



IN BRIEF

What Private garden landscaped to negate the sloping terrain and planted for pollinators.

Where Berkshire.

Size A third of an acre.

Soil Chalk, greatly improved by mountains of compost.

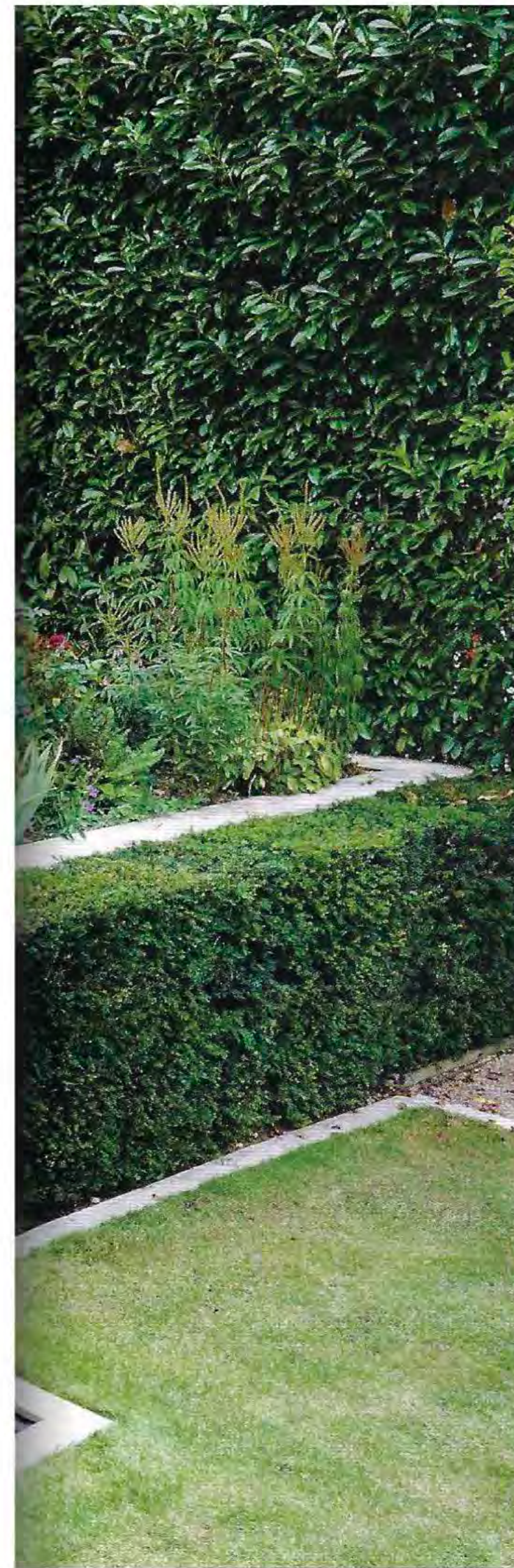
Climate Temperate, sheltered by tall, dense hedges.

Hardiness zone USDA 8.

Joie de vivre

Making the most of natural light and acute angles, and using naturally inspired planting, designer Ann-Marie Powell has coaxed a vibrant garden full of colour and cheer from a reluctant, steeply sided plot in the Berkshire hills

WORDS JACKY HOBBS PHOTOGRAPHS RACHEL WARNE



When garden designer Ann-Marie Powell agreed to take on the planting aspect of this 'pre-landscaped', largely north-facing garden on the steep, upper reaches of Courtland's Hill, Pangbourne, she knew she had a real challenge on her hands. Notwithstanding the limitations of working with someone else's layout, the topography, aspect, soil and style meant she had to dig really deep to deliver a vivacious planting scheme that would "survive, soften and enliven the site, with trees and hedging helping to blur man-made dominance and shift the emphasis back to nature".

Landscape designers Artscape had previously dealt with the impossibility of the sloping site, and owners Nikki and Peter Sketch implemented plans for a series of stepped garden terraces to the rear and side of the house, each descending, or rising, according to the garden's topography.

The arrival is abrupt but immersive, a short, precipitous plunge from the lane to the house and south-facing front garden, steeply banked and concealed by hedging. The garden swings ▷

Facing page Tall hedges of thick laurel, and lower, stepped yew enclose and define the vegetable, rill and sunken gardens. The pared-back, repeat planting links these areas to the wilder entrance garden.

