



New generations: garden designer Sarah Price, here with her husband Jack and baby Lewin, is gradually turning a share of her grandparents' neglected Abergavenny garden (in its heyday, below), into a plot that suits her family and lifestyle

# NEW LIFE OLD GARDEN

*When taking on her grandparents' cherished plot, Chelsea gold medal winning designer Sarah Price had to find ways to turn treasured memories into her own space*



Taking a fresh look at a familiar place is one of the hardest challenges in gardening. I recently moved from central London to South Wales, swapping the view of city rooftops and a window box of herbs for a two-acre Victorian walled garden.

This was originally my grandparents' garden and I have known it all my life. For adventurous children it was an irresistibly enchanting place: a secret, overgrown garden accessible only by a tunnel under the lane; a fast-flowing stream that you could (almost) jump over in one, rhododendrons to climb, and wide, sloping lawns to roll down. As so often, the garden feels smaller now than I remember it as a child. It also feels emptier and less lovingly maintained, as family members have died or become too infirm to garden. But, in spite of all that has changed with the passage of time, the cyclamen and crocus still flower in huge, expanding drifts

under the oak trees and the garden still retains its magic and its hold on me.

A garden rarely offers a truly blank canvas, particularly so when it is one you know intimately. It's surprisingly hard to set aside nostalgic memories and change a place that you love. Yet gardens are alive and constantly changing. It goes against their nature to try to preserve them as static set pieces.

Sparks of inspiration for change can come quite unexpectedly. My husband and I were married here two summers ago, under a pair of oak trees by the stream. I wanted to grow my own cut flowers for the big day so three months earlier I broadcasted an annual seed mix across a few recently cleared borders, where there happened to be some spare space. My timing was spot on and the swathes of jewel-like meadow so transformed the garden that it was hard to bring myself to cut the flowers. Anyone who saw the spectacular displays at the Olympic Park last summer will

understand the impact of these colourful, fast-growing annuals. They introduced some really strong colour into areas that I previously had considered refined and subdued.

The displays also made new visual links across the garden, introducing a sense of flow between areas I'd always thought of as disconnected. Perhaps most importantly, this slightly haphazard experiment released me from inhibitions that had tied me to my grandmother's earlier visions for the garden.

I want the planting in my new garden to offer varied experiences; seasonal highlights as well as greater range of plant heights, from intricate alpine detail at the foot of the great oaks, to towering late-summer perennials that will dwarf us as we pass. But as well as variation, I want to increase the sense of connectivity between different spaces, so that the garden appears to unfold, as a unified

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whole. As this is just the beginning of my new life here, I don't want to do anything too drastic, but rather try out some daring and experimental ideas that will open, rather than limit, any future options.

As well as sowing annuals, I will also be planting perennials to create similar naturalistic but more long-term effects that have year-round interest. I will be careful to choose theme species that flower for a long period, and which are not fussy about their growing conditions, so they can be planted in generous drifts in both sun and light shade.

## Through Monet's eyes

So much for the immediate impact of flowers; a mature garden may also need some more fundamental restructuring. For this, it's important to look at the garden afresh and there are a handful of tricks that I use to see a space as if for the first time.

A simple tip is to squint, so that the detail is lost but the colour, tone and forms in a garden are revealed as a pictorial composition. This helps to view the garden as an arrangement of shapes that need organising into a successful composition rather than as a collection of plants. Tone and colour unify landscapes just as they do paintings. Think of the fuzzy riots of colour and form in Monet's expressive final paintings, made when his vision was severely affected by cataracts.

Another artful ruse that helps you to look analytically is to photograph an area of planting and then to print it out in black and white. Without the distraction of colour you can see the arrangement of plant forms and analyse the different patterns and shapes. If the composition looks confusing, with no unity and no clear repetition or contrast, it may be that there are too many different types of plants.

In these situations, try to simplify the planting composition by introducing a theme plant with a clearly defined structural form. Look at the tall, statuesque silhouette of *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster' or the strong vertical accents of *Verbascum* species. A lower evergreen fountain of *Stipa arundinacea* or plants with horizontal flower forms, such as achillea, sedum or members of the carrot (*Apiaceae* or *Umbelliferae*), family will strike a dramatic compositional counterpoint.

Even without being photographed, mature borders often appear gloomy and unbalanced, with little contrast between light and dark. This signals it is

**Inspiration:** Sarah Price worked on the Olympic Park, above, in east London, where bold swathes of colour worked a quick transformation; shrub pruning (far right) can also reveal much in a mature garden

## Quick fixes with annuals

● Take inspiration from drifts of wildflowers; **cow parsley** (*Anthriscus sylvestris*), native **bluebell** (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) or red **poppies**. Broadcast seed in bold swathes - generous drifts look fantastic even in small spaces.

● Choose the right mix for your conditions. Woodland edge mixes, with **red campion** (*Silene dioica*), **foxgloves** (*Digitalis purpurea*) and **sweet rocket** (*Hesperis matronalis*), look fantastic in semi-shaded areas. The vibrant colours of **California poppies** (*Eschscholzia californica*) and *Coreopsis tinctoria* suit sun-drenched situations, among vegetables in a potager or close to a warm, south-facing wall.

● Pick out a theme plant that is dominant within the mix and plant this elsewhere in the garden. This reinforces visual connections, heightening the sense of flow. For instance, **bishops flower** (*Ammi majus*), a lacy white umbel, is often used in annual mixes and looks beautiful threaded through informal perennials or old-fashioned shrub roses.

● Sow annuals in gaps among perennials. But don't swamp newly planted perennials with annual seeds as these tend to grow more vigorously. Always follow the sowing density recommendations on the packet; see below for suppliers.

