



WORDS BY STEPHANIE DONALDSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON INGRAM



A different SLANT

Turning an irregularly shaped plot with steep steps and narrow paths into inviting, secluded areas from which to enjoy the views was the design brief for this terraced garden in West Sussex

OPPOSITE Painterly 'Professor
Rontgen' parrot tulips
THIS PAGE The garden slopes
down away from the house

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 of white narcissi lining the curving path, with hellebores, grasses and euphorbias.

When Jackie and Alan Sherling bought Shepherds Cottage seven years ago, they fell in love with the village, the 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. "We needed help with the levels and I wasn't used to the chalk soil, so I didn't know what would grow here," says Jackie.



It seemed sensible to find a professional with local knowledge and they struck gold with award-winning garden designer Ann-Marie Powell, forming 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 ▶

• OPPOSITE 'Ballerina', 'Prinses Irene' and 'Black Hero' tulips are planted among pheasant's tail grass (*Anemanthele lessoniana*) and *Ilex crenata* domes THIS PAGE Narcissus 'Hawera'

Shrubs planted either side of the terrace afford privacy



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, I wanted our newly planted apple trees 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 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 choosing low furniture means that they can sit outdoors without feeling they are on display. "It took me ages to find the ►

THIS PAGE Deep maroon-purple 'Ronaldo' tulips
OPPOSITE Flowering *Amelanchier lamarckii* with a scattering
of 'Ballerina', 'Prinses Irene', 'Ronaldo' and 'Havran' tulips





Orange and purple tulips weave among emerging perennials

Borek chairs [borek.eu] that 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.

The role of the undulating yew hedges is to conceal the fence between the two houses, separate different areas of the garden and echo the surrounding hills. Beyond the hedges, the young apple trees are underplanted with a wild-flower meadow. An inviting curved oak bench follows the line of the path that cuts through the meadow and separates the fruit trees from a copse of amelanchiers in front of the wall. Seating areas throughout the garden allow 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 and Jackie has added a small paved area.

Even though Jackie's initial intention was for a low-maintenance garden, she is evidently more than happy with the outcome. "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," she says. "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 milberrylane@gmail.com. Ann-Marie Powell Gardens (01730 825650; ann-mariepowell.com).

RIGHT Various seating areas throughout the garden allow Jackie and Alan to follow the sun and enjoy different views





THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT *Narcissus* 'Thalia'; *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *characias* 'Humpty Dumpty'
OPPOSITE *Narcissus* 'Thalia' is planted amid swathes of pheasant's tail grass (*Anemanthele lessoniana*),
'Metallic Blue Lady' hellebores and *Euphorbia amygdaloides* var. *robbiae*



TIPS ON EMPLOYING A GARDEN DESIGNER

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

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.

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

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.

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