Above Blocks of beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), softened by fountains of the grasses *Stipa lessingiana* and *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Ferner Osten' along with *Penstemon* 'Andenken an Friedrich Hahn' create a backdrop for the two black sculptures by Lily Sawtell.



Above

1 *Echinacea purpurea* 'Magnus' A large and long-flowering, radiant pink and orange-coned cultivar, which mixes better than most in prairie-style planting schemes. Best in full sun and free-draining soil, it will attract masses of butterflies and bees. 75cm. RHS H5, USDA 3a-8b†.

2 *Verbena rigida* A low-growing, self-seeding perennial that fills the lower decks with swathes of vibrant purple flowers, from summer through to autumn. Needs a well-drained, sheltered site, especially in winter as it is not fully hardy. 60cm. AGM*. RHS H3.

3 *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Alba' A really good clump-forming perennial with dazzling white flower spikes that are rich in nectar and attract myriad pollinators. Plant in full sun or partial shade, in a well-drained position. 50cm-1m. RHS H7, USDA 4a-7b.

4 *Nerine bowdenii* 'Isabel' A great late-flowering bulb, and something of a secret weapon that will bring a pop of pink colour to the early autumn border. It loves full sun and free-draining soil. 50cm. AGM. RHS H5.

†Horticultural Award of Garden Merit (AGM) from the Royal Horticultural Society. *Address of 'Isabel' is given where available.

