

LIVING WITH THE *landscape*

Given spectacular surroundings, it is tempting to retreat inside, admire the view and do little with the garden. What's needed are bold, decisive strokes

PHOTOGRAPHS SABINA RÜBER WORDS TOM STUART-SMITH

LOCATION: Herefordshire

DESIGNER: Tom Stuart-Smith

OWNER: Peter Clay

ASPECT: South and west facing

SIZE: 3 acres of garden set in 50 acres of fields and orchards

Brockhampton Cottages lie some five miles north of Ross-on-Wye, with views over deep Herefordshire valleys, perry orchards and game coverts. It's a richly patterned landscape of fat hedgerows bursting with hazels and oaks, and warm soil the colour of fresh liver.

Peter Clay inherited the cottages and the surrounding land from his grandfather, and he and I began making a garden in 2000. He was in the process of setting up the online nursery business *crocus.co.uk* with schoolfriend Mark Fane and wanted to use the garden to test the system.

When Peter and I began work - and this has been a joint project right from the start - the cottages were perched on the hill top, like charming, but incidental visitors to a grander party (the landscape), without any context or clothing around them to relate them to the enormous sweep of landscape that unfolded below.

Great panoramic views can be the most difficult to work with when creating gardens. Everything in the foreground seems piffling compared with the vast backdrop beyond, so that it can sometimes seem pointless doing anything: best to retreat inside and enjoy the view from the safety of the kitchen. If you are going to do anything in the face of this sort of view it needs to be decisive enough to hold its own.

In our bid to be bold, we began by creating three shallow, terraced lawns stepping down from the south side of the cottages into the meadow and contained these to the west, where the land falls away most steeply, by erecting a 30m



designer profile

Tom Stuart-Smith studied landscape design before setting up his own practice in 1998. He has won Gold Medals at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2000, 2001, 2003 and most recently for this year's Laurent-Perrier garden, which featured a magnificent hornbeam tunnel and statuary. His commissions include the redesign of the Italian Garden at Trentham in Staffordshire (on which the 2005 Chelsea garden was based) and Broughton Grange, a contemporary private garden in Oxfordshire (featured in *The English Garden*, February 2005).

(99ft) long, 2m (7ft) high, retaining wall. Below this to the west, we laid out a broad grass terrace studded with beech topiary that overlook the valley like sentinels. Beyond, the structure of the garden dissolves rapidly into a series of loose, globular planting beds that bubble out into the landscape.

We have planted hundreds of trees - oaks and chestnuts out in the open, and more exotic types in sheltered niches - around the garden. The boundary of the garden and open field is defined by a light iron fence and the tree planting spans this divide, so that there is an almost seamless continuity between garden and landscape.

On a smaller scale, the planting graduates from purple alliums, little dahlias, penstemons and sages around the cottages to more expansive drifts of veronicastrums, grasses, persicarias and euphorbias farther away, so that by the time the garden meets the meadow it is all relatively muted and green. With a bit of encouragement, practically everything seems to grow in this ground. Peter has an almost omnivorous enthusiasm for plants and regular batches of rarities seem to arrive daily via *Crocus*. Perhaps the greatest example of his enthusiasm has been the planting of more than 300 perry pears (which are fermented to make the local drink) in 18 different varieties, and harvested for the first time last year.

The garden is constantly being revised and, I hope, improved. We meet two or three times a year and plan any changes for the next planting season. The garden has rapidly become a kind of conversation, with a clear purpose but no fixed destination - its shape and extent changing slowly as the newly planted trees create new spaces, vistas and opportunities.

This garden is not open to the public.

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PREVIOUS PAGE A glorious September morning at Brockhampton in Herefordshire. THIS PAGE, TOP ROW FROM LEFT *Allium cristophii*, *Astrantia major* 'Claret' and asters in a *mélange* of subtle colour; the wildflower meadow sloping away from the house; sentinels of dipped beech stand in a row to the west of the house. SECOND ROW A terrace affords uninterrupted views across the landscape; *Cerintho major* 'Purpurascens'; owner Peter Clay with his dog, Spike. THIRD ROW *Thalictrum delavayi*; the west terrace; white agapanthus. BOTTOM ROW Perched at the top of the hill, the house overlooks rolling countryside; blue agapanthus; a curved border leading away from the drive where large groups of miscanthus and hardy geraniums are backed by *Malus transitoria* and species roses.

