

GARDEN NOTES

MILFORD

After living in a small terrace in the inner north – tending a courtyard garden of approximately 40 square metres – we bought Milford in 2009 and in 2014 embarked on a major renovation and extension of the house and garden.

There were some elements of the original garden I really liked, but it lacked a sense of cohesion and connection to the house. Much of it was very typical of what you would find in an average suburban garden of this size; standard roses, camellias and a pretty impressive wisteria that wrapt itself around the front verandah. However, the house had been unoccupied for some time and what was once rambling was now verging on the sadly neglected. It became frighteningly clear that due to the scope of the building works we would need to start from scratch.

The first thing to go was the 30-plus-year-old pool that lay smack bang in the middle of the garden surrounded by a series of out houses and sheds. During the demolition stage we excavated vast amounts of soil and installed two 12,500 litre reinforced concrete rain water tanks. These sit under the rear lawn and irrigate the entire garden and also top up the pool in summer.

When I was designing this garden I had a pretty clear picture in my mind of what I wanted. Inspired by the work of the English garden designer Dan Pearson whose gardens I had long admired in books, I imagined hazy drifts of summer flowering perennials and swathes of ornamental grasses – albeit on a more modest scale. I also wanted to provide structure with evergreen foliage and seasonal colour with deciduous trees. I liked the idea of separating the garden into zones that included an area for eating and a kitchen garden for growing food. It was very important that the garden had a soul and not a series of manicured hedges and paving.

Planted around the front entrance I opted for *Gardenia florida*. These wonderful plants cop a beating in their northerly aspect and rarely complain. They flower for most of the year and on summer evenings I can throw open the sitting room windows and breathe in their heady perfume. As long as they get enough water and are fed regularly they seem to reward us month after month.

I chose *Acer* ‘Autumn Blaze’ as the feature tree in the front – I also planted two in the rear garden. They are still very young and not quite living up to their name but like everything in life they need time to develop. The beds surrounding the front lawn are full of a combination of salvias, gauras and ornamental grasses. I chose *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’ for its upright habit and flower heads that can reach up to 180cm in summer. I also chose *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Flamingo’ which has a more delicate form and variegated leaf. In fact I wanted to use these poolside until I realised that the delicate leaf can also slice your hand without realising. As much as I love them, I probably love my children more. Salvias chosen for this area include *Salvia* ‘Indigo Spires’ and *Salvia involucrata* ‘Joan’. *Agastache* ‘Sweet Lilli’ is very pink but I think it works next to the to the burnished tone of the ornamental grass *Carex buchananii*.

However, my favourite by far is *Verbena bonariensis* and I have gone a little overboard by scattering it throughout the front garden beds. I love its willowy form and it flowers non-stop from early Spring to late Autumn.



Along the side we chose irregular shaped bluestone pavers with masses of native violets. Above is a small avenue of my favourite tree *Gingko biloba*. These wonderful trees lose their leaves practically overnight in Autumn creating a golden carpet underneath. The *Buxus* spheres create a slightly formal feel and quite recently I have added some *Heliotropium arborescens* 'Lord Roberts' as a highlight. At the side gate is a *Magnolia* 'Kay Parris' that screens the fence from the front and beyond is *Hydrangea quercifolia*.

Further along the side we planted a row of pleached *Ficus hillii* underplanted with *Arthropodium* 'Matapouri Bay'. There is no doubt that *F. hillii* have become a bit of a cliché in recent times – but they serve a purpose here as they create a green wall outside the dining room window. Unfortunately, the local possum population love them too.

This brings us to our once majestic *Magnolia grandiflora*. I fell in love with this tree when we bought the house and in fact we designed the entire back extension around it. Years of drought, building works and possum damage have wreaked havoc with this tree. An arborist is keeping an eye on its welfare and quite recently added the rather unsightly guards to deter our furry friends and allow it chance to recover. It has flowered this year but I fear it may be its last hurrah. Planted under this tree is almost a woodland of *Anemone x hybrida*. These are pretty much left to grow wild here and seem to multiply before my eyes.

The lawn both front and back is Rhizomatous Tall Fescue. We wanted something soft underfoot that regenerates itself and doesn't mind a bit of foot or paw traffic. It does however have a tendency to brown off a bit in summer, which is why I suspect a lot of people are averse to it. Currently the irrigation kicks in twice a day but occasionally it does need an additional hand water on really hot windy days.

The small kitchen garden is a selection of concrete pipes that have been cut down to various heights. I'm quite happy how these industrial monsters look in a domestic setting and they are planted with seasonal herbs, wildflowers and vegetables. At the base, creeping thyme creates an almost woolly carpet and the space is enclosed by espaliered olives and lemons. These are being trained on a product called Archbar mesh that is a 3 dimensional galvanised wire trellis system that is higher than the fence line making it feel a little more substantial and private.

This brings us to the pool. An enormous amount of thought and planning went into its design and we wanted it to appear quite subtle and almost 'pond-like' due to its close proximity to the house. We selected dark glass mosaics for the shell that glimmer in the afternoon sun and honed bluestone paving that remains quite cool in the summer glare. At the base of the pergola I am impatiently awaiting a russet curtain of *Parthenocissus tricuspidata* to tumble down from the wooden blades and provide a summer canopy. Along the fence I have planted more *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster' because they will grow quite tall here and I wanted this area to look quite informal. I have resigned myself to the fact that they won't resemble the frost-dusted specimens in a Piet Oudolf garden in the wintertime but they do resurface so quickly after their haircut in late Spring.

I hope you enjoy the garden today and I will be delighted to answer any questions you may have. Finally, I would like to add that the proceeds from the gate will be donated to support the wonderful work of the Parent Association at Canterbury Girls' Secondary College.

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