

‘How we TRANSFORMED our country garden’

Jackie and Alan Sherling called in garden designer Ann-Marie Powell to help them develop this challenging, steeply-sloped plot in West Sussex into a beautifully terraced area full of vibrant spring flowers

‘Ballerina’, ‘Prinses Irene’ and ‘Black Hero’ tulips are planted among pheasant’s tail grass (*Anemathele lessoniana*) and *Ilex crenata* domes



Jackie and Alan created an idyllic hillside oasis

In spring, there’s a glorious exuberance to the third-of-an-acre hillside garden around Shepherds Cottage in Stoughton, West Sussex. Bright 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 plot, undulating yew hedges encircle a lawn and a froth of amelanchiers follows the curve of the 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 grasses, hellebores and euphorbias.

But Shepherds Cottage hasn’t always been surrounded by such a beautifully landscaped and harmoniously planted garden. In fact, when Jackie and Alan Sherling bought it eight years ago, they were worried about what they’d do with it. While 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 the ‘slice of pie’-shaped garden on chalky, flint soil. ‘We needed help with the different levels, and I wasn’t used to the chalk soil, so I didn’t know what would grow here,’ says Jackie.

The position of the house, two-thirds of the way up the slope, did afford the

the two gardens. I also wanted our newly-planted apple trees to link as seamlessly as possible with next door’s mature orchard.’

Initially, Alan and Jackie planned to keep the existing terrace and steps, but Ann-Marie persuaded them that for a cohesive design, they needed to start again with hard landscaping. It was a budget-busting decision, but one they don’t regret. The new terrace of riven Purbeck stone is more generous than its predecessor, with wide steps and paths that lead invitingly to the other areas of the garden. Informal plantings of shrubs on either side of the terrace give more privacy, and low furniture means they

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can sit outdoors without feeling they’re on display to neighbours and passers-by. ‘It took ages to find the Borek chairs (borek.eu) that work brilliantly alongside vintage Willy Guhl planters,’ says Jackie.

During construction, an irrigation system was installed through the sloping borders, so plants continue to grow well, even in very dry weather. The young shrubs and trees were particularly

vulnerable in the free-draining chalky soil. Now they’re established, Jackie only uses the system when really needed.

Undulating yew hedges conceal the fence between the two gardens, divide different areas of the garden and echo the surrounding hills. Beyond the hedges,

couple wonderful views, but they also felt exposed and knew they needed professional help to transform the space.

Award-winning garden designer Ann-Marie Powell, based on the West Sussex and Hampshire border, had the local knowledge Jackie needed to redevelop it. But before they met, Jackie identified the aspects of the garden that she wished to change.

‘It’s a semi-detached cottage with a chestnut paling fence running all the way down the boundary between us and our neighbours,’ says Jackie. ‘I didn’t want such a visible division, but I did want to see the sweep of the wall that runs down next to the lane and curves round to form the lowest boundary of



Flowering *Amelanchier lamarckii*, with a scattering of ‘Ballerina’, ‘Prinses Irene’, ‘Ronald’ and ‘Havran’ tulips, add colour to a low seating area



Jackie and Alan can relax in several different spots around the garden



Delights nestle along every path, from the painterly 'Professor Rontgen' parrot tulips...



...to pure white Narcissus 'Thalia'...



...to clusters of quirky Euphorbia characias 'Humpty Dumpty'

the young apple trees are underplanted with a wildflower meadow. It was bought in as turf and quite magnificent in its first year, but Jackie thinks the soil is too rich and plans to introduce yellow rattle to reduce fertility and improve diversity. A curved oak bench follows the line of the path through the meadow and separates the fruit trees from the copse of amelanchiers in front of the wall.

There are seating areas all around the garden, allowing Jackie and Alan to follow the sun throughout the day and enjoy different views. This includes the woodland area behind the house. Although it's separated from the rest of the garden by the drive and garage, there are two benches and 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 have before,' she says.

Although her initial intention was for it to be a low-maintenance garden, she doesn't mind that what she has now

needs a bit more work. 'I've taken the garden on as my project and am now able to make more of my own decisions. But I still speak to Ann-Marie regularly, because I respect her advice and we've become friends. We don't always agree, though! For example, there were two box balls either side of the steps leading to the terrace. I kept saying it needed something taller, but Ann-Marie said no.

I learnt fast and am now working my own magic

Then I spotted some cloud-pruned conifers at Architectural Plants and sent her photos of them for her approval. It was a great confidence boost when she came and saw them and said, "You know, that was a really good decision." So I've learnt fast and am now starting to work my own magic here, which I'm really proud of.'

• *Shepherds Cottage, West Sussex, is open by appointment for the National Garden Scheme – visit [ngs.org.uk](https://www.ngs.org.uk) or email milberrylane@gmail.com.*
• *Ann-Marie Powell Gardens (ann-mariepowell.com).*

WANT TO HIRE A GARDEN DESIGNER?

- Look for someone local, who knows the landscape and soil. It's invaluable and time-saving for both designer and client.
- Do your research and look at other gardens they've worked on to make sure you have the same taste. It's good to be challenged, but it's your garden, and you're the one who'll have to live with it and maintain it.
- Make your budget clear from the beginning. Remember, hard landscaping is always the most expensive element, but also makes the biggest difference.
- Be prepared for considerable upheaval. It can take between six and 12 months from your initial appointment with the designer to a fully built and planted plot.
- Prepare a wish list before your first meeting – it will help you clarify what you want and give the designer a better brief.
- Take the time to study the designer's plans and understand them fully, because changes are more easily made on paper than on the ground.

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The garden overlooks rolling fields and an ancient yew forest

Kent & Stowe trowel, £7.99, Dobbies

String tin, £12, Emma Bridgewater

Bistro set, £240, B&Q

Planter, £25, Heavenly Homes And Gardens

Bulb pot, £51, Portmeirion

Trough and tulip bulbs, £19.99, Coopers of Stortford

Sophie Conran trug, £28.95, The Worm That Turned

Bulb planter, £41.99, Burgon & Ball

Gardener's scissors, £5.95, Rex London

Bird bath, £199.99, Gardenesque

Gardening gloves, £26.50, Sophie Allport

Watering can, £39.95, John Lewis & Partners

Cloche, £18, Heavenly Homes And Gardens

Shop the LOOK

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