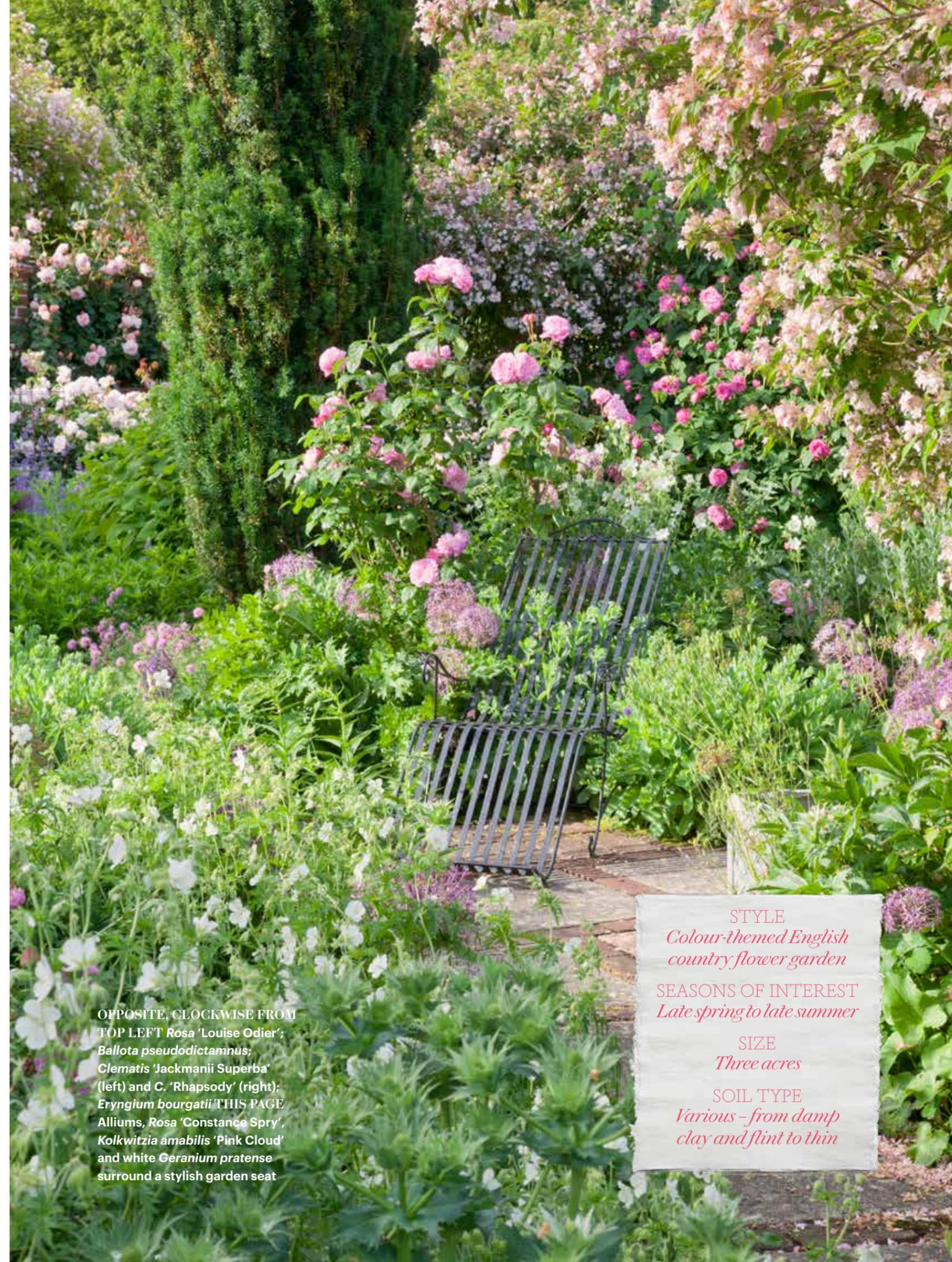


# A profusion OF plants



A combination of meticulous planning and ingenious experimentation is behind the creation from scratch of a glorious English country garden

WORDS BY PAULA McWATERS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ABIGAIL REX



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Rosa 'Louise Odier'; *Ballota pseudodictamnus*; Clematis 'Jackmanii Superba' (left) and C. 'Rhapsody' (right); *Eryngium bourgatii* THIS PAGE Alliums, Rosa 'Constance Spry', *Kolkwitzia amabilis* 'Pink Cloud' and white *Geranium pratense* surround a stylish garden seat

STYLE  
*Colour-themed English country flower garden*

SEASONS OF INTEREST  
*Late spring to late summer*

SIZE  
*Three acres*

SOIL TYPE  
*Various - from damp clay and flint to thin*



**A** pragmatic, methodical economist by profession, Carol Bruce also has a head full of dreams. Her beautiful garden near Canterbury in Kent is the result of input from both sides of her character over the past 14 years, with ideas from her fertile imagination being realised first on paper and then on the ground. Beginning in 2003 with a romantic English rose garden, she has steadily worked her way across the three-acre site to create four more gardens – yellow, pastel, kitchen and blue and white. The latter is on an impressive scale – 91 metres long with double mirrored borders five metres deep – and the effect is rich and blowsy, full of stage-managed detail yet capturing the “wild grace of nature” that so inspires her.