SOUTH TERRACE

Flanking borders
frame the house and
create a foreground
to the view over
the valley

The main impact is
from herbaceous
planting, with large
grasses, *Sedum
telephium*
'Matrona', dark
salvias, verbascums
and astrantias

RIGHT The terrace to the south front of the cottages has been designed with a generosity of scale. The wide, flat 'plateaux' of lawn are linked by shallow steps, flanked by deep borders. The planting on either side is deliberately balanced with many varieties repeated.

The grass terrace is divided into four grass steps. Each level being 4m (13ft) deep



The steps are 20cm (8in) high, edged in local Forest of Dean stone slabs, 45cm (18in) wide

The colour palette is soft and smouldering with roses and other shrubs repeated on both sides

Large clumps of *Acanthus mollis* mark the end of the formal landscape and the beginning of the meadow



ABOVE Planting near the house is chosen to blend with the local stone. *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis' adds a touch of spice.

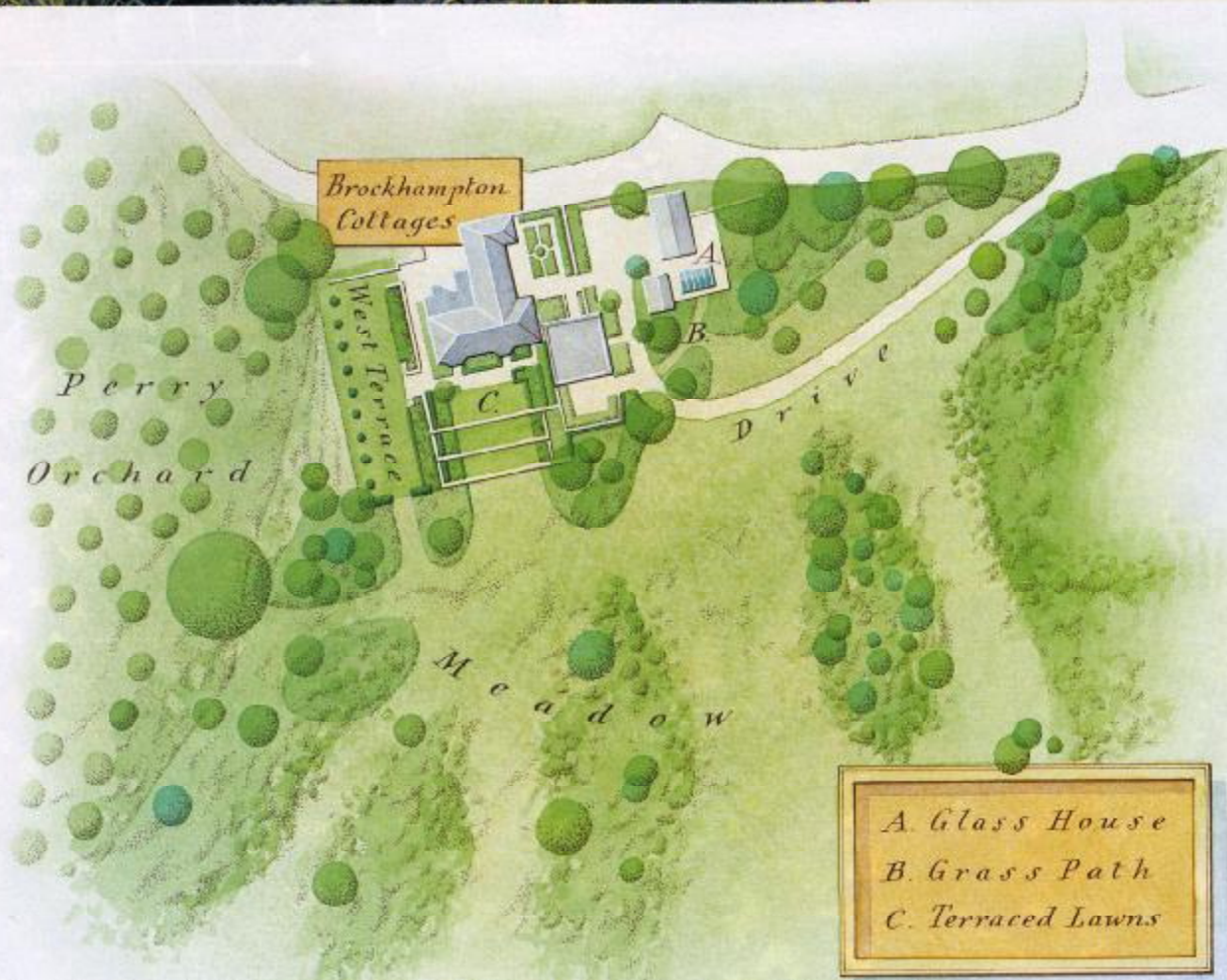
LEFT This large bed has deliberately been given a simple design, to ensure that it doesn't detract from the view.

