





# COTTAGE INDUSTRY

Jackie Sherling has channelled her creative energy into making a classic country garden at her Sussex home

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**F**EW VISITORS FAIL TO BE TRANSFIXED by the glorious view from Shepherd's Cottage – a distant panorama of the South Downs. But then the foreground comes into focus: a captivating collage of flowers and foliage that fill this English country garden. "It's hard to believe that we've completely transformed our garden in just four years," remarks Jackie Sherling. The result is deftly attuned with its backdrop of an ancient landscape, whether glimpsed through silver birches and white foxgloves from the upper terrace, or from the wildflower meadow rippling with ragged robin and buttercups below.

When Jackie and her husband Alan first saw this third-of-an-acre garden, the views over the village of Stoughton and Kingley Vale were largely obscured by a maple. "It didn't take long to remove it," Jackie recalls. And on a long eastern boundary that traverses the hillside, overgrown shrubs had completely concealed a traditional flintstone wall, an attractive feature that wraps around both Shepherd's Cottage and its next-door neighbour. "We removed the shrubs as well to reveal the full sweep of the wall around both properties," Jackie explains.

Shepherd's Cottage is one of two farm labourers' dwellings but, over time, the semi-detached pair had come to be seen as separate entities. "I thought it would look better if we planted a selection of apple and pear trees to continue our neighbours' orchard across both gardens," says Jackie. Unusually, her plot is irregularly shaped, narrowing to a point at the lowest level, creating a triangular south-facing area that is ideal for a wildflower meadow and orchard. "Now when you look down the garden, your eye is drawn to a swathe of abundant fruit trees rather than a mean dividing fence," she points out.





**Above** The garden has lovely views of Kingley Vale, uninterrupted by amelanchiers and beds of geums, geraniums and euphorbias.

As a designer of clothes and interiors, Jackie has an eye for colour and form, and an ability to see both the bigger picture and the fine detail within. Initially she knew nothing about gardening, but a visit to a charity plant sale while she was living in the Republic of Ireland, changed that. “I asked an elderly gardener to choose some good ‘doers’, with notes on their care – that’s how I began to learn about plants,” she explains. Her previous garden was in County Wicklow, also on a slope, but with acidic soil. “I learned what plants would thrive there, but here the soil is chalky, and initially I had no idea what to grow.” So, in 2015, she and Alan consulted garden designer Ann-Marie Powell, who devised a series of linked terraces and densely planted borders to embrace the cottage and tame the slope. “Ann-Marie has created a superb structure; I would never have thought of putting a spring garden on the highest level,” says Jackie.

Sitting high above the cottage, the spring garden never sleeps, and even in winter there are hellebores and silver birch trunks to light up the duller days. “It’s one of four main seating areas that catch the sun at different times of the day,” notes Jackie. “I wanted a garden with separate places to relax and eat.” As spring pervades the woodland, informal beds fill out with snowdrops, ‘Thalia’ daffodils and acid-green euphorbias, before summer is heralded by white camassias, nectaroscordum, *Anthriscus sylvestris* ‘Ravenswing’ and foxgloves alongside ‘Ruby Port’ aquilegias, cranesbill and a froth of forget-me-nots lining narrow, winding pathways.

A strong but loose framework is created by repeated clumps of the wind grass, *Anemanthele lessoniana*, also known as ‘pheasant’s tail grass’ due to its orange- and red-tinged autumn leaves. “I love them – they create such a good froth – but they are vigorous, and you have to take care they don’t drown





**Top** Vivid *Geum* 'Prinses Juliana' with alliums, chives and airy pheasant grass, *Anemanthele lessoniana*.

**Middle** The charming flint and brick cottage.

**Bottom** *Geranium* x *magnificum* 'Rosemoor' starts to flower in May.

out other plants," warns Jackie. Now in their third year, the wind grasses are looking a little tatty, so she is investigating the best way to manage them. "Because they self-seed in the paths, I'm finding I can dig them up, providing a steady supply of new plants to replace tired clumps," she adds.

Jackie has now become well-acquainted with the plants recommended by Ann-Marie, having learned their strengths and quirks, while gradually adding new choices. "Every year something fails, but I just look on it as an opportunity to plant something new," she says philosophically. The heatwave in 2018 claimed two holly balls, while several *sarcococcas* have "fallen by the wayside", but she is not unduly downcast: "*Sarcococcas* send up lots of suckers and, since I'm always short of planting space, they don't always add sufficient value for the area they occupy."

A couple of years ago, Jackie added a Judas tree, believing it to be a white-flowered variety.

"It turned out to have pinkish-purple flowers, but I've got used to it because it tones with *Magnolia* 'Susan'." By a happy accident, this pink-flowered magnolia also matches a nearby *Cercis canadensis* 'Merlot', one of three different varieties she has introduced. Then, just last year, she added two small specimen trees that will not block the view. In the centre of the lawn is a Japanese crab apple, *Malus floribunda*, while a rowan tree is planted to the right. "Its autumn colour is spectacular," she exclaims.

