

# *Invisible* DESIGN

A classic James Alexander-Sinclair design uses no particular colour scheme or style, connecting the garden of converted Hailstone Barn to its rural Cotswold surrounds, with a deceptive simplicity and abundant natural charm

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Wide cobbled paths traverse a vast expanse of 'wild' planting well suited to the windy site and harsh soil conditions.





*Hailstone Barn sits in seclusion: idyllic but not without challenges*



The Brothers Grimm would have been hard pushed to write a better end to this design fairytale. A story where, like a set of carefully positioned dominoes, all the elements fell neatly into place. A beautiful garden lies in the wake of works completed by garden designer, James Alexander-Sinclair, who, with the help of a team of crowbar-wielding landscapers, has created something truly magical.

Hailstone Barn sits in seclusion amid a sea of arable farmland in the Cotswolds: idyllic, but not without challenges. True to the area, the soil is harsh Cotswold brash, which is stony, thin and heavy to work. The open planes and far-reaching views here are certainly enviable, but the garden itself is thereby exposed to strong and destructive winds. The charming rural farmyard setting is certainly photoshoot-worthy, but it hides copious hardcore and farmyard oddments that have been securely hoofed in. And how do you ensure that a garden so perfectly perched, smack bang in the middle of a delightful arable landscape, doesn't detract from the view but blends seamlessly into the background like a familiar old friend?

None of this fazed its designer. "I immediately knew what it was I wanted to do," James explains. Although attractive, various attempts by the owners to create a wildflower garden hadn't been fruitful since weeds had quickly come to dominate. Their idea, however, was a good one, and James was happy to go with it. "The garden needed changing, while holding onto the idea of the wildflowers. I



Clockwise from top Eremurus and lupins thrust upwards; sweet rocket, *Hesperis matronalis*; the barn has a heavenly view out over the planting; self-seeder *Centranthus ruber*.



Plants emerge through a layer of gravel, while the boundary between garden and the field next door is barely distinguishable.



knew it had to be a wild, untrained, loose garden. That much was clear from the start.”

Charming and oozing with wit, James is well known for his wonderful garden designs across the country, from the exuberant garden terraces at Eton to the luscious borders at Cottesbrooke Hall. Yet when it comes to his garden designs, he is a something of a chameleon. James’s work blends so seamlessly with the vernacular and surroundings that you’d be hard pushed to identify one of his gardens. According to him, gardening is far more about where you are doing it, than it is about working to any one particular trademark style. “Although it’s my design, it’s all about the connection between domesticity and the countryside. That link between the house and the garden is key to the ultimate design,” he insists. He goes on to explain that when it came to Hailstone, even though it’s a converted barn and therefore more architecturally sophisticated, it is ultimately still a barn, in a field. “The essence, therefore, is that the design had to reflect that. It had to be simple and honest.”

Three paths were constructed, running from the broad timber decks that surround the barn to a central point in the garden. The paths are wide enough to enable the owner, who uses a wheelchair, to have full access

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**Above** A boardwalk deck provides ample space for outdoor dining, surrounded by burgeoning plants. **Right** Pale pink *Valeriana officinalis* pops up throughout the garden, its tall, branched stems bearing clusters of tiny, nectar-rich flowers.



to the garden. Simply block paved and edged with gravel, the pathways blend seamlessly into the planting. A large ornamental sphere, made by Capital Garden Products, sits proud in the garden. The sphere cunningly suggests a heavy construction of rusty metal, but is in fact made of fibreglass. Being so lightweight, it can be moved around the garden but currently sits proud in the centre. “I so loved the cleverness of these spheres that I actually stole the idea for my own garden. Mine sits nicely where nothing else will grow,” says James with a grin. “Gardening is after all about borrowing ideas.”

The true cunning of this garden is in the planting, which reflects James’s astutely interpretive design skill. The plan was simple: use nature to

the advantage of the design. The impoverished, Cotswold brash soil stunts plant growth. Perennials that would normally grow to great heights with habitual adulation and bounties of compost remain short and stubby in the harsh conditions here. “Everything has to be tough, since it won’t be stroked and nurtured. Strong roots, and tough conditions means that plants are naturally shorter and less likely to be blown over,” explains James. Shorter plants require less water too, so they are pretty much bomb-proof, come rain, wind or shine. As the plants mature and self-seed, weeds will eventually be crowded out. “If not, they shall be helped,” says James, laughing.

To avoid disturbing dormant weed seeds, the site wasn’t dug over but left pretty much as James found it. A generous layer of gravel was spread across it to further suppress weeds, but also for aesthetics. A portfolio of characterful and, above all, tough plants was selected and planted directly into the rocky soil substrate. “The landscaping team weren’t too pleased. The tough, rocky soil made for hard digging. Everything had to be planted with a crowbar,” he recalls.

