

A previously empty expanse of lawn has been transformed with wide beds that link the farmhouse and garden.

Time & PLACE

Garden designer Joe Perkins explains how he set about creating a garden to complement a beautiful medieval and 17th century Sussex farmhouse

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Above Soft shades of purple from *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walkers Low', *Geranium* 'Rozanne' and silvery *Stachys byzantinus* in new, rectangular borders.

An early summer paradise of soft but structured planting surrounds this uniquely beautiful farmhouse hidden away in the depths of the Sussex countryside. When I first visited on a sunny but cold early spring morning it was immediately apparent that this was a special place. Just the drive in was wonderful – a mile-long cruise through arable farmland, with woods and single stately oaks dotted across the landscape. Approaching the house, the drive became lined with lime trees (*Tilia cordata*) in a broad sweeping avenue, with low and mid-height grass verges to either side. It was clear that the owners of this

17th-century farmhouse (with medieval origins) were proud of the spectacular setting, and that someone at some point had made a particular effort to make the approach to the house just as memorable.

I grew up in sleepy countryside just outside Oxford, and enjoyed a seemingly non-existent boundary between our garden and the farmland beyond, so the setting and character of this house brought back happy memories for me. When I was greeted enthusiastically by the owner and her two dogs, it was clear she shared the same passion for a garden that is part of a wider rural landscape.

The beauty of the house, the approach and the landscape were, however, soon overshadowed by the



Top A large pond with a mature weeping willow were already established features in the garden.

Above One third of the paving around the pool was lifted and replaced with plants.

Left The garden's designer, Joe Perkins.

scene of near-desolation we found ourselves looking at through the all-important kitchen window. She had only recently moved in, and was desperate to get on with 'dealing' with the garden, which, she freely admitted, was uninspiring and uninviting; she just didn't quite know where to start.

As we talked, we studied the view: a huge expanse of lawn, 300m long and as wide as the house, filling the window, with just a few large trees and a native hedge marking the transition back to farmland in the distance. To the west, an enormous leylandii hedge, over 6m tall and almost as wide, blocked a just-as-enormous old barn, but it towered over the lawn, dwarfing anything that dared grow alongside it.





There were some key features – a large pond with quintessential weeping willow, some areas of wildflower where the lawn drew closer to the boundary hedge, and a walled outdoor swimming pool, although this was an unimaginative space with no planting and a sea of stone paving. These of course had to be integrated into the new design, as did the overpowering hedge – at least for now. There was mention of the huge concrete barn behind it becoming a thing of the past, at some point in the future, but this was such an undertaking that the garden would need to be adaptable and incorporate the ‘green giant’ for the time being.

There was fairly free rein on the brief, in respect to layout and design at least, and maintenance – that all important question to be asked before embarking on any new design – was happily covered by a full-time gardener who had been looking after the property for years and was hugely enthusiastic and inquisitive about the current owners’ new plans. On the other hand, the planting was, to some extent, less free. There were Pinterest boards and colour schemes, David Austin rose catalogues – this was an owner who was good with plants, and knew the essence of what she wanted. There was also a good measure of openness to other ideas and plant suggestions, and it became a very enjoyable collaboration when it came to finalising plant lists, which is really how it should be, and the best possible outcome for the long-term development of the garden. There were some red lines: roses had to feature, and yellow was declared out of bounds, although a few varieties of euphorbia were sneaked in on account of their excellent foliage and tough character.

The scheme immediately around the house quickly took shape as a series of rectangular beds enclosing a simple Yorkstone terrace. These beds are lined up with key views both from various windows of the house and with vistas across the width of the house, particularly down to the pond with the willow tree. This structure or layout has the effect of pausing the transition from the house and terrace to the wider garden, bringing the immediate lawn area down to a smaller scale and

Above *Salvia* ‘Mainacht’ and *Lychnis coronaria* ‘Alba’ are repeated across the beds to give them a structured look.

The house is beautiful. Soft red brick, tile-hung gables and roofs covered with mellow clay tiles – a Sussex farmhouse, typical in the best possible way. But the existing garden did very little to embrace the character of the house or its setting and, in fact, was a space in which one felt out of place, even uncomfortable. We agreed as we walked around that there was no sense of place in the garden and standing out in the middle of that expanse of lawn we felt very exposed.



giving both direction and intimacy to the space. The planting here is planned for a predominately late spring and early-summer explosion, with *Salvia* x *sylvestris* ‘Mainacht’, *Stachys byzantina*, *Geranium* ‘Rozanne’, various bearded iris including ‘Jane Phillips’ and ‘Sable’ and *Nepeta racemosa* ‘Walker’s Low’. *Papaver* ‘Patty’s Plum’ helps to bring the colouring across to the pink roses ‘Heritage’ and ‘Queen of Sweden’. There is white too, with *Rosa* ‘Winchester Cathedral’ and *Delphinium* ‘Guardian White’, and the season is extended with lavender and yew topiary cushions nestled in among the perennials. Then there are the bulbs, tulips first, followed by *Allium hollandicum* ‘Purple Sensation’.

The key to getting the structured look with what are essentially a collection of quite loose and fluffy perennials is simplicity and repetition. The borders mirror each other, and although there is variation to add interest, for the most part they tie together visually to create a fairly seamless whole.

As the garden opens out from the house, the planting changes in its season of interest. Two broad sweeping borders map out the fluid curves of the new lawn and are generously planted with grasses (*deschampsia* species) and late-flowering perennials

Clockwise from above Further away from the house, wildflowers are a tangible link with the countryside beyond; bright pink, black-eyed flowers of *Geranium psilostemon*; velvety *Stachys byzantina*; delphiniums in regal purple add height – try ‘Purple Passion’ for a similar effect.



such as *Monarda* ‘Croftway Pink’ and *Knautia macedonica*, with multi stemmed *Amelanchier lamarckii* framing the views towards the wildflower meadow and countryside beyond. An oak pergola is positioned to create a superb long vista from the kitchen window, framed with summer-flowering climbing roses and late-flowering clematis varieties. When the hedge is removed and replaced with a smaller boundary of hornbeam, this feature will really come alive. Further out and the grasses give way to shrubs for autumn and winter interest, such as *Cornus kesselringii* and *C. ‘Midwinter Fire’*, with bigger trees such as the cut leafed alder *Alnus laciniata*, and the tulip tree, *Liriodendron tulipifera*.

The swimming pool garden has been ‘greened up’, losing around 30 per cent of its previously paved surface and benefitting from plantings of olives, lavender and rosemary, as well as the bright *Geranium psilostemon* and self-clinging *Hydrangea petiolaris* which will soften the walls given time.

The clients are, it’s safe to say, delighted with the whole scheme. In fact, there has been mild complaint that it is hard to get anything else done due to feeling compelled to sit and admire the views. But that’s a measure of a successful collaboration. ■