perfect planning

ALL THE BORDERS are on a large scale in this garden. The bed (above) is a massive 20m x 20m (65ft x 65ft). Many plants are repeated so that the planting doesn't become too complex. Some of the plants are grouped in 5 or 10m (16 or 32ft) blocks.

THE LANDSCAPE dictates the choice of plants and colours. Colour is never too strident and plants in flower are separated by others, such as grasses and hellebores, which have good structure.

CLOSE TO THE HOUSE the planting uses soft, dark, plummy colours to blend with the local stone.



This plant bed is 80m (260ft) long and 15m (50ft) deep running along the north side of the garden, parallel to the entrance drive

Planting is made up of widely spaced shrubs with large groups of *Calamagrostis brachytricha* and miscanthus, interplanted with cranesbills, pulmonarias and epimediums

Simplicity is important in this part of the garden, which is designed to be seen from 20 or 30m (20 or 30yd) distant

Texture is more important than colour here - it is not a part of the garden that gets much close inspection

SWEEPING BORDERS

COLOUR & PLANTING



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT In close up, *Acanthus mollis*; *Lilium regale* and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' with *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis' on the terrace beds overlooking the valley; *Astrantia major* 'Ruby Wedding' with frothy *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau'; a dense matrix of sedums with *Stipa gigantea*, roses and *Allium sphaerocephalon*.

Tom's professional design tips

DON'T BE AFRAID to discard plants if they don't work out. At Brockhampton Cottages, we planted lots of the lovely *Epilobium angustifolium* 'Star Rose', which I contributed from my own garden, but it threatened to take over the whole place in six months! On the other hand, we can't get enough amsonias, anemones, molinias and pulmonarias.

BLEND THE SCHEMES into the landscape by using smaller groups and smaller sized plants nearer the house, increasing the scale and planting in drifts as you move towards the edge.

THE BIGGER THE VIEW, the stronger and simpler the design needs to be.

IT'S A GOOD IDEA to start with a simple planting plan and then to make it more complex over time if that's what appeals to you. It's much easier to do this than to simplify

something that has started off by being too muddled.

CONFINE EXOTIC and tender plants, such as dahlias or any bedding, to areas near the house. This also applies to plants that need special husbandry, such as sweet peas or delphiniums which need tying or staking. As you get farther from the house, the plants should be closer in appearance to native weeds, less colourful, with smaller flowers and be more self reliant.

TAKE THE COLOURS from the landscape and put them in the planting. Look at the plants that grow in the fields and hedgerows and find horticultural equivalents that will create a link between the garden and the field.

BE AWARE THAT some plants may be more determined than you are. *Acanthus mollis* grows almost too well in this garden. In some places we have tried to eradicate it, only for it to return stronger than ever!