

Natural beauty

In her own garden, designer Alison Jenkins has used a sophisticated palette of colourful planting that sits lightly in its Somerset setting

WORDS SARAH PRICE PHOTOGRAPHS ANNAÏCK GUITTENY

IN BRIEF

Name New House Farm.

What Private Garden.

Where Near Bath.

Size Two acres.

Soil Clay based loam – the area was previously known for its market gardens.

Climate Temperate.

Hardiness zone USDA 9a.

In Alison Jenkins' garden, set in a steep-sided, wooded valley, *Phillyrea latifolia* is juxtaposed with the narrow foliage of *Phillyrea angustifolia* f. *rosmarinifolia* 'French Fries' and the deliciously scented *Osmanthus yunnanensis*, while a wavy hawthorn hedge places the garden within the wider landscape.

Visiting someone else's garden is source of both pleasure and inspiration, seeing how another gardener expresses their own vision and responds to a particular location and setting. Having crossed paths at plant fairs, conferences and nurseries with designer and horticulturist Alison Jenkins it is great finally to visit the Cotswold home she shares with sculptor Patrick Haines. The approach to the house is exciting in itself: a narrow winding lane along St Catherine's Valley, a deep cut and wooded limestone valley just outside Bath. The double fronted stone elevation appears set back from the lane in clouds of informal plantings, a teasing view of horticultural artistry for passers by: clouds of white *Ammi* umbellifers intermingled with the rich plum of poppies and *Erysimum* 'Red Jep', copper grasses and the beautiful apricot tones of *Oenothera stricta* 'Sulphurea', a desirable evening primrose.

Sheltered by the valley's slope, the planting appears to tumble down in waves. *Cenolophium denudatum* and *Ligusticum* (a prolific self-seeder here) form soft-white horizontal accents, a loosely drawn froth that contrasts with spires of foxtail lilies and the dots and dashes of scarlet astrantias and magenta geraniums. Colour is important and carefully considered; *Digitalis parviflora* 'Milk Chocolate', *Sanguisorba* 'Chocolate Tip', and *Baptisia* 'Dutch Chocolate' all harmonise with the rusty tones of steel within the garden while chartreuse euphorbias pack a vibrant punch.

Despite its cocooning by hedge, slope and building, this garden area feels light and open to the sky. Rusted steel panels retain the slope creating a series of paved level terraces. Calm areas of negative space that offset the wild abundance of planting. A shallow rill extends the length of the paving and trickles into reclaimed stone troughs at the bottom of each terraced level. It's a small detail that animates the whole of the space as birds, frogs and even grass snakes come to drink, aided by the 'layered' vegetation that provides a variety of habitats surrounding the water.

Wavy hawthorn hedging acts as a protective corridor for wildlife out of which an old and straggly blackthorn tree is silhouetted, teaming with songbirds. I admire its characterful, slightly awkward shape that closely resembles Patrick's highly detailed, awe-inspiring sculptures of thorn, insects and birds. Keeping the old blackthorn feels symbolic; both Alison and Patrick have resisted the urge to make the space 'perfect' and instead have welcomed nature in. Wildlife loves a tangle of contrasting plant form and height but it's often hard for people to loosen their control and welcome nature close to home. The tightly defined framework of Alison's hard landscape means that there's enough structure to absorb the 'messiness' of nature.

Alison's use of evergreens is sophisticated. Loosely clipped forms appear to cushion each stone or rusted steel retaining wall around her house. *Ilex x koehneana* 'Chestnut Leaf', a particularly handsome holly with large, shiny leaves, and drought-tolerant *Phillyrea latifolia* are juxtaposed with the exceptionally pretty, narrow foliage of *Phillyrea angustifolia* f. *rosmarinifolia* 'French Fries'. In close proximity is the February-flowering and deliciously scented *Osmanthus yunnanensis*. Later in the spring the confident wide spreading dome of evergreen *Euphorbia x pasteurii* 'Phrampton Phatty' has large mounds of honey-scented, yellow-brown flowers. These rounded forms are contrasted with fine, skyward-rocketing grasses. Most beautiful is *Oryzopsis miliacea*, which flowers from summer to late winter with whorled flowerheads routinely staggered up the stem, like a refined horsetail.

Alison and Patrick are increasingly preoccupied with questions of what it means to garden in the face of a global climate emergency. What species will thrive in a climate that is warmer and more prone to extreme storms and droughts? How should we balance ornamental with productive gardening? What is a low-impact garden? How can we restore the health of depleted soils? What role is there for our gardens in reducing species and habitat loss? These questions are changing Alison's way of gardening. She has become more resourceful, using mole dirt to bulk up home-made compost, for example, to avoid a car trip to the garden centre and more unrecyclable plastic sacks. Her hedgerows are rich in free and sustainable resources such as coppiced hazel poles, and nettles and wild garlic for soup.

