



The ornamental gardens are divided from the rest of the estate by a low wall, part of the terrace that once ran around the old house, which was demolished many years ago

With the help of garden designer Sean Walter, the owners of Thursford Old Hall in Norfolk have capitalised on the land surrounding the Jacobean Revival house to create an exuberant garden and a working vineyard

INTIMATE GRANDEUR

TEXT JODIE JONES | PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS



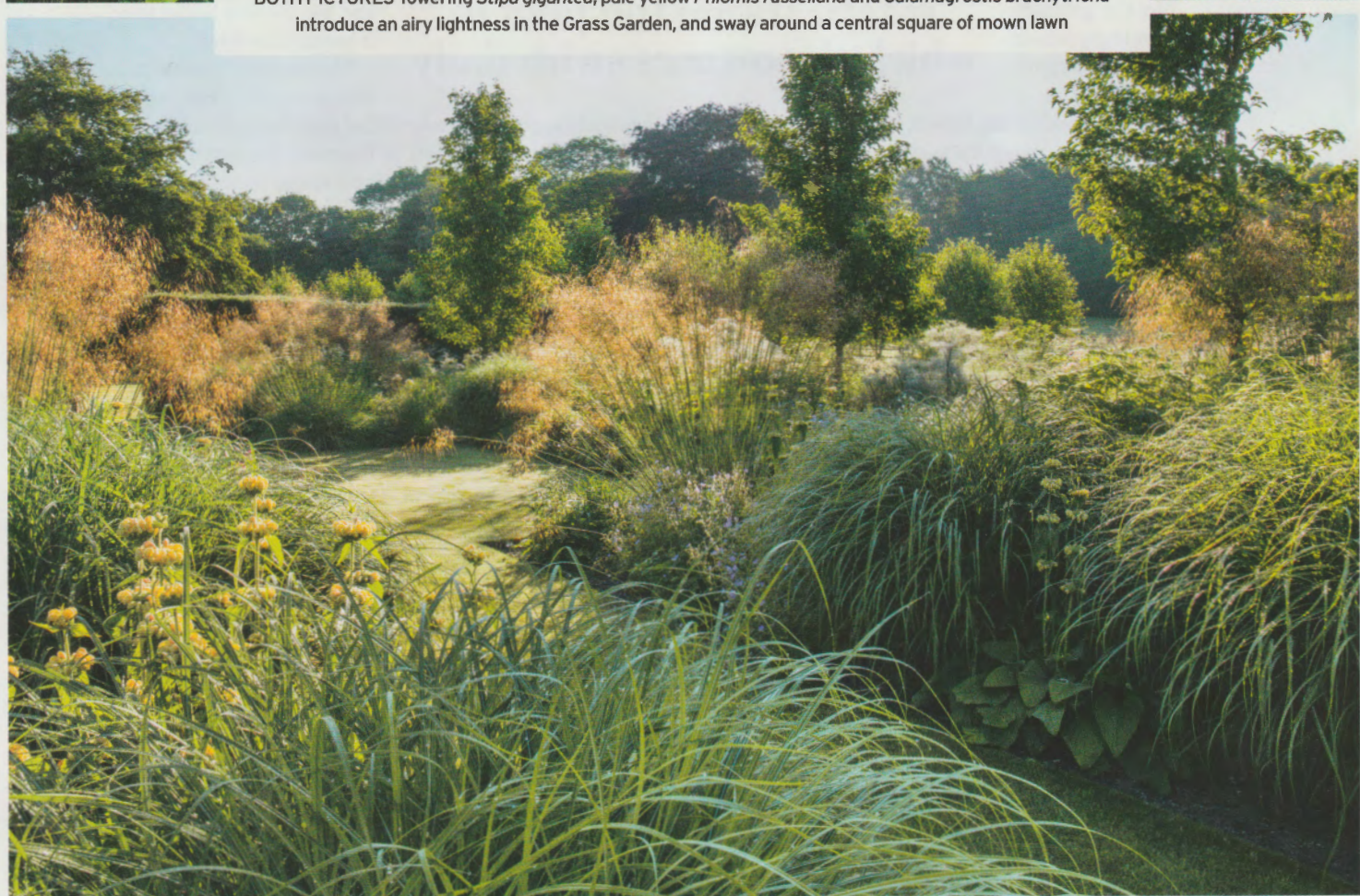


FROM TOP An avenue of evergreen oaks in box-edged beds adjoins the original parterre (below), which is now filled with *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna' and *Rosa* 'Wild Edric'





BOTH PICTURES Towering *Stipa gigantea*, pale yellow *Phlomis russeliana* and *Calamagrostis brachytricha* introduce an airy lightness in the Grass Garden, and sway around a central square of mown lawn



For many years, Alison and Bill Moodie drove through the village of Little Snoring in North Norfolk as they happily shuttled between their home in Chelsea and a weekend bolthole on the coast at Blakeney.