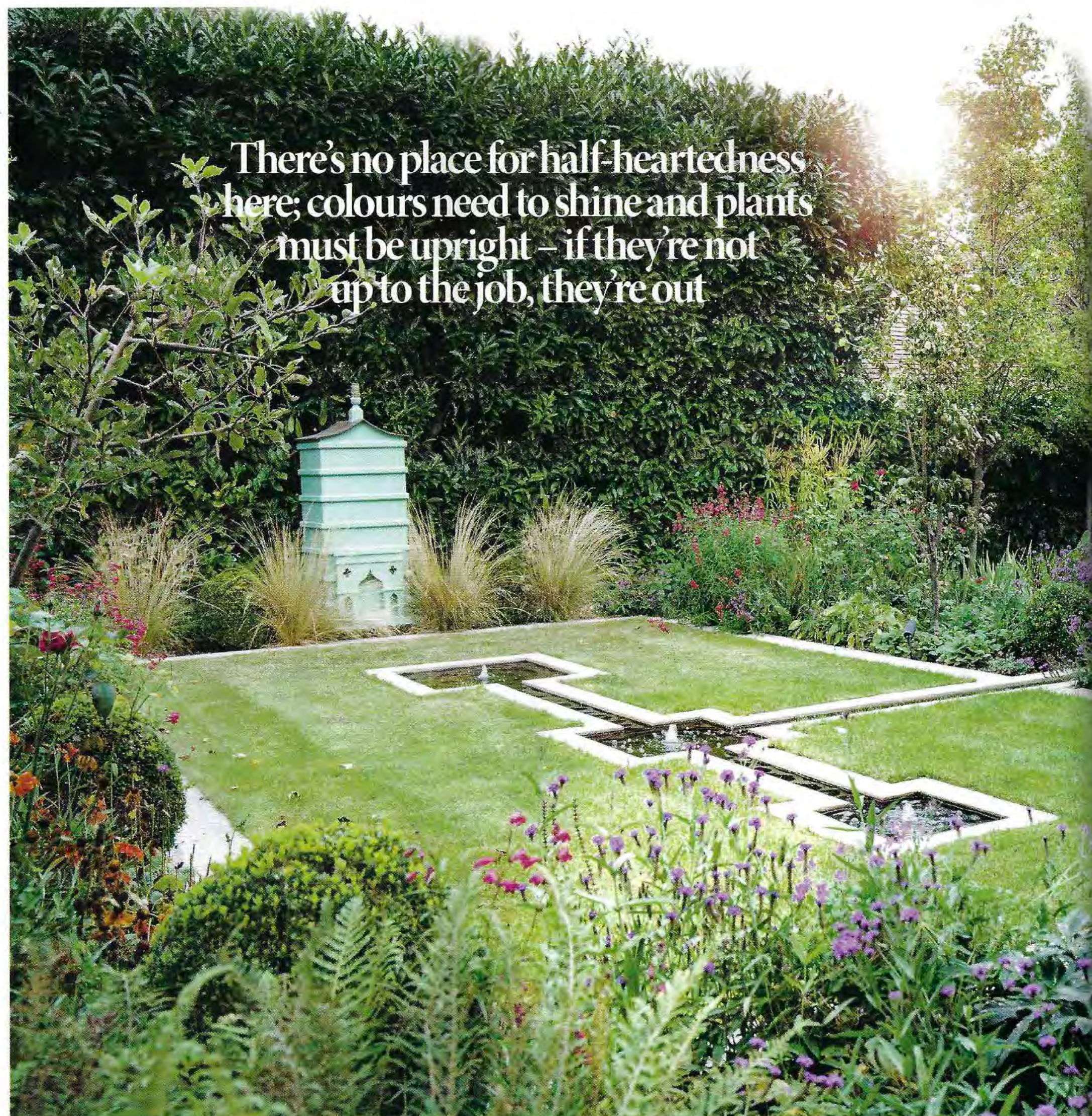


▷ through a deep-cut pathway round the western side of the house to a levelled dining space, down steps to lower-level vegetable garden and adjoining rill garden. Water issues from a geometric trio of pools via a clean-cut rill, which disappears through vegetation before dropping vertically down into the sunken lawn, the garden's lowest point.

Valiant efforts to self-plant the scheme failed to live up to Nikki's own high expectations for "an amazing garden, a jewel box of colour in every season, and a real haven for birds, butterflies and bees". Inspired by Ann-Marie's energetic, carefree and colourful style, she brought the designer in "to ramp up the planting and encourage pollinators".

The garden was indeed lacking a little something, admits Ann-Marie. Remodelling the entrance garden, which spills haplessly around the dining terrace, she "let in the swirling skirts of Mother Nature", introducing swathes of loose, naturally inspired planting, great wafts of grasses, jewel-coloured flowers and shrubs that "shone like stained glass windows". Realising that the steep banks and south-facing aspect brought magnificent back-lighting, she planted tiers of richly coloured shrubs and flowers that simply ▷

Above The tiered beds surrounding the dining terrace contain repeat plantings of *Cercis canadensis* 'Merlot' and beech blocks, interspersed with bleached grasses, *Stipa lessingiana*, *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Ferner Osten' and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', and *Eupatorium fistulosum* f. *albidum* 'Ivory Towers'. The black, stone Pelican and Dolores Miranda sculptures are by Lily Sawtell.



There's no place for half-heartedness here; colours need to shine and plants must be upright – if they're not up to the job, they're out

Above The ornamental beehive in the rill garden is surrounded by laurel hedges, box balls (*Buxus sempervirens*), ornamental pear trees (*Pyrus calleryana* 'Chanticleer') and the grass *Stipa lessingiana*. The rich colours of *Penstemon* 'Andenken an Friedrich Hahn', *Helenium* 'Moerheim Beauty', *Verbena rigida* and *Geum* 'Prinses Juliana' stand out against fern *Polystichum setiferum* (Decompositum Group) 'Proliferum' in the beds.

► ignited. Playing with light added a completely new dimension, natural illumination enhancing the planting's brilliance and richness. The purple foliage of *Cercis canadensis* 'Merlot' has the ultimate glow factor, and is cleverly repeated across the bank alongside the radiant hues of burnt-orange *Helenium* 'Moerheim Beauty', ruby-red *Penstemon* 'Andenken an Friedrich Hahn' and *Betonica officinalis* 'Hummelo'. These strong, signature colours repeat with the seasons, reinforced by Ann-Marie's secret weapon, "an entire, underground city of bulbs"; an immense, autumn uprising of fuchsia-pink *Nerine bowdenii* 'Isabel' follows a kaleidoscope of spring tulips in orange, magenta and purple. Nikki buys into this 'go big or go home' approach: "There's no place for half-heartedness here; colours need to shine and plants must be upright, robust and tolerant of the free-draining chalk soil. If they're not up to the job, they're out."