Meanwhile, on the front terrace, she has added two graceful, multi-stemmed *Amelanchier lamarkii* to the side borders. "I'd grown them in Ireland, so when Ann-Marie suggested them for this spot, I was delighted," she recalls. Blossoming in spring, the amelanchiers are developing fruit by the time the borders beneath peak in early summer, spilling over with a profusion of orange *Geum* 'Prinses Juliana', *Centaurea* 'Jordy', aquilegias, phlomis, *Allium* 'Purple Sensation'

and the magnificent bearded *Iris* 'Rajah'. Binding the planting together are *Geranium* x *magnificum* 'Rosemoor', a heavily veined purple cranesbill – "hardy geraniums are the mainstay of the borders," Jackie insists – and *Euphorbia amygdaloides* var. *robbiae*, a spreading wood spurge that has long-lasting, lime-green flowers.

Jackie grows two other varieties of euphorbia, *E. polychroma* and *E. characias* 'Portuguese Velvet', and is delighted with them: "They're amazing, and have really come into their own in the third year." On the other hand, *Centaurea* 'Jordy' seems to have



# Shepherd's Cottage

## STAR SPRING PLANTS



### AQUILEGIA VULGARIS

A granny's bonnets seedling that has popped up, with pretty, pale-blue flowers.



### GEUM 'PRINSES JULIANA'

This perennial bears orange double flowers from May and in flushes during summer.



### ROSA 'SIR PAUL SMITH'

A climbing rose with highly fragrant double blooms, flowering early in May.



### IRIS 'RAJAH'

Yellow flags and velvety dark burgundy falls with a golden trim on this tall bearded iris that flowers in May.



### WOOD SPURGE

*Euphorbia amygdaloides* var. *robbiae* bears long-lasting, lime-green flowerheads from April into summer.



### SILENE LATIFOLIA

Commonly known as white campion, this perennial wildflower produces pretty pale blooms from May.



waned with each passing year. Not so the two geums, 'Leonard's Variety' and 'Prinses Juliana', which flower for months on end – "Although the geums took a couple of years to get going," she notes. By late summer, as many herbaceous plants fade, the geums are still going strong, joined by sun-lovers such as coneflowers, daylilies, salvias and *Verbena bonariensis* to prolong the colour in the terrace beds.

The Purbeck stone terrace stretches almost the full width of the plot, creating a strong linear framework that seamlessly links the cottage with flower beds, pathways, seating areas and steps descending to the lower areas. It is a scheme that artfully blends cottage garden favourites with contemporary style and vintage furnishings sourced by Jackie. From the terrace, seven stone steps pass between sloping borders before reaching a rounded lawn enclosed in yew hedging.

These steps have been interplanted with woolly thyme, *Thymus pseudolanuginosus* and, to each side,

**Top** The woodland terrace is home to white camassia, euphorbia, silver birches and more pheasant's grass.

**Above** Each stone step is separated and edged by woolly thyme cushions.



# Focal points

Bold accessories and seating, confidently placed in key positions, help give this garden a sense of style, while catching the eye



**Above** Growing below the multi-stemmed amelanchier are iris and geum, euphorbias, dark centaurea and faithful hardy geraniums.

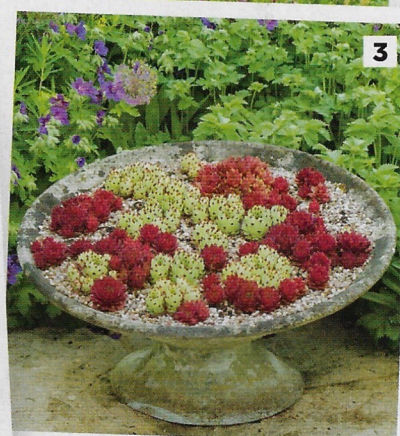
informal borders echo the terrace planting, blurring the steps with a mixture of geraniums, euphorbias and

aquilegias. “Ann-Marie repeats plants throughout, linking different areas, while adding new ones to create a different atmosphere in each room,” Jackie points out. The yew hedges are maturing well, clipped into undulating forms. “I didn’t want ‘waves’ because it would look too perfect and modern, so it is shaped to mirror the landscape, resembling two arms that embrace you,” she explains.

From the lawn, a curving path leads both eye and footstep straight down to a miniature orchard and wildflower meadow. “The idea was to grow wildflowers beneath the apple trees, but when I tried it in my previous garden, it was overrun with thistles,” she explains. “This time, we simply rolled out meadow turf, so no thistles.” At the heart of the wildflowers stands a curving bench, screened from the lane by amelanchiers and a cotinus.

At every stage of her life, Jackie has enjoyed a creative outlet, latterly as a fiction writer. But that was in a period when she had no garden – and gardening is now centre stage. “I have a limited amount of creativity,” she notes, “and, rather than being stuck at a computer, I like to spend my time designing and being out in my garden.” ■

Shepherds Cottage, Milberry Lane, Stoughton, Chichester, Sussex PO18 9JJ. Opens for the National Garden Scheme on 19-20 May, 2-5pm, and to groups by appointment from 1 May to 30 September.



**1** The oak bench ended up double the length originally envisaged. “When you look down from the house, it needed to be a certain width to make an impact,” explains Jackie. **2** Stepping stones are countersunk into the lawn, linking a lower gateway with the main path. **3** A bowl on the terrace, planted with sempervivums, dates back to the 1960s and was found at Colombia Road. **4** The slatted bench from Fermob ([fermob.com](http://fermob.com)) is a favourite place to sit and enjoy the fabulous view.