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GARDENS

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OCTOBER 2009 £3.85

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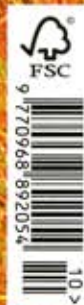
Plant your own designer border


**Britain's best
autumn gardens**

Roy Lancaster names his top 10

Golden days

Get the most out of your garden this October
with crab apples, dahlias and grasses





IN BRIEF

WHAT Family home surrounded by rolling countryside and mature woodlands.

WHERE Grendon Court, Herefordshire.

SOIL Good, fertile red loam.

SIZE Two acres.

CONDITIONS Regular rain all year and frosts in winter.

FEATURES Mixed plantings of perennials and grasses by designer Tom Stuart-Smith.

GARDEN PLAN See page 30.

The upper garden at Grendon Court is a maze of perennials and grasses, including plumes of *Calamagrostis brachytricha*, tall *Eupatorium maculatum* 'Orchard Dene' and blue *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch'.



Golden touch

When Kate Edwards asked the son of a family friend to revamp her land, she had no idea he was a gold medal-winning designer. Now she has an elegant new garden, filled with tall grasses. Words James Alexander-Sinclair, photographs Jane Sebire



Owner Kate Edwards and garden designer Tom Stuart-Smith collaborated happily on the project.

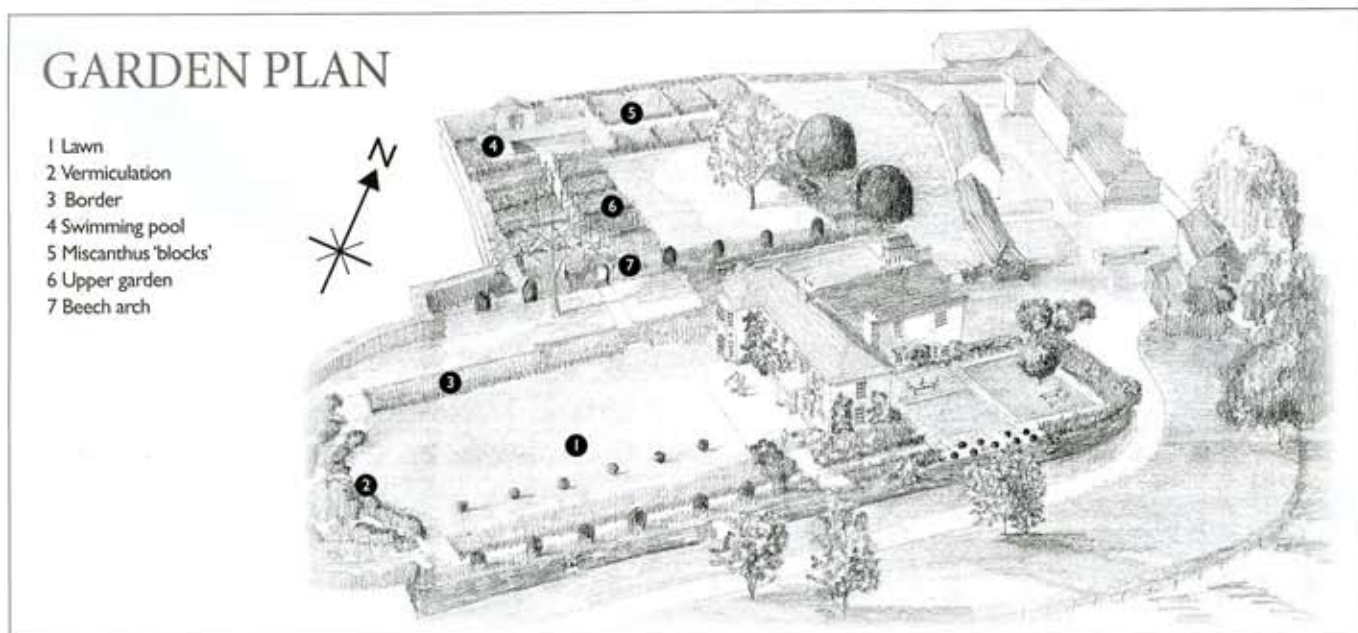
“My mother-in-law said that a friend’s son did a bit of garden design, so I rang him up. I didn’t realise he was such a big cheese”



Swathes of tall, rustling grasses (*Miscanthus malepartus*) surround the swimming pool.

Gardening can sometimes seem a bit mystifying to the uninitiated: all that botanical Latin and worries over marauding fungi. Sometimes, particularly if it is your first garden, you need a guiding hand. When Kate and Mark Edwards returned from Hong Kong a few years ago they had – and I think it is OK to be honest here – not much of a clue where to start. “My mother-in-law said that a friend’s son did a bit of garden design,” explains Kate, “so I rang him up. I didn’t realise until after we had our first meeting that he was such a big cheese.” The cheese in question was Tom Stuart-Smith, three times winner of the coveted ‘best in show’ for his garden designs at the Chelsea Flower Show. His public work includes Trentham Gardens, the Queen’s Jubilee garden at Windsor Castle and the gardens surrounding the Bicentenary Glasshouse in the RHS garden at Wisley.

