

An Open & **SHUT CASE**

Designer James Scott has skilfully edited a mature Hertfordshire garden, interlinking compartmentalised areas and closing off others to frame vistas

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An old swimming pool is reincarnated as a wildlife pond, its sleek lines in keeping with the garden's formal parts.



out the rubbish, but left the really nice key plants,” he explains.

The other issue with the garden, James felt, was a lack of flow. There was a lot of mature hedging, but almost too much. “The garden felt over compartmentalised,” he says. He spent some time studying the garden and working out how to link its different spaces, before opening up pathways through various sections of hedging and revealing views and vistas. “There was a nice bit of woodland to one side of the garden, but it was shut off by a hedge, so it looked as if it sat beyond the boundary of the property. We pulled a conifer out of the hedge, which left an odd-shaped gap, but then we

Top Many of the garden’s shaped conifers were retained, lending both structure and maturity.

Above Graceful spring stems of bleeding heart, *Lamprocapnos spectabilis*.

Left The newly opened vista, from cutting garden to woodland.

got a willow weaver in to make a willow archway in the shape of the conifer that had come out.” The new arch was lined up with an opening in another hedge that shut off the cut-flower garden; both areas were connected and a vista parallel to the house was created. “Before, you had three things blocking the view across the garden. Now when you walk out you can see three times as far as you could,” says James.

Conversely, behind that renovated swimming pool he wanted to put in a ‘barrier’, of sorts. A line of handsome, teardrop-shaped hornbeams (*Carpinus betulus* ‘Fastigiata’) now stands behind it. “I felt you took in quite a lot of the garden at once from there,” James explains. “The hornbeams are a reference point, giving scale and delineating where the more formal, organised part of the garden ends, but without a solid barrier. They frame the views as well.” Those views of beautiful Hertfordshire countryside, on the edge of the Chilterns, are well

KNOWING WHEN TO LEAVE WELL ALONE is part of the skill of garden design – clever editing can be just as effective as ripping everything out and starting again. And a skilful edit is just what designer James Scott, of The Garden Company, has applied here at Dacorum House, after its owner, Fiona MacLean, called him in to help her make sense of this well-established space. Fiona, her husband and their two, now grown-up children had lived in the house for 13 years before she decided to improve the garden – the trigger for action was an inherited swimming pool that the family no longer

Above The cut-flower garden, its four square beds edged with box hedging, houses perennial blooms to bring into the home.

used. “We decided we didn’t want the swimming pool, we wanted a wildlife pond,” says Fiona. James was called in, the pool’s transformation was a huge success, and, as she explains, “it went on from there. James had so many ideas that we implemented.”

Because the garden was already quite mature, James didn’t have to make sweeping changes. “We were lucky,” he says, “in that there were quite a few nice things that happened to be in the right place, so we could retain a lot of maturity.” There was a large lawn, and what James thinks were 1970s planted conifers, but also nice yews, many clipped into domes. “We had a good rummage through and took





Above Quartering the cut-flower garden with paths is a simple yet striking design.

Left *Allium hollandicum*.

Below Beyond the pool, a large *Abies procera* 'Glauca' bears steely blue needles and cones.



worth taking in too, but, again, a subtle edit was required to make the most of them. "At the end of the garden there was a 2.4m-tall hedge so you could just see the tops of the trees beyond it, but nothing else. We cut the hedge down to 1.5m and that simple change opened up really nice views," says James.

'Subtle' and 'simple' are the watchwords of this garden's transformation, until it comes to the swimming pool. Here the change was dramatic, turquoise lining and deep-end vanishing before Fiona's eyes. "It was quite an engineering project," says James. "We cut off the circulation systems so it became a self-managing body of water, and then we partly filled the deep end with rubble." The rubble was capped with concrete to make it stable, and high blockwork plinths were built for the stepping stones that run along the pool's length. At the same time, blockwork planting beds were put in to create shallow areas around the edge. "Animals can get in and out and the beds are a good area for organisms to live and breathe, which keeps the water clear," James explains. "It was the best thing he did for us," Fiona enthuses. "Newts, moorhens, ducks, frogs, toads and dragonflies all turned up out of nowhere."

The other key part of the garden is the cut flower garden, originally mooted as a vegetable patch, before Fiona changed her mind: "I don't do much

Old & New

It was a case of evolution over revolution in this garden's subtle transformation, which made the most of existing features while adding new ones



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1 The converted mower shed makes a useful garden room and focal point in the cut-flower garden, with rushy *Luzula nivea* filling its beds. 2 An established wisteria is enhanced by a planting scheme in shades of blue and purple. 3 Clipped evergreens were retained, but complemented with underplanting, including ferns. 4 A woven willow archway was installed in the gap left from removing a conifer from this thick hedge to create a gateway into the woodland beyond.

gardening and I'm not very knowledgeable," she confesses. "The cutting garden was a big success though. The idea was that I always have flowers for the house and James planted it up with some really lovely things, and edged the beds with box." Bleeding heart, peonies and alliums bloom in spring, shortly to be followed by roses, flush with red-tinged new leaves. The four large beds are overlooked by a painted wooden garden room that was previously a large shed used to store mowers. "It was quite austere-looking beforehand, but the planting around it softens it," James says.

Although many of the garden's mature plants were left in place, a lot of new planting was added. "James brought a lot of year-round interest," says Fiona. "Lots of bulbs, carpets of daffodils and crocuses, but all the way through to the end of the season." At the far end of the pool, naturalistic planting involving rudbeckia, fluffy pennisetum and *Verbena bonariensis* adds summer's-end colour below the hornbeams, before letting the garden's structural evergreens and conifers take over for winter.

Having transformed the garden and watched it reach this level of refined perfection, it must have been a wrench to decide to leave it, but Fiona and her husband have in fact moved away, just a few months ago. "Our two children have left home and the house was too big for us," she says. James is helping with their next project – creating a garden from the 'field' around their new home, which is being built on the site of an old farm bungalow. It helps, she says, that the new owners obviously loved the garden and said it was one of their main reasons for choosing the house. "They came in July or August and the garden was looking absolutely gorgeous," Fiona says. For sale: a beautifully designed, cleverly crafted and long cherished garden – who could resist? ■

Below Irises and marginals in the pool's planting beds are a haven for wildlife and soften the straight lines of its landscaping.