### Seed suppliers

● Pictorial Meadows offers a range of innovative combinations, many inspired by the plantings in the Olympic Park (0114 267 7635; pictorialmeadows.co.uk).

● Emorsgate Seeds developed its wildflower and grass mixtures over 30 years and groups mixes by habitat type (01553 829028; wildseed.co.uk).

● Landlife, the conservation charity, has an online wildflower shop which supplies mixes for different soil types as well as an annual and perennial mix called Gardener's Double Delight, full of corncockle, corn chamomile, poppy, ox-eye daisy and lady's bedstraw (0151 737 1819; wildflower.org.uk).

HEATHCLIFF O'NEALLEY/GAP







**Form:** hedges and hard landscape, left; add structure to a garden; striking amsonia, top; and the dramatic thistle *Onopordum acanthium* make good theme plants

### Create a theme with perennials

Theme plants that flower over a long period are an easy way to conjure atmosphere

- **Amsonia tabernaemontana** var. *salicifolia* is striking when planted en masse as an anchor to early grasses or as a foil for late-flowering perennials. Its dainty, pale blue flowers (May-June) are followed by torpedo-like seed heads and yellow autumn foliage.
- **Onopordum acanthium**, the biennial, silver-leaved Scotch thistle, introduces drama in gravel or wild plantings. It is statuesque (up to 6ft/2m) and self-seeds easily, so a few plants quickly create a recurring theme.
- **Cyclamen hederifolium** (inset right) is perfect for dry shade, especially beneath mature deciduous trees. Plant en masse to create drifts of nodding pink flowers from September to November. The mottled green-and-silver leaves are also enchanting.
- **Aster divaricatus** has white, starry flowers from late July to October and

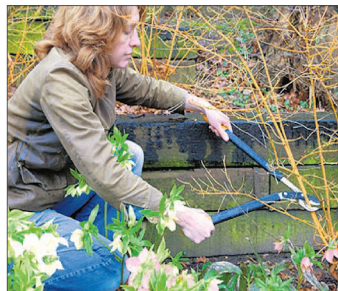
is invaluable for understory plantings in both sun and shade.

- **Centranthus ruber 'Albus'** is very unfussy. It grows in lean, dry soil, in sun or shade, and flowers all summer if deadheaded.
- **Hydrangea arborescens 'Annabelle'**. The pom-pom flower heads, fresh green foliage and delicate winter seed heads make this invaluable in small town spaces as well a structural repeat in large herbaceous borders.
- **Stipa arundinacea** (syn. *Anemanthele lessoniana*), has copper-bronze evergreen foliage. Tolerant of dry shade, it is a key plant for difficult areas in urban gardens.
- **Molinia caerulea 'Heidebraut'** is shade-tolerant and has good winter structure, making it useful to link sunny to partly shaded spaces.
- **Bupleurum perfoliatum** has intriguing lime-green umbel flowers and is excellent as infill for shadier plantings.
- **Geranium 'Patricia'**, has vibrant magenta flowers that bloom from June until the frosts.



time for careful pruning to allow light through to the planting layers. We have a magnificent hornbeam at the end of the garden, yet no one notices it as it is shrouded in spotted laurel and laburnum. By clearing these shrubs, I'll reveal the tree's full form, and its beautifully sculpted trunk. Drastic clearance or pruning might seem brutal, but often it brings about long-term improvement.

Of course, in any well-loved garden there are some places that should remain sacrosanct. Last February, a generous swathe of species crocus (*C. tommasinianus*) created a sensational wave of purple across the lawn. Under an old *Cornus mas*, yellow in bud, there were spectacular swathes of *Galanthus nivalis*, our native snowdrop, and later in the season I found the dark stems of snake's head fritillaries emerging in a damp hollow of grass. I'll not disturb these precious colonies and instead I'll look to enhance and expand on them, planting swathes of companion plants that will complement them ecologically.



The thrill of a new start can soon be dampened by a sense of not knowing where to begin, and that it's all too overwhelming. Colourful annuals and short-lived, fast-growing perennials have helped me to introduce a sense of flux into our otherwise tired garden. These experiments have freed my mind from the weight of memory, so I can begin to make more fundamental structural changes.

### Long-term design strategies

- Simplify your vision. Try to build upon what already works and clear the unsuccessful. In a small garden, a tree with characterful form may be enough for the main focal point.
- Create an identity with a unifying theme. Some gardens may not have an obvious feature, in which case a simple ground pattern that moves through the garden or a bold repeat of a structural plant, such as box or yew, can be enough.
- Reduce your list of essential plants when redesigning or adding new plants to a border. I try to edit my initial list by a third. Select a high proportion of plants that have more than one season of interest and repeat them.
- Limit the number of materials. To create a coherent, uncluttered space, a general design rule is to stick to two and a maximum of three different types of hard materials. When choosing, take the lead from the architecture of your house or local building style.
- Your garden should reflect your lifestyle and taste. Much garden design is common

sense - how you use your garden will dictate the changes that need to be made. If you entertain, create different places for relaxing and dining so that you take advantage of sunlight throughout the day. If you want a productive garden, the best areas for fruit and veg should be central to the redesign.

- Pruning can regenerate a garden. Removing the three D's: dead, diseased or damaged wood is a good place to start. Pruning out crossing branches in multi-stemmed specimen or shrubs can make a feature out of otherwise congested, dense forms.
- Hedges frequently grow out of scale to their surroundings. If you have old yew or holly hedges in need of renovation, prune them at the end of February and March. Prune into old wood on one side of the hedge and leave the other side to feed the regrowth.

Summer-cut the remaining hedge but wait two years to cut the other side and the same again before cutting the top. Feed and mulch for quicker regeneration.