Before starting the garden, Carol spent hours walking her dogs in the surrounding countryside, soaking up the atmosphere of the wooded hills, observing the native flora and noting how paths tend to wander enticingly in and out of sight. She has tried to re-create this at Bladbean Old Stud, particularly in the labyrinthine rose garden, where pathways criss-cross each other and the planting is on a scale that is completely enveloping: “It’s that lost-in-the-woods feeling – plants have the upper hand here, not people.”

Carol has handpicked the roses for sturdiness and resistance to disease. Three-quarters of the 80-plus varieties she has chosen

**THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Striking *Iris* ‘Braithwaite’ echoes the purple of *Salvia* ‘Mainacht’; the elegant glasshouse; *Rosa* ‘Constance Spry’; *Rosa* ‘Buff Beauty’

**OPPOSITE, TOP** *Rosa* ‘Mrs Anthony Waterer’ is offset by alchemilla and common valerian in the rose garden **BELOW** *Phuopsis stylosa* and alliums play with scale



are old ones – romantic, flowering once and often highly scented gallicas, centifolias, damasks and so on, backed up by repeat-flowering rugosas and David Austin hybrids. She relishes their pruning and training in late winter, which pays dividends when they bloom in profusion, with some trained together in threes over two-metre-high metal arches to form one huge flowering mound.

At their feet is a carpet of interwoven cottage-garden perennials – catmint, alliums, eryngiums, sedums, delphiniums and echinops – interspersed with local native species such as field scabious (*Knautia arvensis*), meadow geranium (*G. pratense*) and red valerian (*Centranthus ruber*). Most have been grown from seed in the greenhouse, then allowed to self-sow in the beds in a glorious jumble. Harmony is maintained by banning yellow, red and orange from the colour scheme. “Other than that, I try not to impose myself too much on nature,” Carol explains.

She believes that “a garden is something you do, not something you have” and, as she works the entire three-acre site herself – a full-time occupation – she has devised strategies she can manage single-handedly. Hoeing is done at speed with a serrated tool she swears by – a long-handled Wolf-Garten push-pull weeder – and hedge cutting with a lightweight battery-operated trimmer.

“I treat the garden as a work zone for one half of the year and a living work of art for the other, which helps me remain dispassionate about chopping it all back at the end of the season,” she says. For speed and efficiency (with her economist’s head on), Carol does this by running over all the perennial beds in late autumn with a petrol-driven wheeled strimmer. It takes her four two-hour sessions to complete each area and, though it seems drastic, is highly effective. She leaves the debris on the ground to rot ➔





*Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' and tall blue delphiniums set off the pale blooms of roses 'A Shropshire Lad' and 'Barbara Austin' in the walled garden



*Phlomis russeliana*

FOUR OF  
CAROL'S  
FAVOURITE  
PLANTS

*Phlomis russeliana*

Hardy, vigorous evergreen  
- beautiful all year round

*Phuopsis stylosa*

Ground-cover crosswort,  
does its own thing with an  
explosion of pink pompoms

*Geranium pratense*  
f. *albiflorum*

Pure white form of  
the meadow cranesbill,  
tough and charming

*Eryngium giganteum*

No English country garden  
should be without this  
steely blue sea holly



*Phuopsis stylosa*



*Geranium pratense* f. *albiflorum*

down over winter, returning organic matter to the soil, then rakes up and removes the larger bits by the end of March. "It's low maintenance in the long run. I don't add any mulch or fertilisers."

For Carol, making a garden is a learning process: "Once I've finished an area, I rip it apart mentally to find out what worked and what could be improved." When she arrived, she was faced with unloved sycamore scrubland, nettles and piles of old concrete. "It felt liberating - there was absolutely nothing that looked precious to anyone, so it gave me carte blanche to do as I pleased."

Carol's plans for any new area are always meticulously detailed. She starts with the mechanics - stomping around on site and delineating the space with canes and string, then devises a tight design brief for herself, deliberately imposing certain restraints to contain her wilder ideas, yet "leaving wiggle room for a lightness of touch". It takes many hours but is a vital part of the process.

She plays with plants to create unusual effects, often juxtaposing two with a similar flower shape and colour but of a different scale, such as *Allium* 'Purple Sensation' weaving through a border with the smaller pompoms of perennial crosswort *Phuopsis stylosa*. Seeds are gathered in the nearby woods, too, to introduce locally thriving natives such as devil's bit scabious. Carol believes in letting plants have their head and not meddling too much. "I've learned not to fight Mother Nature. You can never win," she says.

Ultimately, she has come to see garden design as being rather similar to the process of putting on a play: "I write the script, I work out the general sentiment and then I pick my cast - the plants!" Get those elements right and, with an artistic director like Carol Bruce, a great performance is guaranteed. 📺

📍 **Old Bladbean Stud, Canterbury, Kent, is open for the NGS on 28 May, 11 and 25 June, 9 and 25 July, 6 and 20 August, 2-6pm: adults £6, under-16s free (oldbladbeanstud.co.uk).**

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*Eryngium giganteum* and *Allium cristophii*

**THIS PAGE, BELOW** Vibrant green box balls provide neat punctuation amid flowing

plantings of scabious, nepeta and alliums in soft shades of mauve and purple



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