

## CUTTINGS

## What to do this week

■ Lift gladioli once the foliage has died to store for winter. Be careful, as the corms are surrounded by cormlets: these can be saved and grown on if you want to increase stock.

■ Spread compost or an organic mulch where vegetables have finished and the ground is not needed for late sowings.

■ It's a good time to divide and move perennials, so they can settle in before winter. Water them well, lift carefully, with a good ball of soil around the roots, and plant in the new position to the same depth as before. Firm in and keep watered.

■ To keep things tidy, cut back the spikes of flowering rush to the ground when the umbels of pretty pink flowers are over.

## WE DIG THIS



It's been a great year for fruit, and this neat little apple storage rack will keep any glut dry and airy. It has five shelves and mesh at the sides to prevent any hungry beasts sharing your feast. Available ready-assembled, it's down from £119.99 to £89.99. [primrose.co.uk](http://primrose.co.uk)

## Dates for the diary

■ Beautiful arrangements: St Albans Cathedral will be filled with flowers from Thursday until next Sunday as part of the Music in Bloom festival, with performances including Britten's War Requiem. Daily tickets are £10, flower-arranging classes £20 ([stalbanscathedral.org](http://stalbanscathedral.org)).

■ Find out about the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh's work on plant exploration and conservation at the Explorathon, on Friday, noon-5pm. Admission is free ([rbge.org.uk](http://rbge.org.uk)).

■ Highlights of the Malvern Autumn Show, held at the Three Counties Showground next Saturday and Sunday, include the National Giant Vegetable Show. Entry costs £15 ([threecounties.co.uk](http://threecounties.co.uk)).

Charlotte Vowden and Caroline Donald

[cutterings@sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:cutterings@sunday-times.co.uk)

# My long road to paradise



Shuart Conway

This wealthy owner ditched the designers and created her own personal Sissinghurst in Kent. Inspired by poetry and myths, it's a romantic idyll where loud colours are banned. And she's so devoted, she never goes on holiday, says **Caroline Donald**

**C**arol Bruce is married to a successful property financier, so you might expect to find her driving a Range Rover through the Kent countryside and spending £100,000 on commissioning a smart garden designer to create a picture-perfect paradise for the couple, all without her having to get a nail dirty or a hair out of place.

Not so: Bruce, 44, drives the cheapest car that she can find to carry her dogs and bags of compost, and warns me that she may have twigs in her hair when we meet. She has indeed spent about £100,000 on her garden at Old Bladbean

Stud, near Canterbury, but that has been over the course of 10 years, and it is all her own work. For Bruce's idea of heaven is digging holes, and hiring someone else to do what she loves would be anathema.

In fact, as the garden is open several times a year for charity events, she considers it to be her life's work. She has conjured up a veritable Sissinghurst of romance, spread over 3½ acres, herself — give or take a brick wall or stone path — with her husband, Maitland, giving her a hand when he has time. "If you want to live in a rainbow, you have to build one," she says. (She is inclined to discuss the garden in poetic terms.) "I don't think you can pay someone to take that journey for you."

Getting to the garden does indeed feel like a trip to the end of the rainbow. The

Carol Bruce in the mirrored double borders at Old Bladbean Stud, near Canterbury

**+** SUNDAY TIMES DIGITAL  
See more of Carol Bruce's painterly paradise in a photo gallery at [thesundaytimes.co.uk/gardening](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/gardening)

single-lane tracks in the Kent Downs are so little used that they have grass growing down the middle. And when you get there, parking is in a rather scruffy farmyard, but once you pass through the wrought-iron gates in a high red-brick wall, you enter an enclosed world of abundant growth, with plants spilling over paths and jostling for space.

Bruce's 36-page guidebook, in which she cites Greek mythology, music, poetry and fairy tales as influences, makes it clear that she has thought of every relationship between plants, from juxtapositions to how they affect a particular sightline. There's no chance that she will have filled a random space with a nice perennial she picked up at a village fete; this is a garden where the overall mood takes precedence over the sum of its parts.

It would be easy to assume that Bruce had done a course at one of the upmarket

garden design schools geared towards ladies who lunch, but this is not the case; she has learnt on the job since she started gardening 16 years ago at her former home in Ashford. "I took to it like a duck to water," she recalls. Nor does she devour glossy magazines and books about other designers to glean ideas — she looks blank when I mention a few names. No, she already has her own clear picture of what she wants.

"I naturally think visually," she says. "It is easy for me to come up with a mental landscape to create. It's then a question of working backwards to create the look I have seen in my head. I am making a collage out of the image of a place, using flowers." Indeed, it can take her years, and many plants, often grown from seed and selected for the right characteristics, to get the exact tone, shape or size she has seen in her head.