For Alison, productive gardening is a way of making a powerful connection with people. "I want to help people have the confidence to grow their own. Knowing about the soil your salad has grown in might sounds like a small thing, but it really matters to the way you think about the world," she says. Eager to connect people and share knowledge, she invites specialists into her home and holds workshops on composting, making growing structures with willow and boosting soil fertility through bokashi, a traditional Japanese way of fermenting food waste. It's about sharing ideas and experiences in person, and visiting inspiring garden like New House Farm. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Alison's work at alisonjenkins.co.uk

Turn the page to see more of New House Farm and 12 of Alison's key plants

Right Beyond the shade of a mature ash tree, sun lovers thyme, *Lotus hirsutus* and the self-seeding, monocarpic *Ligusticum lucidum* intermingle. The exceptionally long flowering *Euphorbia seguieriana* subsp. *niciciana* forms a massed froth of acid-yellow flowers that offset the deep greens of *Phillyrea latifolia*, *P. angustifolia* f. *rosmarinifolia* 'French Fries' and rosemary. These loosely clipped green forms act as visual anchor points to the more ethereal perennials that appear almost to float above.



Planting appears to tumble
down in waves, with
Cenolophium denudatum
forming a loosely drawn froth



Top In Alison's productive garden, raised beds provide space for cultivated crops, such as strawberries, but beauty as well as productivity is important with foxgloves and other ornamental plants growing among the edibles, and the grass *Stipa tenuissima* joined by poppies in the gravel paths.

Below The clean, white starry flowers and airy texture of *Gillenia trifoliata*, offset the rich, deep tones of the red wallflower *Erysimum* 'Red Jep', the poppy *Papaver somniferum* 'Lauren's Grape' and the bronze evergreen sprays of the red tussock grass *Chionochloa rubra*.



Top Small foreground trees, such as this *Prunus x subhirtella* 'Autumnalis', echo the undulating forms of trees along the horizon, making it hard to decipher where the garden ends. Informal plantings of *Dianthus barbatus* 'Albus' and foxgloves, create a visual transition to the meadow beyond.

Below *Verbascum phoeniceum* 'Violetta', foxgloves and poppies lightly self-seed around the productive garden. *Stipa tenuissima*, *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna' and *Eryngium alpinum* are encouraged to settle around the fringes forming visual link to nearby ornamental plantings.





Wildlife loves a tangle of contrasting plant form and height but it's often hard for people to loosen their control and welcome nature close to home

12 KEY PLANTS

1 Linaria 'Peachy' Sunset-coloured, floriferous toadflax with glaucous foliage and two-toned trumpets that flower all summer. 90cm. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b¹.

2 Trifolium rubens Upright clover with clusters of downy-silver buds, turning to wine-red flowers in late summer. Rich in nectar and suited to informal schemes. Grow in sun with adequate moisture, not too much heat. 60cm. RHS H7, USDA 3a-10b.

3 Sanguisorba 'Chocolate Tip' Massed sprays of maroon, bobble-like flowers on upright wiry stems that are held clear of foliage. Offers low mounds of pinnate, blue-green serrated leaves with a faint chocolate red midrib. 1.2m. USDA 4a-8b.

4 Ballota pseudodictamnus Low-growing, evergreen shrub with soft, felted grey-green foliage on long, pale, curving stems. Pink flowers appear on whorled spears in late summer. Loves a hot dry spot and poor soil. 60cm. AGM*. RHS H4, USDA 7a-10b.

5 Stipa tenuissima Fine, bright-green foliage turns sandy-tan in autumn and stands throughout winter. 60cm. AGM. RHS H4, USDA 7a-11b.

6 Lotus hirsutus Soft, silver-leaved sub-shrub that will form a spreading mat in gravel gardens or rockeries. Arching stems bear pale-pink pea-flowers at their tips in summer. Brown, starry seedpods last the winter. 60cm. RHS H4. USDA 7b-10b.

7 Penstemon 'Raven' Deep pink-purple flowers with white throats draw the eye when planted among pale-flowered companions. Will attract plenty of pollinators. Deadhead regularly and flowers will persist until first frost. 1m. RHS H3, USDA 7a-9b.

8 Geranium x riversleianum 'Russell Prichard' Prolific magenta blooms offset by attractive grey-green foliage. Fantastic edging plant that flowers from May to November. Prostrate but will scramble up neighbouring plants. 40cm. AGM. RHS H4.

9 Briza maxima Tufts of smooth, grey-green leaves bear delicate, heart-shaped spikelets on slender stems that shiver in the wind. This greater quaking grass is a beautiful annual grass that can become a prolific self-seeder on light soils. Happy in both sun or light shade. 20-50cm. RHS H6, USDA 4a-8b.

10 Salvia microphylla 'Cerro Potosi' Magenta-pink flowers offset by fresh green, aromatic leaves. An exceptionally long flowering and hardy form. Popular with bees. Evergreen. Flowers from June to November. 90cm. AGM. RHS H4.

11 Eremurus x isabellinus 'Cleopatra' Bottle-brush spikes of burnt-orange flowers appear in early summer. Glaucous, sword-like foliage dies back before flowers appear. Tubers like to bake in the sun after flowering. 1.2m. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

12 Dianthus barbatus 'Barbarini White' A pretty, white sweet William that Alison admires most when it is in bud. 50cm. RHS H7.

¹Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. ¹Hardiness ratings given where available.



Teucrium x lucidrys, a bushy, aromatic sub shrub, and domes of *Astrantia* 'Ruby Star' mimic the loosely clipped, rounded forms of *Phillyrea latifolia*. *Cenolophium denudatum* umbels form a horizontal contrast. Spikes of *Eremurus x isabellinus* 'Cleopatra' and *Digitalis parviflora* 'Milk Chocolate', help direct the gaze towards distant hills.