Kate and Mark had moved back to the UK in order to take over the house and garden at Grendon Court in



GARDEN PLAN BY TOM STUART-SMITH



The yellow flowers of *Phlox russeliana* fade by October, becoming dry seedheads that will look dramatic all winter.



A beech 'portal' leads through the grasses and perennials of the upper garden to the lawn below.

▷ Herefordshire from Mark's mother, who showed a remarkable *sangfroid* when confronted by some of Kate's more radical suggestions. The main problem was that the access to the house was a trifle eccentric, involving a flight of steep steps up to the front door. The solution was admirably radical, and involved lifting one side of the garden by about 5m and thereby 'burying' part of the house's lower floor. This is all retained by whacking great concrete L-shapes disguised behind a fine wall of local stone.

The main purpose of the transformation was to make a more modern garden: as Tom describes it, "one in which people sit rather than just passing through, en route to somewhere else." Today the garden sits there looking impossibly gorgeous and it is difficult to fully appreciate the amount of heavy engineering that Tom and Kate had to organise before placing a single plant.

That's just not cricket

The main part of the garden is a large rectangular lawn with planting to either side (see facing page). Tom's suggestion of planting a magnolia in the grass was howled down: the family was prepared to make *some* compromises, but to have a lawn too small for impromptu cricket matches was a step too far. In the foreground of the picture opposite is a 'Vermiculation', Tom's take on an architectural conceit designed to resemble the tracks and tunnels of a wormery. It's a series of wriggling box hedges interplanted with the grass *Hakonechloa macra*, which ripples in the slightest breeze. The whole is neatly enclosed between a venerable beech hedge and the tight line of the retaining wall. The fact that the garden is so "precisely enclosed" is most attractive to Tom, who believes gardens satisfy people most profoundly when they provide both "refuge and prospect". The "prospect" in this case is the fabulous view down a perfect bucolic valley.

From here steep steps run up to a higher garden that is far from conventional. Previously host to a slightly overdressed pergola and vegetable garden, it now houses 14 rectangular



Mixed borders and low box hedges frame the lawn, while allowing uninterrupted views of the surrounding fields and woodland.

“ it is difficult to fully appreciate the heavy engineering Tom and Kate had to organise before placing a single plant ”





Looking after *Miscanthus* grasses

All kinds of *Miscanthus*, including *M. sinensis* 'Malepartus' (pictured above), are pretty low-maintenance. They require no staking and provide excellent skeletons for the winter garden. They are fully hardy and, as they are clump-forming, not at all invasive. In the early spring they need to be cut to the ground – with a large area like this, it is easiest to attack them with a strimmer. That's about it in the way of maintenance, although they will be better off being divided every three years.

Smaller *Miscanthus sinensis* cultivars include:

- 'Ferner Osten' has beautiful red flower heads. About 1.5m tall.
- 'Morning Light' has leaves with a thick white central stripe. Not the best at flowering, but a site in full sun will help. 1.6m tall.
- 'Zebrinus' has silvery flowers above leaves with broad creamy blotches along their length. Reaches a height of about 1.7m.
- 'Kleine Silberspinne' is a dwarf cultivar that reaches a height of only 1m or so. It has narrow leaves and upright flower spikes.

“ I trusted Tom to get it right – if you go to all the trouble of employing a designer, you should let him get on with it ”

▷ beds that bulge and overflow with ranks of perennials packed as closely as feathers on a duck. Great waves of *Veronicastrum*, swarms of *Echinacea* and herds of whooping *Persicaria* press in upon the connecting paths and explode on to the lawn. This path ends up by a swimming pool that is surrounded by a shimmering, rustling ocean of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Malepartus'. “There are 2,000 grasses in this area,” explains Kate. “The idea was to give the area an Asian feel: it looks, sounds and feels like paddy fields.” It certainly makes a wonderful contrast. Tom feels that “swimming is a very different garden activity and it is good to keep the surroundings simple. I also thought it would be fun for children to run through and, of course, the maintenance is virtually non-existent.” At this time of year the whole area is one big swishing, writhing sea of fabulous frost-kissed beige.

It was a garden designed in partnership, although the planting was left entirely to Tom. “He made it clear that I wasn't going to get pictures of every plant he was planning. I trusted Tom to get it right on the principle that if you go to all the trouble of employing a designer, you should let him get on with it.” The case of the *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis' illustrates the wisdom of this process: “Initially I dismissed it as a thin-yoghurt sort of plant but now I can't get enough of it.” She also said she did not like yellow, which is odd, as the borders are awash with *Rudbeckia maxima* and *Phlomis russeliana*.

Both Kate and Tom have obviously thoroughly enjoyed themselves creating this garden – and the joy of their collaboration shines through. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Grendon Court opens to the public for two days a year under the National Gardens Scheme, in July and September; see www.ngs.org.uk for confirmed dates early next year. The gardens also open to small groups by appointment. Email kate@grendoncourt.co.uk for more details.



This switch grass, *Panicum virgatum* 'Warrior', brings warm red and pink tints to the autumnal borders, such as the long planting that flanks the lawn (left).



The pink petals of *Echinacea purpurea* 'Magnus' die back to leave seed-filled cones at home among drifts of grasses (right).



These pink Japanese anemones flower until the first frosts, outlasting the spent flowers of *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Lavendelturm', with their striking seedheads (left).