

Passion for pots

Pots brimming with dusky-foliaged tender plants predominate in an East Sussex garden, showing how containers can become the focus

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First impressions of the exterior of Rye View house are promising. Legions of pots containing a boisterous mixture of dark-leaved perennials and colourful annuals displace most of what was once a large parking area.

Rounding the corner, a lavishly planted cottage garden seems to unfold. Yet there are further delights to discover as this is, in fact, a bona fide plantsman's garden.

Fast workers

David Page and Howard Norton bought the house in Winchelsea, by the East Sussex coast, more than 10 years ago – not only for the magnificent views towards Rye, but also because its neglected state presented a challenge. Howard, especially, relished the idea, having been an obsessive gardener for as long as he can remember: 'We had the garden open under the National Gardens Scheme within months,' he says. 'We worked hard; it looked marvellous.'

Howard is the driving force, but David also enjoys working in the garden, although he doesn't agree entirely with Howard's painstaking approach to maintenance, especially

Welcome impact

The containers in the entrance drive provide a punchy front-of-house show at Rye View. Purple foliage delivers drama. Luxuriant banana *Musa lasiocarpa* **1** forms a focal point with the inky foliage and hot pink flowers of *Dahlia* 'Magenta Star' **2** flaunting themselves in front of it. Sultry cannas **3** echo the contours of the banana leaves. Lolling at ground level is *Tradescantia* (Andersoniana Group) 'Purple Dome' **4**. Pastel *Nicotiana mutabilis* **5** float delicately above the more substantial *N. 'Perfume Deep Purple'* **6**; pelargoniums, lobelias and verbenas fill any gaps. The randomness of the container collection gives a relaxed feel.



'Containers provide the flexibility to satisfy his hunger for new plants...'



Rusty bronze and burnished black

Salvia 'Amistad' and reed-grass *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' form a foil for blackish purple foliage of *Dahlia* 'Fascination' and glossy *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop', which are set off by orange-striped leaves of *Canna* 'Phasion'.

as regards the hundreds of containers, tucked into every available space.

Howard has definite views about pots. Firstly, they should be as large as possible, to reduce the frequency of watering. A bottom layer of crocks is followed by a good amount of well-rotted manure. He stands firm in his choice of John Innes No. 3 compost, after trying many others. Finally, 2.5mm (1in) of grit on the surface deters slugs and helps retain moisture.

Watering is not a daily chore – some of the containers can be left for up to a week – but it is still a serious business: Howard is sceptical about using a hose, preferring the more labour-intensive watering can. He has six, which he fills a few hours before watering to warm up. This ambient dousing is reserved for tender plants such as dahlias and bananas, while harder items get cold water straight from the tap. >>>



David Page (left) and Howard Norton have created a plantsman's garden at Winchelsea, East Sussex, where clever use of containers maximises planting and extends seasonal interest.

Container gardening

Taste of the new

Howard is extremely fond of grasses, bamboos, and trees with interesting bark. Purple and silver foliage predominate. He says he pays little heed to formal design principles: 'Planting in threes and fives doesn't work for me; my appetite for new plants won't allow that. Things tend to evolve rather than get planned.'

Containers provide the flexibility to satisfy his hunger for new plants in a limited space. A useful technique is sinking a container to ground level under a tree; in this instance a fern, *Woodwardia unigemmata*, beneath a willow. 'It needs a lot of water and the roots would rob it of moisture. This way we can maximise space.'

There are no shortcuts to keeping things looking good: there is dead-heading and regular, ruthless rooting out of plants that aren't working. Spare cuttings of plants that 'take' easily – such as *Plectranthus* and salvias – are kept to replace things that look unhappy, and self-seeders are moved around to fill gaps.

Lighting up shade

Orange and black make a dramatic statement in this combination of *Dahlia* 'Moonfire' underplanted with matching *Calibrachoa* and *Diascia*. On the eastern side of the house, it lifts a slightly shady area with its bonfire colours.

Most of the containers sit on the gravel surface around the house, which is excellent for drainage. David and Howard are happy for plants to seed into it, softening the outlines of the pots and 'anchoring' them into their setting.



In October, dahlias are lifted for overwintering and other tender plants moved inside. Tulip bulbs are potted up for spring; containers by the entrance are planted with winter interest such as coloured-stemmed dogwoods and willows transplanted from the couple's allotment for the season. 'They look superb underplanted with variegated ivies, skimmias and winter pansies,' Howard says.

There is an instinctive feel for structure and an expertise in combining colours and shapes to create a fluid elegance with a sense of drama. David and Howard's garden and way with containers is a story of hard work, determination, trial and error, and love – a winning combination for a sensational garden. ●

Create drama using dark colours and impressive foliage

Self-sown *Allium cristophii* and *Eryngium giganteum* in the gravel behind a container of purple-black petunias with *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens' in the foreground (above left). A giant in the driveway, *Ensete ventricosum* 'Maurelii' (above right) provides an impressive reception for visitors. This, Howard and David's favourite banana plant, can double in size over a season.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Rye View is open in July as part of the National Garden Scheme 'Winchelsea Secret Gardens Group'. Visit www.ngs.org.uk