

# Where art imitates life

*Old Bladbean Stud, Canterbury, Kent*

George Plumptre enjoys the meticulous plant selections and inspiration from half-remembered things that imbue a Kentish garden with unselfconscious style

Photographs by Marcus Harpur

**T**HE longer that I write about gardens, the more interested I am in their relationships with people, rather than just their qualities of horticulture and garden design. Nowhere is this more relevant than at Old Bladbean Stud in Kent, where Carol Bruce has created a remarkable garden in a little over 10 years.

For Carol, the creation of her garden has been a voyage of discovery; visitors have a similar experience as they follow increasingly remote lanes that lead ever deeper into the east Kent countryside where Old Bladbean lies hidden. This is the Kent Downs AONB, where small, undulating wooded valleys fold away from the North Downs towards the coast a few miles away.



*Above:* Carol Bruce and her Italian spinone, Hector, are dwarfed by delphiniums and *Campanula lactiflora* in the pastels garden. *Right:* Peter Moorhouse's Angel sculpture watches over the paths in the rose garden

Carol starts the illuminating guidebook she has written about the garden with the sentence: 'In 2003 this site was a wasteland of derelict huts, piles of concrete, broken glass, thistles and nettles. It was forlorn, chaotic and abandoned—the perfect place to unfurl some of the flowery worlds scrolled up in my imagination ever since I can remember.'

For the next 10 years, the creation and maintenance of her garden became both experiment and education as the untrained Carol transferred her ideas into reality, learning from mistakes and benefiting from unbroken daily involvement. She does all the work herself; as she says: 'It would make no sense at all for me to employ other people to do the gardening—that would be like buying a jigsaw puzzle and then hiring someone to do the puzzle for me.'

The result is a garden that is unusually personal, in which Carol knows virtually every single plant, when it was planted, its strengths and weaknesses. Equally important, every stage of the garden's development has been driven by her ideas and aspirations; inspirations from childhood or thoughts that arose on walks through the surrounding woods.

It is a garden with an underlying orderliness that confirms her training as an economist, combined with—certainly through the weeks of summer—a rich ebullience that comes from the skilful arrangements of plants that have all been worked out in advance on finely detailed hand-drawn planting plans. Looking at one of these on protected tracing paper, with its intricate arrangement of organic shapes containing the different Latin plant names in neat but spidery handwriting, I was reminded of the famous plans drawn by a similarly meticulous plantswoman, Gertrude Jekyll.

Covering some three acres on a largely flat site to the north and east of the house, the garden combines areas of comforting seclusion with others of outward-looking







The greenhouse nestles on its own gravel peninsula surrounded by a sea of flowers



Purple haze: carefully chosen plant partners, such as *Knautia arvensis* and *Allium cristophii*, are encouraged to form self-sowing colonies, ravishing in early summer



spaciousness. As you arrive at the tall wrought-iron entrance gates, you have no idea what to expect and so the effusive riches of the rose garden that greet you are a welcoming surprise.

The rose garden exemplifies the philosophy behind Old Bladbean: a precise framework of a quadrant shape is dissected by narrow paths into nine beds that recede to the focal point in one corner with a sculpture, *Angel* by Peter Moorhouse, and the framework contains a softening profusion of planting.

The beds are filled with a combination of shrub roses and accompanying perennials, punctuated by neat evergreen shapes of clipped yew and box. The roses are mainly old-fashioned shrub varieties, as well as a selection of David Austin hybrids and the

Bearded irises *Black Swan*, *Braithwaite*, *Jane Phillips* and *White City* are the first indication of a colour scheme maintained by successive blooms

perennials are a diverse mixture from which only bright red, orange and yellow flowers are excluded.

There is an overriding sense of fullness, which continues throughout the garden and partially derives from Carol's technique of planting generous groups of a single plant together for maximum effect: three plants of *Rosa* Tuscany Superb trained together to form one mouth-watering dome of velvety purple flowers, great clumps of different alliums or *Sisyrinchium striatum* or billowing pink *Kolkwitzia amabilis*.

From the rose garden, an opening in a yew hedge leads into the restrained yellow garden, with a colour theme of yellow and white, and on to the square-shaped pastels garden

to one side of the house. Here, deep beds planted with perennials for mid- to late-summer flowering surround a central lawn.

Commenting that she likes arrangements of different flower shapes in varying shades of the same colour, she goes on to say: 'I then smudged these areas into each other like artist's pastels (hence the garden's name) so that the colours blend gradually in waves of blue through mauve to pink then white to yellow around the garden.'

Well-known regulars such as delphiniums, eupatoriums, eryngiums and phlox mix with lesser-known treasures such as delicate *Amsonia tabernaemontana* var. *salicifolia* with clusters of tiny pale-blue star flowers and the equally small-scale

spikes of a white *Veronicastrum virginicum*. A path leads from the pastels garden to the unexpected discovery of the garden's *tour de force*, the double 'mirrored' borders.

Suddenly, you emerge into an almost overwhelming open space to look along deep double borders on either side of a generously wide lawn, a view that extends away for 300ft. The borders are planted symmetrically in four sections that mirror each other, the colour shades merging from pale to dark as you progress from each end into the centre.

Given further architectural symmetry by the rows of white-painted wooden-trellis obelisks and matching pairs of stone benches at both ends and wooden ones ➤





**Curved paths, bottlenecks, dead ends and unexpected changes of direction all harness a sense of anticipation and adventure**

at the centre, it is a spectacular composition whose scale is matched by its detail and whose symmetry is softened by the colours and shapes of the planting. The flower colours are white with shades of blue, mauve and purple, different greens of foliage mix with recurring clumps of silver.

There is seasonal succession in the same style of planting, so white spires are produced first by foxgloves, then white delphiniums, later by verbascums and, finally, liatris. And a select group of plants is used repeatedly for different colours, notably irises, which range from pale blue to dark black-purple.

Around the two short ends and one long side, the double mirrored borders are enclosed by a brick wall that was purpose-built in 2008. Behind two sides of the wall is the organic kitchen garden, with fruit trees trained on the walls and vegetables and soft fruit grown in a series of rectangular beds. With no mulch or organic matter added, Carol uses a five-bed crop rotation of different vegetable types such as legumes and brassicas, alongside a separate rotation system using potatoes, sweetcorn and squash. It's an experiment in what will thrive and what will not, balanced by what Carol likes to grow for the kitchen.

As you wander back through the garden, along Lamby's walk—which takes its name



**American sculptor Zenos Frudakis's lifesize sculpture of Carol's late Irish wolfhound**

from the lifesize sculpture of Carol's Irish wolfhound by the American sculptor Zenos Frudakis—you are struck by how the garden manages to combine a profuse density of planting with an overriding feeling of restfulness. This is a garden that has been moulded by a powerful combination of precision and creativity and where the relationship with its maker is evident at every turn.

Plants are predominantly grown from seed and, in many areas, unrestrained self-seeding to produce natural colonies is encouraged. The system is wildlife-friendly and self-sufficient, with a wind turbine, rainwater collection and solar panels.

Perhaps most intriguing, given the effort and talent that has gone into it, the garden is 'of the moment', with no ambitions for its future. The intrinsically ephemeral nature of gardens is captured by Carol when she says: 'I am keenly aware that my garden is a sandcastle built at low tide—a temporary manifestation of human will destined to be reclaimed by the sea.' It's a suitable thought with which to leave such a rewarding and stimulating place.

*The gardens of Old Bladbean Stud, Bladbean, Canterbury, Kent, open regularly from May to September (www.oldbladbeanstud.co.uk). George Plumpton is Chief Executive of the National Gardens Scheme*