowers in striking sky-blue on this clump-forming hardy perennial that flowers in autumn.



planned scheme is then planted out in the various borders. This usually works well except for this year, when Bacchus Christie (five-year-old son of the Executive Chairman, Gus Christie, and his wife the soprano, Danielle de Niese) rearranged the plant labels in the nursery when no one was looking, which has led to some unexpected, although not unpleasing, combinations!

The main areas of the garden are laid out between the opera house and the view of the Sussex Downs. There is the Wild Garden and then the Mary Christie Rose Garden, named after the wife of Sir George, who was responsible for the construction of the new theatre. From here you pass through the Urn Garden, the Mildmay Garden and the Bourne Garden, all of which are stuffed with plants and

The gardens are all made for promenading, with wide paths and deep borders brimming with plants

Above left Shepherd's crook-shaped lighting made of rusted steel.
Top right A wine-red flowered salvia. Seek out *Salvia* 'Nachtvlinder' for similar coloured blooms.
Above right Asters can always be relied upon for late flowers. Try 'Mönch' for lilac daisies like these.

contrast beautifully with the Figaro Garden, which is a very quiet and simple confection of yew hedges and still water surrounding a Henry Moore sculpture. The gardens are all made for promenading, with wide paths and deep borders brimming with mounds of tobacco plants (especially *Nicotiana mutabilis*, one of my absolute favourites), salvias, dahlias, bright tangerine tithonias and tall and spindly, bobbly-flowered *Persicaria orientalis* – also known as kiss-me-over-the-garden-gate, which has to be one of the best common names ever coined. Lots of late-season loveliness that carries on flowering until the autumn frosts.

One garden path is adorned with rusted steel lights shaped like shepherd's crooks – these do not just illuminate the garden but serve as emergency



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Above *Dahlia* 'Blue Bayou' emerges from the silvery leaves of *Plectranthus argentatus*.

Left Fluffy-flowered ageratum is a superb tender bedding plant for the front of borders.

Below *Salvia elegans* 'Scarlet Pineapple'.



lighting as well. Picking up the rusty steel theme are six round steel columns that were designed for roses, but have been repurposed by Kevin as supports for orange-berried pyracanthas. "They are positioned close to the wild garden and I wanted to plant something that was not only spectacular but good for birds and other wildlife," he explains.

Operas are very like gardens. That is a rather sweeping statement, but allow me to try to explain. Both have adagios, arpeggios, andantes, cadenzas and glissandos. Both are a collaboration between composers (the designers) and performers (the gardeners). Both give us moments of peace, and powerful, whack-it-out-of-the-park, full-bodied crescendos. Operas can bring you to the edge of tears, raise you back up with a thigh-jangling punch of emotion and then swiftly reduce you to a quivering jelly of relief. Gardens do this too – we have all wandered through borders of breathless beauty, beneath the comfort of trees and been jolted into awe by a sudden vista or juxtaposition of plants.



In a garden that is so wrapped up in performance, one wonders what happens when all the singers, musicians and, indeed, the audience, has gone home.

The answer is that it is quite a community: the gardens open for local people and there is an in-house horticultural show where staff enter cakes, prize vegetables, children's artwork and all the things that you would expect to find at a village show. The main difference is that the entries are judged by internationally famous singers rather than the chairman of the parish council. "A lot of people work here and putting on six operas each season, dealing with performers and making

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everything perfect can be hard work,” says Kevin. “My prescription for stress is a walk down to the lake or a few moments sitting on a bench.” Like music, gardens are an excellent way to

unwind and at Glyndebourne you can enjoy the best of both in one place. *And* you get to dress up and drink champagne. What's not to love? ■

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Glyndebourne, Lewes, East Sussex BN8 5UU.

The gardens are accessible to those attending performances and are also open for tours on specific dates throughout the year.

Tel: 01273 812321; glyndebourne.com

Top left A late flush of flowers on *Rosa* 'Bonica' is always welcome.

Above left Spikes of tiny, felty flowers on *Salvia confertiflora*.

Above right White-themed beds on the north end of the lawns feature cosmos, dahlias and alstroemerias.