The surrounding countryside is a great influence in terms of shapes, patterns and moods: the fall of shadows in woodland; the way plants die naturally. She likes to keep the stems and seedheads after flowering is over. "It is about expressing an idealised moment in nature," she says. "This is the canvas, the plants are the paintbox."

Bruce will even accommodate the local wildlife: it is an uncommonly generous

gardener who incorporates an existing rabbit path into the design of a rose garden. If things fail — seedlings get nibbled, combinations don't gel, the colours don't work out — well, that is half the fun. As she writes in her guidebook: "As with a particle accelerator, the bigger the smash, the more I can learn from the wreckage."

The garden is divided into five areas, and you can see the painterly approach in the shimmering hues of each section: one with predominantly old-fashioned roses; a yellow garden, to confine this uncompromising colour in one space; pastels, where Bruce experiments with differently shaped plants in the same colours; a long, grassy walk flanked by double borders that are almost exactly mirrored; and a huge vegetable patch, where she grows enough food to last the couple for the year.

The colours are predominantly silvers, blues, whites and pinks, in romantic arrangements of towering delphiniums, ranks of irises and clouds of phlox.

There's no concession here to the fashion for loud, clashing oranges, pinks and reds — the kind you would find in old-fashioned plants such as zinnias and dahlias, which are the horticultural equivalent of nursery food with a splodge of ketchup on top. Bruce admits to



Bruce has divided the garden into five areas with carefully arranged colour schemes. From top, a globe artichoke bud in flower; *Rosa 'Mary Rose'*; *Sedum spectabile 'Iceberg'*; gourds in the vegetable patch; and a sculpture by Pete Moorhouse

## Bruce's top tips

■ In winter, when the chill can numb your fingers to the bone, Bruce recommends wearing wetsuit gloves. They're waterproof, tough and warm, and cost about £20.

■ Don't bother with mulching and fertilising, and water only veg and new plants. Those plants that survive will be all the tougher for it.

■ Grow vegetables in rotation. Bruce has a "conveyor belt" along the outside wall, with the veg moved along one bed every year.

■ "Do it yourself and you get a skill, hire someone and you get a bill."

■ Grow species instead of named varieties, and let your plants self-sow. Under the principles of survival of the fittest, your own strain of plants will develop, ones that are best suited to your garden conditions.

■ Things die — it doesn't necessarily mean that you or the plant did anything "wrong", it just goes with the territory.

■ Don't act on impulse — instead, plan on impulse, then act on the plan.

having "no sensory filters", and is sensitive to noise in whatever form it takes (including children), so she finds such brightness loud and jarring. Dahlias, for example, are like "sticking Post-it notes around the garden".

Instead, everything is calm and in harmony, with garden tasks following the seasons by a strict timetable, starting on January 1 — when she rakes off the dead stems she cut down the autumn before and hand-weeds the plant crowns — then pruning roses from March 1, through picking and preserving fruit and veg in late September to tidying up the hedges in December.

The steps she takes to create a glorious garden are as important to Bruce as the results themselves, whether it is raising generations of seeds until she gets the plant she wants, or experimenting with combinations and planting conditions. As she writes: "When an idea is pulled down out of the clouds and onto the ground, it is crossing the border into another country. Magic wands, crystal balls and time machines are seized at customs, and from here on the terrain is defined by restrictions, binding constraints, trade-offs, unknowables and the laws of physics." Er, quite.

It's hard work and, according to Bruce, "takes a certain stoic mentality. It is not a dream, it is reality. People are seduced by the high points, but you really need to be someone who likes digging holes. It is the stuff you do before February that makes it happen." She never mulches or fertilises — she likes hoeing too much and "all's well so far". Nor does she water, apart from vegetables and new plants. "In this way, I hope to allow my garden to evolve with changes in the climate over the longer term."

She admits that she never goes on holiday, and one wonders if she ever gets much further than the end of the lane. Being "passionate" about your garden is a hackneyed phrase, used by people who are pretty darned keen on their plants and how they're put together, but for whom, really, it's not a life-and-death matter. Meeting Bruce, one gets the feeling that, were she to be separated from her creation, she might wither.

"I never imagined that it would be acceptable to spend all my days doing something I love fundamentally," she says. "It is my baby, my journey, my evidence on the planet that I exist. This is my honest truth. This is myself." And that is worth more than any amount of money can buy.

■ Old Bladbean Stud, near Canterbury, is open today, 2pm-6pm, and again on October 5; [oldbladbeanstud.co.uk](http://oldbladbeanstud.co.uk)

