

Garden OF THE WEEK



Gardener: Irene Eltringham-Willson

Location: Butlers Lane, Herstmonceux, East Sussex BN27 1QH; tel: 01323 833770

Size: A one-acre garden in a six-acre plot

Soil: Loam with some clay

Been in garden: 25 years

Open: www.ngs.org.uk. Jazz in the Garden, August 10-11, 2-5pm, £6, and by arrangement; Butlers Farmhouse is also a B&B.



An eclectic garden that's full of surprises

This lovely old, unconventional patch in East Sussex is made up of a number of smaller spaces, collections and many a fun diversion!

Words Naomi Slade
Photos Matthew Bruce

Inheriting a very old garden can go one of two ways. You can either end up with something that's defined and requires a very specific type of management, or you can find yourself in charge of a space that lends itself to the personal touch.

And when Irene Eltringham-Willson and her husband Peter arrived at Butlers Farmhouse near the Sussex coast, the garden was very much the latter: neatly tended, yet with plenty of scope for development and improvement.

So Irene gradually began to make her mark. "Initially I didn't have much time, as I was the assistant head of a large comprehensive

school," she explains. Fortunately, she promptly found a partner in crime. "My husband doesn't garden, he's a jazz pianist - that's his excuse and he's sticking to it! But the day after we moved in, a lady called June knocked on the door and asked if we could use some gardening help. She's still here - she was born in the cottage she lives in and she's a font of country knowledge," she says.

"I watched the garden for about a year to see what was there, then we marked out where the herbaceous border was going to be and dug the holes for the bushes and shrub roses. We filled the rest in later!"

Thus, the pair made gradual progress, tackling two or three projects a year, getting the measure of the plot as well as adding interest and detail.

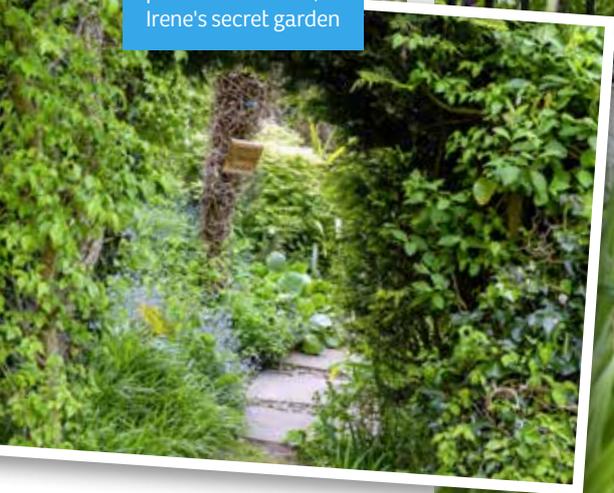


Wide, deep borders start with tall, stout trees and shrubs at the back, cascading down to a palette of perennials. Below, Irene's secret garden



'Brilliant blossom'
Spring sees a torrent of cherry and wisteria blooms bringing the garden to life

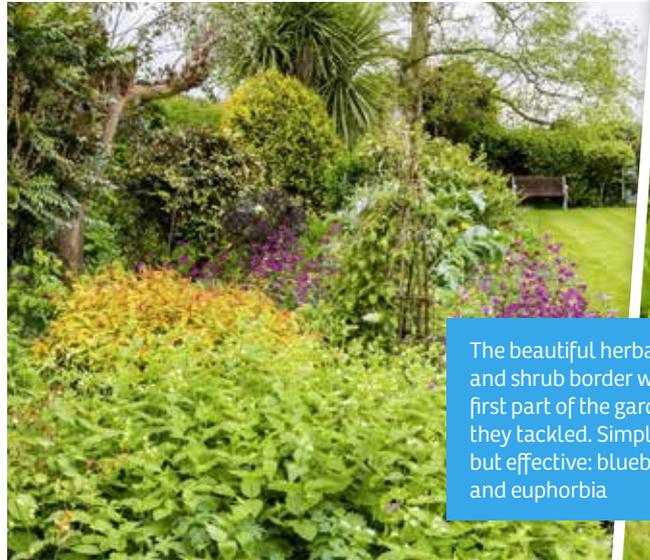
'Spring brights'
The perfect vibrant spring planting of wallflowers, forget-me-nots and cerinthe



