

*Astrantia* 'Shaggy', silver-leafed *Stachys byzantina* 'Big Ears' and bright mounds of geraniums 'Orion' and 'Patricia' join roses in dense planting.

# *The Constant* GARDEN

Few spaces have to work as hard as this Tom Stuart-Smith designed garden at Middleton Lodge in North Yorkshire, where a jam-packed itinerary of wedding weekends means that each special area must perform at its peak all year round

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Hummocks of yew and multi-stemmed *Catalpa bignonioides* are carefully positioned on the manicured lawn outside the Fig House.



Time was when a young couple had two options when it came to tying the knot: the full fig church number, possibly including a dress like a frosted meringue and drunk uncles, or a more low-key, registry-office affair – with optional drunk uncles since the room would be smaller. All this changed in 1994 when Gyles Brandreth (the one with the humorous sweaters) steered a change in the law through parliament and all manner of wedding venues sprang up in halls, houses and stately homes. Now choice is unlimited, the world is the oyster of the newly engaged, and one of the most successful ‘new’ wedding venues is Middleton Lodge near Richmond in Yorkshire.

The exceptionally well-proportioned Georgian house is lived in by James and Rebecca Allison and their two young children. James’s father bought the place when it was a little exhausted from its colourful history of being lived in by a series of copper magnates, soldiers, aldermen and, interestingly, the Backhouses who were responsible for much of the planting at Trebah in Cornwall. James was brought up here and remembers the gardens being opened for the National Gardens Scheme: “There was a gardener called Joe who kept everything immaculate until he died in 1985, after which it became quite wild.” When the family moved in they were living in one wing of the house as the rest of the estate crumbled and the roof dripped water on the stairs.

Faded grandeur is all very well for a while, but this was a place that was looking for a purpose. As James explains: “We had lots of run-down buildings on site and we wanted to restore the estate and start up a sustainable business.” They didn’t hang about and, since 2012, have developed a working quarry that will eventually become a quarry garden, a hotel, a restaurant in the stables and a thriving wedding business. Brides flock to Middleton and on popular weekends the Allisons can cater for two celebrations at once. Central to all this activity is the two-acre walled garden, and

this is where the couple decided they needed some help. They had coped with the buildings (Rebecca is an architect, James an engineer) but gardens are a different kettle of fish. “Garden design has so many different facets – scent, time, sunshine and so much more. I am in awe,” admits James. Fortunately, while working in London, Rebecca had collaborated with multi-award-winning garden designer Tom Stuart-Smith, who was duly brought in to have a look.

Most of us are quite tolerant towards our gardens: we understand that there will be moments when parts of it look a bit below par. We make allowances because we know that next week, or next month, something new will burst into flower and all will be forgiven. This garden cannot afford days off, since (most) people have only one wedding day and they want everything to be perfect. They do not have the luxury of coming back in a fortnight because the roses will look better then, so the garden must always be on absolutely top form.

The final design was a collaboration between the Allisons and Tom, who remembers it fondly. “James has this amazing, can-do attitude and is an excellent project manager. It comes, presumably,

from having an organised engineer’s mind,” he notes. All the plants were grown in advance so the garden had an excellent start and required very limited supervision from Tom, which, he says, “was all very liberating”.

The final piece of the jigsaw was Andrew Webb, who has been head gardener at Middleton

from the beginning and who, with his team, has planted over 200 roses and 40,000 herbaceous plants, which he remembers arriving on a couple of articulated lorries in 2016.

The design follows a relatively simple yet effective pattern: the Fig House, a brand new building which hosts a stream of parties, faces the parkland. It is so called because there used to be an old fig there, which has been dug up and moved elsewhere on the estate. To commemorate its inspiration, Andrew has planted a selection of related figs including *Ficus benjamina*, *Ficus*

**Below** Lead planters housing standard bays and an underplanting of seasonal bedding – white lobelia and verbena – ensure the Fig House terrace is well-dressed for wedding parties.







The chunky stone seat is a nod to the area's quarrying history, and an impressive focal point on the Fig House lawn.



*lyrata* and the creeping *Ficus pumila*. The long windows look out across a wide lawn with a scattering of topiary hummocks and some multi-stemmed *Catalpa bignonioides* (Indian bean trees). A focal point at the end of the lawn is a massive rock that is not only a nod to the quarrying that has always brought prosperity to the area but also makes a handsome seat. To either side are long borders with repeating groups of perovskia, salvias, geraniums and molinia skipping around more clipped yew – all of them chosen for their long flowering seasons. Another layer of planting, this time of rugged *Rhus typhina* and a sea of molinia on top of a low wall gives extra texture and serves to alluringly conceal the other gardens.

Surrounding the lawn are four gardens, each designed to look their very best at different times of the year and each with a tall metal arbour – for those all-important wedding-day photo opportunities. First is a neatly regimented and



**Top** Produce for the restaurant is grown in the vegetable garden.  
**Above** *Salvia* 'Amethyst', *Perovskia* 'Blue Spire' and *Geranium* 'Nimbus'.  
**Right** Rising from a bed of *Molinia* 'Heidebraut', *Rhus typhina* acts as an informal screen.







**Top** A metal, rose-clad arbour sets the scene for perfect wedding photos.

**Above** Great banks of *Geranium* 'Orion' with rose 'Kew Gardens' guarantee flowers for midsummer weddings.

**Left** Foxgloves, rose 'Harlow Carr' and *Geranium* 'Patricia' create an idyllic setting.

efficient vegetable garden, the content of which is dictated by the chef since all the produce is used in the restaurant, with an arbour of pear trees and a spring garden with wisteria as an impressive centrepiece. Next is the rose garden where old rose varieties cavort around a pattern of fastigate yews and a central planting of the magnificent white climbers *Rosa* 'Sombreuil' and *Rosa* 'Aimée Vibert' – this is obviously the go-to romantic spot for midsummer weddings.

The final garden is the prairie garden, a glorious tangle of grasses and perennials interrupted by beech drums and an arbour planted with *Vitis vinifera* 'Brandt' for its excellent autumn colour. "This garden was grown from scratch," Andrew recalls. "Tom made a seed mix and we sowed it into a layer of sand." Some might think it a slow way to make a garden, but it has been effective and performs over a long period. "We let the plants stand at least until January so we can get the full effect of seedheads and frost," Andrew explains.





All in all, this is a pretty special place: a very sophisticated garden looked after with care and dedication. From an unpromising beginning (it was, at one point in its history, home to some sheep and a load of Christmas trees), the walled garden has burgeoned into a fabulous place. I tip my hat to the creativity of Tom, to the all-encompassing energy of the Allison's who achieved so much in such a short time, and finally to Andrew and his team, for any garden is only as good as those who care for it every day. I am not sure I am all that keen on getting married again, but finding Middleton Lodge might be an excellent excuse to throw a massive party. ■

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**Top** In the prairie garden, beech domes and cotinus emerge from a seed-raised meadow.

**Above** *Echinacea pallida* in the prairie garden.

**Right** *Vitis vinifera* 'Brandt' climbs the rusted metal arbour.