Illumination, rather than colour-change foliage, is the main focus of autumn plantings, but the introduction of "fantastic beech cubes" (*Fagus sylvatica*) not only "helps anchor and give structure to the slope, they colour up brilliantly in autumn". For Nikki, the beech blocks have been a "complete revelation", and she is delighted that so many birds have nested in them.



Next up, big grasses – "Yes, even in a relatively small garden," enthuses Ann-Marie. "They bring excitement, movement and sparkle. When I'm designing, it's all about the volume of swish. I turn it up in the wilder areas and restrain it in more formal parts." This helps to differentiate and retain the individual identity of each garden compartment. Moving eastwards, away from the more naturalistic, flower-filled, 'Wild West' of the garden – which, admits Nikki, borders on chaos – colour and grasses are dialled down, while evergreen structure, hedges, lawns and trees take precedence. "It's logical that the quietest, greenest, more formal space – the sunken garden – be tucked away at the garden's deep end."

Midway, the rill garden introduces an exciting new element – water. Tousled grasses, ferns and strands of floriferous colour are pinned right back, secured by four upright fruit trees and a variety of box balls, to reveal a broad, rectangular lawn inlaid with a stone-edged water feature and rill. Water brings sound and movement to the tranquil space, before plunging down through infinity borders, disappearing into the sunken garden below. Not ones for fads and fashions, Ann-Marie and Nikki settled on a replica of a Chelsea show garden ornamental beehive to create a focal point, an apt nod ►

Above A row of *Pyrus calleryana* 'Chanticleer', in large, verdigris, bell-jar planters from Capital Garden Products, create a decorative screen in the Sunken Garden. These ornamental pears offer structure, spring blossom and warm autumn colour, and underplanted with *Echinacea purpurea* 'Magnus', *Geranium macrorrhizum* 'Bevan's Variety' and the grass *Anemathelle lessoniana*, they add year-round interest to an otherwise lacklustre wall of laurel.



Above

5 Penstemon 'Andenken an Friedrich Hahn' Brilliant, jewel-coloured, foxglove-like flowers bring a real glow factor to the late-summer garden. Make sure conditions are sheltered and well drained to ensure plants survive especially cold winters. 60cm. AGM. RHS H5.

6 Anemone hupehensis var. japonica 'Pamina' Bears tepal-packed rings of long-lasting, deep-pink, double flowers, which bring height and splashes of colour to late summer and early autumn borders. Fully hardy, great in sun or shade. 1m. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 5a-8b.

7 Dahlia 'Totally Tangerine' A lovely, anemone-centred, orange-pink dahlia with a ruffled centre and radiating petals. The flowers bloom well into autumn and, with their sturdy stems, they are good for cutting too. 80cm. RHS H3.

8 Oenothera lindheimeri Gaudi Red (= 'Florgaured') Brings a gleam to late-summer beds with wands of bright-pink flowers on red stems, which are held above lance-like, dark-green, foliage. Good for front of a border and as groundcover in a well-drained, sunny site. 30cm. RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b.

▷ to the garden's increased biodiversity. The hive is framed with coiffed, golden grass *Stipa lessingiana*, which Nikki tidies with a hairbrush, a trick Ann-Marie has stolen from her client.

The adjoining vegetable garden is Nikki's design and domain. The glasshouse reflects the style of the house, and raised beds (three dedicated to permanent soft fruit, rhubarb, asparagus and perennial herbs, with crops rotated in another four) overcome issues of planting in chalk. "I love experimenting with unusual varieties, and giving away surplus, home-grown produce with a zero-carbon footprint," says Nikki.

The influx of pollinating insects, butterflies, bees and birds, generated by Ann-Marie's naturalistic touch, has done much more than bring prosperity to the vegetable plot. "The entire garden is alive and energised," reveals Nikki. Ann-Marie is also content: "If I can improve my client's life by creating a garden brimming with nature, my job is done." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Ann-Marie's work at ann-mariepowell.com

Above Ann-Marie softened the existing hard landscaping, engulfing the steep slope with tall plants and grasses able to withstand the bank's dry conditions. *Eupatorium fistulosum* f. *albidum* 'Ivory Towers', *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' and *Panicum amplexicaule* 'Alba' help to blur the rigidity of the pre-existing boundary yew hedge. The soft textural grass *Stipa lessingiana* and airy *Anemone hupehensis* var. *japonica* 'Pamina' ruffle up the 'neat and tidy' box.