

Economies of scale

Exuberant and romantic, generously planted, heady with scent, this economist's garden in Kent reveals skill and a passion for growth

Author: Camilla Swift, freelance garden writer
Photography: Robert Mabie

Fountains of delphiniums grown from seed, *Allium cristophii*, *Geranium pratense* var. *pratense* f. *albiflorum*, creamy white *Verbascum chaixii* 'Album', catmint and eryngiums partner the highly perfumed old roses.

Old Bladbean Stud is hard to find. To reach this magical garden in the Kentish Downs is like Hansel and Gretel following the breadcrumbs along a tangle of narrow grassy lanes through a beautiful, slightly mythical forest. But instead of the Wicked Witch there is Carol Bruce, joyful, exuberant and totally driven. Her passion is infectious, her words tumbling over each other like her effervescent planting.

In 2003 she took on an abandoned 1.2ha (3 acres) landscape of nettles, thistle and broken glass. As an economist with a penchant for an Excel spreadsheet, Carol began drawing up a meticulous design.

Incorporating five different garden rooms, but with a simultaneous sense of single space inspired by the surrounding lanes and forest trails, the layout of each room is deliberately labyrinthine. Also into the mix went her passion for alternating layers of order and chaos, reconciling natural disorder and mathematical certainty. 'I wanted,' she says, 'to create a giant working space for exploring, learning and ideas; a voyage of discovery.'

Carol has had no horticultural training. But positively embracing her ignorance, she decided to find out what she needed to know only when she needed to know it. She pored over gardening manuals, encyclopaedias, reference books, seed and plant catalogues – and the internet. 'I love Google,' she says. 'Type in "3 foot high, spray of pink flowers, September", and it starts throwing out images. That's exactly like the one in my head, I think. Then I discover it only grows in India.' >>>

First impressions

She tried out her new-found plant knowledge first in the Rose Garden. Wanting to create the sense and look of an Impressionist painting, she chose colours first, using plants as elements in a collage or as pigments. The resulting ebullience of scent, form, texture and colour combines 80 different selections of roses: old-fashioned gallicas, damasks and moss roses, rugosas and David Austin hybrids, with spears of campanula, delphinium, and verbasicum jostling with alliums, eryngiums and geraniums. With the narrow paths all but buried in summer, this is a painting Carol wants you to be at the heart of, not admire from outside.

Knowledge gleaned from this garden informs the next. Designed for reading the paper, shelling seeds, and brushing the dog, the Yellow Garden is a chorale of everything yellow (red and orange are banned). With its yellow and white roses planted about with *Sisyrinchium*, aquilegias, geraniums and *Digitalis lutea*, this space – in direct contrast to the extravagant theatre of the Rose Garden – is calm, sensible, everyday.

A narrow arch in a beech hedge leads next to the Pastels Garden. Acting as lobby to the house and other parts of the garden, and designed to be seen just in passing, the planting, in varying pale shades of similar colours, blends seamlessly, like pastels in an artist's box.

'This,' says Carol, of her whole garden, 'is my blank canvas. Anybody else working in my garden would be like someone walking up to an artist's picture and painting an orange stripe right through it.' So how does she actually manage this large garden with no help, even with the mowing? She has a rigid, uncompromising schedule, with efficient but robust systems and no watering or mulching except in

Old Bladbean Stud Gardens

Address: Old Bladbean Stud, Bladbean, nr Elham, Canterbury, Kent CT4 6NA; www.oldbladbeanstud.co.uk

Size: 1.2ha (3 acres), of which two thirds Carol created from scratch and is open to visitors.

Soil type: mixed, from good to poor, dry chalk rubble or waterlogged sticky clay.

Aspect: roughly north-south.

Age of garden: 14 years, started in 2003.

Key seasons of interest: May to October.

Open: for the National Garden Scheme on 11 & 25 June; 9 & 23 July; 6 & 20 August. Other days by appointment.



Carol Bruce has single-handedly created her romantic dream of a garden from an overgrown wilderness.



NICOLE HEDDARPOUR

the fruit and vegetable garden.

Despite which, reining in her fertile imagination can be a difficulty. She tries not to start things unless she knows that she can complete them, hauling herself back to reality in the nick of time: 'How many hours will that take? How many barrowloads?'

'Here, says Carol, instinct and intellect, myths and maths work together in harmony.'



Paths almost disappear (left) in the lavish planting of the Rose Garden.

The vast Mirrored Borders (below) stretch for 90m (300ft) with generous sweeps of large perennials punctuated by white obelisks. Stone benches are placed at each end of the central lawn.



Raising seed

Carol loves propagating – all today's delphiniums are descended still from one packet of seeds – and encourages self-seeding. Field scabious (*Knautia arvensis*), grown from a pod found in the road, together with white wildflowers self-sow everywhere. 'I'm happy for white things to run riot round the garden,' she says.

She likes to replace foreign species or named cultivars with their British wildflower counterparts. So, as an alternative to *Verbena bonariensis*,

she grows devil's bit scabious (*Succisa pratensis*) – raised from a seedhead she had collected in the forest.

No self-seeding is allowed, though, in the 90m-long (300ft) Mirrored Borders. Much serious contemplation was required before embarking on these last pieces of her horticultural puzzle: 'I sat on a bucket for three years just staring,' she says.

The design rules are rigid: each plant appears four times, each the perfect mirror of the other – for this is an absolute exercise in discipline

where, by restricting the planting palette, and imposing geometry and symmetry, she extracts order from chaos. Here, says Carol, instinct and intellect, myths and maths work together in harmony.

Massive stone benches provide spectacular sightlines at each end of the central lawn. Sentry-like obelisks bring height and rhythm, accentuating the symmetry of the borders. Carol's colour palette links land and sky, with abundant silver-leaved *Artemisia ludoviciana* 'Silver Queen' reflecting the frequent grey of British skies. Big beasts such as *Crambe maritima*, *Campanula lactiflora*, *Cynara cardunculus* and *Eryngium yuccifolium* march among a revolving cast of plants cleverly planned to create similar impact whatever the seasons, with white foxgloves giving way to delphiniums, then *Verbascum*, and finally *Liatris*.

Ruthless cutbacks

Every November Carol mows these borders right down to the ground. Nothing escapes over 10cm (4in) – not even the irises. 'It's

astonishingly effective,' she says, but admits it is incredibly hard work. 'In the Mirrored Borders I've used everything that I've learned in rest of the garden,' she says: 'It's all about balance. I can't do these borders without discipline, just as I can't do the Rose Garden without tolerance.'

As if all this were not enough, there is a kitchen garden, walls groaning with fruit, the entire length of the Mirrored Borders. Taps and compost bins at regular intervals with a carefully planned, well-stocked pedal wheelbarrow – imagine an adapted ice-cream vendor's tricycle – relieve excess trudging. Carol plants all her vegetables on exactly the same days every year, surprised and delighted when anything works, unsurprised and amused when it does not. Why does she do it? Quite simply, because she loves it. Carol and her garden are inextricably intertwined. She cannot remember a time when she didn't want to go out and dig holes.

'There's a magical day in April,' she says, 'when Mother Nature lights the blue touchpaper. From that moment on, right until the last autumn leaf finally hits the ground, the plants grow, flower and set seed like a silent, slow-motion fireworks display.' All her relentless hard work has more than paid off. ●