It was only when Bill retired that they reassessed their situation and decided to consolidate their assets. 'We were ready for a project,' says Alison. 'We wanted a larger house with space to create gardens, and Bill had always rather fancied having a vineyard, so we had quite a specific set of requirements.'

While flicking through a magazine, Alison spotted a property that seemed to tick all their boxes, and then discovered that they had been driving past it for years. The Jacobean Revival house was impressive, but not ridiculously large (in fact, it was the servants' wing of a larger property demolished at the end of the First World War). It came with nine acres of land, including a south-facing slope that Bill identified as the ideal location for him to grow the classic Champagne combination of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier vines.

They brought in interior designer Charlotte Crosland, who had helped with their former home in Chelsea, and she in turn introduced them to Sean Walter of The Plant Specialist to work on the garden. 'Without Sean, we wouldn't have known where to start,' says Alison. 'We wanted to do the gardening ourselves, but the grounds were an alarmingly blank canvas that we could never have made sense of.'

When Sean first visited the house, it was surrounded on all sides by open parkland and approached by a long, informal drive. On the far side of the building, a featureless terrace ran along the length of the house, with its view across sweeping lawns to a picturesque dovecote tower interrupted by a low wall.

The only ornamental elements were a box-edged parterre, a short avenue of whitebeams and a section of crinkle-crankle yew hedge that stopped abruptly in the middle of a lawn. 'None of these elements related to the house, which sat strangely apart from its surroundings,' Sean recalls. 'My brief was to introduce intimacy while retaining a sufficient sense of stature to complement the grandeur of the house. We were working to a budget, so we couldn't start from scratch. Instead, I tried to develop the design from what was already there.'

So the parterre remains, but within its box-edged beds Sean has planted easy-care, long-lasting perennials, including *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna' and *Knautia macedonica*, masses of *Allium christophii* and the lovely rose 'Wild Edric', which is a particular favourite of his. 'It is just an excellent performer – it is tough and repeat flowering, and it has a great scent.'

Where once the parterre sat in splendid isolation in an expanse of mown grass, it now adjoins a formal avenue

of clipped evergreen oaks, rising out of echoing box-edged beds filled with *Aquilegia* 'Black Barlow' and the high and airy grass *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Transparent'. Mown paths between these beds lead along one axis out to the boundary of the formally gardened area and on an intersecting path to an adjoining area, crammed with ornamental grasses and prairie-style plants.

'This area is for the late summer,' says Sean. The beds bulge with *Cephalaria dipsacoides*, *Valeriana pyrenaica*, *Phlomis russeliana* and *Stipa gigantea* glowing gold in the low, late-season sun. 'It does get intense,' says Sean. 'That is why the central square of mown lawn is the most important element in this area. You need that formal contrast to act as a foil, or it could descend into chaos.'

'The plants we've used here are an inexpensive yet stylish way to fill a large space, and many of them – like the bronze fennel – self-seed to quickly pack the space.' In fact, Alison and Bill, who still largely manage the gardens themselves, found it a struggle to keep on top of this exuberant planting until Sean gave them a maintenance masterclass. 'It's about working smarter, not harder,' he says. 'I showed them how a thorough weeding blitz in late spring would help them keep control for the rest of the year.'

It also helps that, elsewhere in the garden, Sean devised schemes that were extremely low maintenance, such as on the approach to the house, where he has combined slender yew pyramids with a monoculture of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus'. 'They just need to cut the grass right down in late winter and for the rest of the year, it looks after itself.'

The swimming-pool garden is equally low input.

Masses of *Centranthus ruber* 'Alba' take care of themselves, and the walls are covered in fragrant *Trachelospermum jasminoides* and also fan-trained stone fruits. Rippling ribbons of *Hakonechloa macra* frame the pool in which Alison and Bill swim daily from April to October. It is an object lesson in easy impact.

The formerly featureless terrace is a case in point. Sean removed the low wall that once divided it from the lawn, and broke up the barren expanse of stone slabs with areas of gravel, into which he planted thymes, purple sage and *Geranium* 'Rozanne', dark purple *Iris* 'Sable' and *Alchemilla mollis*. Low hummocks of box create a contrast to this scattered planting and, although it took a power drill to excavate adequate planting holes in the compacted site, these have settled happily into their new home.

Alison and Bill have also settled happily after the initial flurry of hard work required to turn this house into their home. It is just over five years since they started work on the garden but now, when they do allow themselves a moment to enjoy the fruits of their labour, they can toast the achievement with a glass of Bill's latest vintage □

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Ribbons of *Hakonechloa macra* frame the pool in which the owners swim daily

OPPOSITE FROM TOP Slender yew pyramids along the approach to the house. The swimming-pool garden is filled with lush *Centranthus ruber* 'Alba'

