

READER
GARDEN

"The garden evolved
with nature's help"

This sumptuously planted hillside plot is a garden of surprises. Owner Hazel Archibald shows us around

SECLUDED HOLLOW
Nestling against a sandstone quarry wall, this sheltered terrace catches the evening sun



IN THE GARDEN WITH...

Hazel Archibald

AT 2 Quarry Cottages, Wall Hill Road, Ashurst Wood, East Grinstead, West Sussex RH19 3TQ

GARDEN SIZE Quarter of an acre

SITE South-facing, on a slope

SOIL Light and sandy

FEATURES Informal mixed cottage-style plantings; container plants for spring; mature trees and shrubs; productive vegetable garden; secluded patio terrace; natural sandstone elevation; ornamental pond; areas of woodland planting; florist and gift shop in the barn on open days

VISIT Open Friday 13 May, 2-5pm for National Gardens Scheme

(see www.ngs.org.uk)

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This enchanting cottage garden in Sussex is full of surprises. From the dainty unfurling of bluebells and potted auriculas in spring to the fragrant rosemary and sprawling white clematis clambering up the house walls, the sloping plot is a real delight to explore.

When owner Hazel Archibald first moved here 40 years ago, the surprises were far less pleasant! "The rubbish we unearthed fuelled bonfires for months," says Hazel. "The original garden was little more than a grassy hillside, so my first priorities were to add plants and trees, while catching as much of the sunshine as possible," she says.

Hazel's Victorian cottage is built on the site of an ancient Roman quarry, with a patio terrace that's sheltered by a sheer wall of sandstone and a steep amphitheatre of

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spring tulips, alliums, honesty, bluebells, forget-me-nots and persicaria.

"Last year we revamped the terrace because the pointing between the crazy paving was cracked and weeds had taken hold," she says. "We built it nearly 40 years ago, so it has stood the test of time.

"However, the ground levels turned out to be higgledy-piggledy and my builder had to make some adjustments before new drains could be installed and the original crazy paving cleaned and relaid."

Encircling the garden is a leafy framework of trees and shrubs whose roots now help to hold the hillside together. "I planted every tree myself," she says, "including the huge beech in the main lawn. I grew it from a tiny beech nut and now it casts a soft, dappled light all summer long."

Over the years Hazel's garden has evolved and matured gradually. "New vistas have been created that help to distract attention from the slope," she says. "Whereas gardeners are often tempted to terrace a hillside plot like this, I wanted mine to develop hand-in-hand with nature. It's so much more interesting than if the

VIBRANT VISTAS (clockwise from left) Hazel's plant-packed cottage garden; *Clematis montana* 'Alba'; a hidden door, with *buxus* and *Sambucus nigra*; a stone urn planted with *Soleirolia soleirolia*; purple *Liriope muscari*, with self-sown aquilegia, ferns and a small hydrangea

LEFT The productive greenhouse

garden were completely flat. "Part of the garden's charm is that you can't see it all at once," she adds. "You have to set out to explore and discover hidden corners. It wasn't planned like this; it just evolved naturally."

After many years of feeding the soil with her own compost of grass clippings, chopped-up leaves, egg shells, vegetable waste and ash from her log fire, the soil is hugely improved. But with sandstone and beech tree roots never far beneath the surface, growing conditions are tricky.

"I've given up fighting nature – it's easier to let the garden grow what's happiest here," says Hazel. "Plants that thrive include peonies, snowdrops, hydrangeas,



ferns, camellias and cyclamen, as well as promiscuous self-seeders such as oriental hellebores, aquilegias and honesty.”

Even as a toddler, Hazel had her own small area in her parent’s garden and her love of flowers has never waned. “I somehow knew I’d end up working with flowers, and finally set up a floristry business in my garage.”

Balancing shape and form with colour comes naturally to Hazel, and striking blends include the evergreen, palmate leaves of *Fatsia japonica* contrasting with spiky palms. In spring, the soft foliage of nepeta, pulmonaria, ferns and euphorbia offset the flower colour of alliums, aquilegias, foxgloves, bluebells and tulips. “I also grow a number of hydrangeas,” says Hazel. “Twenty years ago I’d never have planted them, but now I adore them, not only for their foliage, but also because they flower for so long.”

Another success story is Hazel’s sunny vegetable patch and greenhouse. “It’s secreted away in the furthest, highest corner of the garden, beyond a small spinney of silver birch and sheltered by fencing,” she says. “There’s always something to pick, every week. This year I harvested 12 melons off just three plants.”

Despite the abundance of lush foliage (which Hazel credits to regular sprinklings of chicken manure pellets), pests are few and far between. “My garden is full of birds, especially thrushes that eat slugs and snails,

LEAFY SURROUNDS (clockwise from above) The top patio is sheltered by acers; looking down towards the patio terrace, with tulip ‘Elegant Lady’, pink *Persicaria bistorta*, alliums, hellebores, forget-me-nots and ferns; clematis ‘Alba’ with *Lunaria annua* below; stone steps lead to a woodland area; slender white trunks of Himalayan birch

and if you look in the compost heap or under stones, you’ll find slow worms, toads and newts,” she says.

It’s no surprise to learn that Hazel gardens organically. “As well as avoiding pesticides, I also ensure there are logs and piles of leaves left as shelter for insects and grubs,” she explains. “Many gardens are too sterile and over-tidied, so there’s no shelter for the very creatures that help maintain a natural balance. That’s the gardener’s best defence against pests.”

Hazel can’t deny a certain satisfaction in what she’s managed to achieve from such an unpromising start. “I’m proud of my garden because it’s all my own work,” she says. “But, above all, I find great solace in its tranquillity, which I appreciate all the more keenly since the death of my husband Archie. I just love sitting in it, looking around and listening to the birdsong. It’s absolutely enchanting.” 🌸



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