



Land of SLOPE & GLORY

The transformation of this 'steeply sloping, slice-of-pie-shaped' garden in West Sussex is a design inspiration for anyone with a compact and challenging terraced plot

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THE DETAILS

STYLE

Country garden with a contemporary twist

SEASONS OF INTEREST

Early spring to late autumn

SIZE

Approximately a third of an acre

SOIL

Chalky flint





In spring, there's a glorious exuberance to the hillside garden of Shepherds Cottage in the West Sussex village of Stoughton. Vibrant orange and moody purple tulips weave among hellebores, grasses, acid-yellow euphorbias and emerging perennials, framing the stone terraces that surround the house. Lower down the garden, undulating yew hedges encircle a lawn, and a froth of amelanchiers follows the curve of an ancient flint wall. At the highest point – behind the house and beneath a copse of silver birches – there's a soft colour palette where white narcissi line the curving path, accompanied by hellebores, grasses and euphorbias.

When Jackie and Alan Sherling bought Shepherds Cottage six years ago, they fell in love with the village, the deeply rural setting and the views across the valley to the ancient yew forest of Kingley Vale. They were less enamoured by the challenge of making something of their steeply sloping, slice-of-pie-shaped garden that progressively narrows to the bottom corner. The position of the house, two-thirds of the way up the slope, did afford wonderful views, but they felt very exposed and the existing garden had little to recommend it. "I could have spent a lot of time gardening and maintaining something that was not very nice, so why would I bother?" Jackie asks. "We definitely needed help with the levels and I wasn't used to the chalk soil, so I didn't know what would grow here."

It was clear that professional help was needed and it seemed sensible to go for someone with local knowledge. Looking in *Yellow Pages*, they struck gold when they found award-winning garden designer Ann-Marie Powell and formed what has proved

to be a successful and lasting relationship. From the outset, Jackie had identified some aspects of the garden that she wished to change: "It's a semi-detached cottage with a chestnut paling fence running down the boundary between us and our neighbours. I didn't want such a visible division, but I did want to see the sweep of wall that runs down next to the lane and curves round to form the lowest boundary of the two gardens. Also, we had newly planted apple trees and I wanted them to link as seamlessly as possible with next door's mature orchard."

Initially, Alan and Jackie planned to retain the existing terrace and steps, but Ann-Marie persuaded them that to achieve a cohesive design they really needed to start again with the hard landscaping. It was a budget-busting decision, but one that they do not regret. The new terrace of riven Purbeck stone is far more generous than its predecessor, with wide steps and paths that lead invitingly to the other areas of the garden. Informal plantings of shrubs either side of the terrace afford privacy from neighbours and passers-by, and Jackie's choice of low furniture means that they can sit outdoors without feeling they are on display. "It took me ages to find the Borek chairs [borek.eu] that ▶

PREVIOUS PAGES 'Ballerina', 'Prinses Irene' and 'Black Hero' tulips are planted among pheasant's tail grass (*Anemanthele lessoniana*) and *Ilex crenata* domes THIS PAGE, FROM TOP LEFT Painterly 'Professor Rontgen' parrot

tulips; the garden slopes down away from the house OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP 'Ballerina', 'Havran' and 'Ronaldo' tulips; *Narcissus* 'Hawera'; *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *characias* 'Humpty Dumpty'; *Narcissus* 'Thalia'

fitted my requirements for these particular contours." During construction, an irrigation system was installed through the sloping borders. Although it is not used as a matter of course, it does mean that plants continue to grow well, even in very dry weather when young shrubs and trees are vulnerable, particularly in this free-draining chalky soil.

As for the undulating yew hedges, their role is to conceal the fence between the two houses, to separate different areas of the garden and to echo the surrounding hills. Beyond the hedges, the young apple trees are underplanted with a wild-flower meadow. It was brought in as turf and was quite magnificent in its first year, but Jackie thinks that the soil is too rich and plans to introduce yellow rattle to reduce fertility and improve diversity. An inviting curved oak bench follows the line of the path that cuts through the meadow and separates the fruit trees from the copse of amelanchiers in front of the wall.

There are seating areas throughout the garden, allowing Jackie and Alan to follow the sun and enjoy different views. This includes the woodland area behind the house. Although it is separated from the rest of the garden by the drive and garage, it has two benches to which Jackie has recently added a small paved area with a chair, tucked away in a corner. "It's a lovely viewing point that we didn't get before," she says, although she admits that she has yet to sit there. Even though Jackie's initial intention was for a low-maintenance


garden, she is evidently more than happy with the outcome. Asked if she considers herself to be a keen gardener, she responds, "I have taken the garden on and I'm making more and more of my own decisions about what to do, although I always involve Ann-Marie because I really enjoy that. It's become a companionable relationship with some friendly sparring. For example, there were two box balls either side of the steps leading down to the terrace and I kept saying it needed something taller, but Ann-Marie didn't agree. I spotted some cloud-pruned conifers at Architectural Plants [architecturalplants.com] and sent her photographs of them for her approval. It was great for me when she came and saw them in place here, and said, 'You know, that was a really good decision.'" It seems that the sorcerer's apprentice has started to work her own magic.

SHEPHERDS COTTAGE Stoughton, West Sussex, is open by appointment for the NGS – see ngs.org.uk or contact millberrylane@gmail.com. On 10 May, it is open (11am-4pm) to raise funds for the neighbouring Saxon church. Ann-Marie Powell Gardens (01730 825650; ann-marielowell.com).

THIS PAGE, FROM BELOW LEFT *Narcissus* 'Thalia' is planted amid silver birch, swathes of pheasant's tail grass (*Anemathele lessoniana*), 'Metallic Blue Lady' hellebores and *Euphorbia*

amygdaloides var. *robbiae*; 'Ronaldo' tulips OPPOSITE Flowering *Amelanchier lamarckii* with a scattering of 'Ballerina', 'Prinses Irene', 'Ronaldo' and 'Havran' tulips





Tips on employing A GARDEN DESIGNER

1 LOOK FOR LOCAL KNOWLEDGE It's invaluable and time-saving for designer *and* client.

2 DO YOUR RESEARCH Ensure your tastes coincide – it's good to be challenged but it is your garden and you will be living with it.

3 MAKE YOUR BUDGET CLEAR Be straight from the beginning. Remember, hard landscaping is always the most expensive element, but also makes the biggest difference.

4 BE PREPARED Make a wish list before your first meeting – it will help you clarify what you want and give the designer an outline brief. Be ready for considerable upheaval.

5 TAKE TIME Study the designer's plans – and understand them fully – changes are more easily made on paper than on the ground.