

# TWIST *in* the TALE

*Landscape architect Jane Brown's design for what was a featureless garden in a valley of the South Downs incorporates discreet spaces, in a classical idiom, and distinctly modern elements*

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The garden at this South Downs rectory consists of a series of interconnected spaces, including this shady courtyard formed by box-head pleached hornbeams





# THE OLD RECTORY

in west Sussex nestles comfortably in a gentle valley in the South Downs. At first glance, the garden looks as though it has clothed the stone house for years. With rich planting and beautiful, warm sandstone landscaping, the garden has a deceptive maturity. But on closer inspection, the modern styling of an expert hand reveals itself.

When landscape architect Jane Brown took on the project in late 2005, the existing garden was, she says, 'very sparse'. Mostly laid to an uneven lawn with a few mature specimen trees, and a pool and tennis court as the only features, it was a bleak canvas. 'There wasn't much to work with,' she recalls. 'The initial brief was simply to create a space for the family, with an organic vegetable garden. But the client has a keen eye for gardens, art and design, and was interested in developing the garden further. Once we got going, things snowballed, and the design evolved over two years.'

It is a sizeable property totalling eight hectares, although the garden occupies only around two of these, including a meadow and sports pitch. The clients found Jane through friends, for whom she had designed gardens they liked. 'From the outset,' Jane explains, 'I wanted to design a garden that would complement the Victorian house without being old-fashioned, so it was very much about combining classical elements with modern. The garden lent itself to being divided into a series of spaces or "rooms", but a key challenge involved how to change subtly the levels around the house. We did it by introducing steps and raised areas.'

Using traditional materials with a confident, modern approach, Jane united what had been a loose collection of spaces around the house to create a more structured journey through the garden. A stroll may take you past exuberant, colourful, mixed herbaceous and grassy borders; through a shady courtyard formed by box-head pleached hornbeams with a simple stone trough at the centre; down to a sunken terrace with a view towards the pool; and past a bog garden that distracts the eye from the tennis court and steers you towards the beautiful vegetable garden. Each space commands its own atmosphere, while also sitting comfortably in relation to the house and the surrounding landscape. 'I tend to veer away from over-ornate gardens – I like keeping things natural,' says Jane. 'We were trying to create a garden that gave the impression of having been there for quite some time, but had more of a modern twist. There is the wonderful backdrop of the Downs that you can always see from any point, so it was important for the garden not to impose on the landscape too much. Big pools and fountains wouldn't have worked.'

*'The design of this garden was very much about combining classical with modern'*

Jane deliberately used a limited range for the hard landscaping. 'Lots of the materials relate to the house,' she says. 'The aim was to keep it simple. We used green oak for the pergola and raised beds in the vegetable garden. And for the pool wall I sourced Sussex sandstone to match the house as closely as possible. We used a local quarry and had the stone cut in a way that would echo the dressing of the original blocks.'

The subtle details bring out the modern elements of the design. Steps set into the wall of the pool terrace seem distinctly of the moment, taking you to a hidden platform for views across the garden to the Downs. In the sunken terrace, the same sandstone is used for the retaining walls, but here the blocks are set on their ends, lending a twenty-first-century note.

The same subtle melding of traditional and modern can be seen in the planting. In a corner set aside for winter interest, a grove of white-stemmed Himalayan birches is planted on a tight geometric grid. The romantic rose garden is full of wild species mingling with shrubs and perennials. A box

OPPOSITE Grasses, such as *Calamagrostis acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' form bold blocks of bronze colour in the back borders in autumn. THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT The Old Rectory is a Grade II-listed building in west Sussex. Steps and raised areas were introduced to the garden to create different levels around the house. A sunken terrace provides a tranquil and secluded spot to enjoy the surroundings. The backdrop of the Downs can be seen from any point in the garden





*‘There’s an autumn-harvest quality to the garden at the end of summer – it looks good well into October’*

parterre is planted in a star shape, and *Rosa* ‘Madame Alfred Carrière’ has its own green-oak pergola, right at the heart of the vegetable garden.

Most of the plants are chosen for drought tolerance, as there is no watering system. The colour palette drifts from ruby reds and maroons in early summer to warm, late-autumn oranges and golds. At this time of year the grassy borders come into their own with bold bronze blocks of *Calamagrostis acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’ in the back borders and *Miscanthus* varieties, including ‘Gracillimus’, ‘Ferner Osten’ and ‘Malepartus’, mixed with *Stipa arundinacea*, *Stipa tenuissima* and late-flowering *Hemerocallis* and *Aster x frickartii* ‘Monch’. ‘There is a lovely autumn-harvest quality to the garden at the end of summer,’ says Jane. ‘The grasses speak for themselves and look great with other seed heads. With the aconitums and asters there is still some colour and the garden looks good well into October.’

For all the stunning visual impact of views and planting, this is still very much a family garden, run by head gardener Caroline Matthias, who, having worked closely with Jane and the owners on the design, has continued to develop the garden with the planting of an arboretum. The vegetable garden is integral to family life, supplying both the rectory and the owners’ London home year-round. Play areas are as important as the aesthetics, from the ‘secret’ pathway that snakes behind the big borders, to the path through the wild-flower meadow that leads to a tree house designed by Jane. It has all the charm of a traditional country garden, with just enough of a modern twist to bring it right up to date. There’s a sense that this is the kind of garden for which the Old Rectory has been waiting 160 years □

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**THIS PAGE FROM TOP** The ornamental vegetable garden supplies both the rectory and the owners’ London home. A path lined with herbaceous borders leads to a wild-flower meadow. Landscape architect Jane Brown designed an idyllic tree house for the children. **OPPOSITE** A bench has been strategically placed to contemplate the views