The house dates from at least 1590 and the garden has been tended for a long time, so the soil is a good, hearty loam. Yet the site is exposed and not far from the sea. "It's not a cold garden but it does get quite windy and there's some maritime influence," says Irene. "The Pevensy Levels used to be sea - it was where William the Conqueror landed. The sea was at the end of my lane in 1066 and the way global warming is going, it will be again soon!"

Although the garden's fairly large, the layout is unorthodox as part of the original acreage was sold, along with a gardeners' bothy, many years ago. The long front of the house faces the lane, with the main garden off to the left while, to the right, the

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The beautiful herbaceous and shrub border was the first part of the garden they tackled. Simple, but effective: bluebells and euphorbia



Shrubs and plants contrast in eye-catching colours, with pittosporum, photinia and honesty

Irene's four favourite plants

Garden
OF THE
WEEK



Dark pink dahlias

"I didn't used to like them but June has made me love them! We swaddle them up in winter with great dollops of manure."



Tulips

"They're unbeatable at this time of year and I love 'Prinses Irene' and 'Queen of Night' (pictured) particularly."

paddock garden and meadow lead off the drive. Yet, in many ways this lack of convention is fitting as the garden itself is unconventional, made up of smaller spaces and collections and many an idiosyncratic diversion.

A grass garden is planted in a diverse range of containers and there's a pool garden with a Cornish seaside theme, all shell mulch, anchors and flip-flops. The paddock garden contains a stumpery and there's a fernery in the main garden.

Irene has also created a black and white garden. "Well, it's more light-and-dark, really," she says. "My niece held her pagan wedding there." And, in a corner, a poison garden is packed with plants that will do you ill, boasting a 'poison pergola', with a different toxic climber up each of the supports, and a mandrake which is apparently less exciting than it sounds. It's dismissed as "a spectacularly dull thing with little blue flowers".

Irene's 'secret garden' is hidden behind the pool pavilion and it's tropical and lush, packed with cannas and passion flowers, a *Paulownia tomentosa* that's pollarded to produce large leaves, grevillea, tree lilies and the odd optimistic echium.

"June keeps giving me little snakes, so I dot them around the tropical garden. My favourite plant here is *Dianella tasmanica*. It has the most boring flowers in the universe, but the berries are an amazing cobalt-blue," adds Irene.

And as if this wasn't enough interesting stuff, she has an artist in residence, Lucy Dean. "She comes about once a week to do various projects. She's woven a willow lady and her head is made of clocks!

"I think a garden has to be fun. I suppose some people think it's grand because of the size, but that's before they notice the oddities," says Irene.



Sarracenia

Irene's carnivorous trumpet pitcher plants live in bowls on the terrace - they provide beautiful, easy centrepieces.



Cerinthe major 'Purpurascens'

"It's such a good value plant and once you've got it, it seeds everywhere so you won't get rid of it!" Bees and butterflies love it.

Her top gardening tips

1 You can get away with a lot of unruly plants if you trim the lawn edges neatly. The formality of a well-kept lawn distracts from the bed's tendency to be chaotic and rampant.

2 The roof of the house dates from 1680 and it's imperative that the wisteria doesn't invade. We keep it in check by cutting it back five times a year – but it still flowers!

3 I've a small, round pond but I didn't want a rubber liner, so I bought a jacuzzi. It's nice and deep for the fish and the dip, where you would put your bottom, is excellent as a ledge for marginal plants!

4 We have a secluded orchard where we've cut the hedge into a swooping U-shape. This creates a great view of the South Downs.



The house dates from around 1590, surrounded by natural planting and packed borders