“They came around though. Eventually...” When you consider the scale of the garden at 26m x 27m, that team deserve a medal.

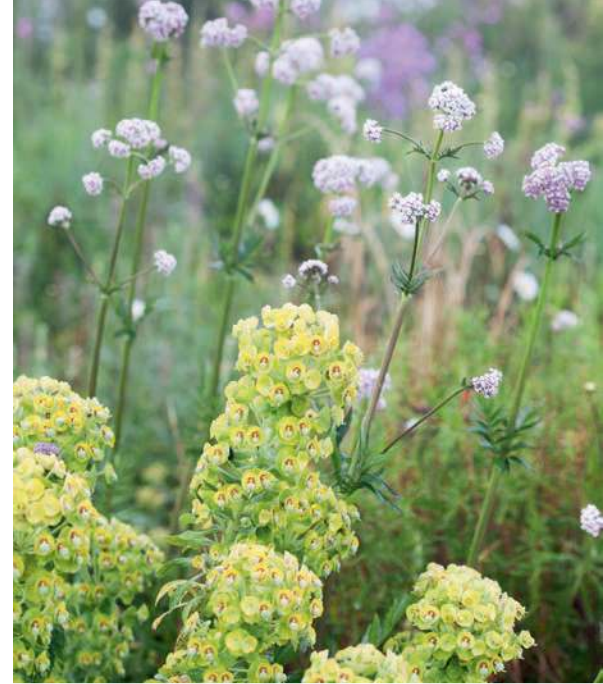
The gamble has paid off. Hailstone Barn now has a superb faux-wildflower meadow. The effect is one of calm sophistication

and enviable simplicity and, above all, is natural, as intended. All views from the barn now overlook a rhythmic expanse of plants, brimming with colour and texture, throughout the seasons. “Our house is basically in the garden. We enjoy the open views out towards the garden, but so too the views from the garden into the house,” explains the owner proudly.

Centranthus, valeriana, *Knautia macedonica* and bronze fennels eagerly populate the spaces between acid green *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, *Stipa gigantea* and established globe artichokes. Studded throughout are alliums, iris, and lupins, which give way to the scarlet reds of *Hemerocallis* ‘Stafford’, *Penstemon* ‘Garnet’ and *Persicaria amplexicaulis* ‘Taurus’ in the summer. “There isn’t any one specific colour scheme for the garden. Colours change throughout the year,” explains James. “In fact, I don’t think I have ever designed with a specific colour scheme in my life. The colours here may look synchronised, but I don’t hold to specific colour schemes in my designs as they all demand different palettes.”

**Top** *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii* lends solidity to the otherwise ethereal planting. **Right** Try *Aquilegia vulgaris* ‘Barlow Black’ for dark, double granny’s bonnets like these. **Far right** *Iris* ‘Rajah’ offers a striking pairing of yellow and burgundy. **Bottom** Block-paved paths simplify access.





James has left no strict maintenance rules for the owners and their gardener. The garden was created to be free, with an easy, laid-back attitude to life. “As a designer, one must be tolerant of changes, developments made by owners and gardeners. This is their garden, and if they enjoy it, I’m happy,” he says. This garden in particular has been created, as James puts it, “to express itself”. So if, due to over self-seeding, it starts to look crowded in places, the offending plants can simply be ripped out. Similarly, in those areas where particular plants are much admired by the owners, they will be allowed to spread and crowd out their neighbours. The owners refer to this, lovingly, as their “eternal editing job”. Unbounded, this garden has as much freedom as is sensible. “If you like it, enjoy it. If you don’t like it, take it out. That is the essence of gardening. It’s never the same, from one year to the next,” James maintains. “Otherwise we’d all be bored stiff!”

According to James, the most important aspect of garden design is the relationship between client

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**Above left** Super-sized cardoons supply huge mounds of silvery foliage alongside a simple wooden bench.

**Top right** Lime green euphorbia with pale *Valeriana officinalis*.

**Above right** Spiky leaves of *Stipa gigantea*, its golden-oat flowers just beginning to develop.

and designer. “In the end, we all have to be happy,” he explains. “The reason you get a garden designer in, is the same reason you get a plumber in. Where and when you need it, you get help. Obviously unplugging a sink and designing a garden are quite different skills, but you still have to trust your plumber as you would a garden designer. “My job is to see the things that people who don’t do this all the time may not be able to see straight away and then bring that to a happy conclusion. But above all, it should be fun. If it stops being fun then something has gone wrong somewhere.” And at Hailstone Barn, it’s clear that they certainly had a lot of fun. ■

Further information: [jamesalexandersinclair.com](http://jamesalexandersinclair.com)