

"We can't help but feel happy when we're outside"

Ruth and James Hewines' bleak Chilterns plot has been transformed into a **TRANQUIL HAVEN** with purple blooms and a brave geometric design

GARDEN makeover

BEFORE

A snug patio hugged the area outside the house and the rest was laid to lawn

AFTER

Lush planting adds year-round interest and privacy

Nectaroscordum siculum

Allium hollandicum
Purple Sensation

Allium stipitatum
White Giant

Catmint

Plant easy bulbs in your garden too! P49

When Ruth and James Hewines bought their newly built home in Cholesbury, Herts, the garden was little more than a flat expanse of grass, which became increasingly full of weeds towards the back boundary. Exposed to neighbours and with just a strip of paving barely wide enough to squeeze a table and chairs, the outside space didn't do the far-reaching views across the undulating Chilterns countryside justice. "It was a pretty boring garden!" remembers Ruth.

Although the couple both enjoy spending time outdoors, there was little to tempt them outside to enjoy their spacious plot. "I like to potter in the garden and grow vegetables," says Ruth. "James is a great cook and he loves being able to eat outside. And, when time and the weather allow, it's also nice just to sit on a lounge and read – or sleep!"

In pursuit of a garden that would allow them to do all of this, they turned to award-winning design-and-build business The Garden Company (thegardenco.co.uk) for advice.

Armed with photos cut from magazines showing the kind of garden and plants they liked, Ruth and James explained their list of wishes and needs to managing director James Scott. "I told him we were keen to extend the patio out, have a vegetable garden, an area to keep the chickens, and we wanted to add some colour and structure," Ruth recalls.

A TALL ORDER

Designer James remembers seeing the potential for a lovely flow between all



James and Ruth can't get enough of their wild and wonderful plot

OUR GARDEN PLAN

LOCATION Cholesbury, Herts
THE LOOK Rural haven
SITE Size 1 acre **Faces** South
Soil Heavy clay

OUR BUDGET

Design **£1,900** Prep & excavation **£5,000** Irrigation **£1,900** Paving **£15,000** Lighting **£3,600** Kitchen garden **£900** Metal edging **£800** Planting **£10,500** Wildflower meadow **£4,800** Trees **£1,000**
TOTAL: £45,400

HOW LONG IT TOOK

Prep & excavation **2 weeks**
Paving **4 weeks** Kitchen garden **1 week** Metal edging **3 days** Planting **2 weeks** Wildflower meadow **2 weeks** Tree planting **2 days** Irrigation **3 days** Lighting **2 days**
TOTAL: 13 weeks

HOW WE DID IT...



CLEVER PLANTING gives the dining area natural privacy.

SENSUOUS FOLIAGE and flowers soften the hard edges of the paving.

GARDEN MAKEOVER

SMART IDEAS TO STEAL

- ✓ **USE PURPLE BLOOMS** against a dark background for a stylish contemporary look.
- ✓ **ADD A SCULPTURE** to a border that mirrors the shape of the flowers around it.
- ✓ **SCREEN A SEATING AREA** with swaying grasses.



the large windows at the rear of the house and the garden. "But, in its existing state, there was no sense of sanctuary or any interest in the space close to the house," he says. "It was basically a large, scrubby area that was quite overlooked on one side, which both Ruth and James felt was too exposed to be inviting," continues James. "They wanted to spend time outside, relaxing and enjoying being surrounded by nature. As hardworking professionals, their dream was to have a peaceful haven to retreat to at weekends and in the evenings, and they had some clear preferences regarding plants

and colour palettes, which was very helpful. As James is a keen cook, they also wanted to grow fruit and veg, and to enjoy pottering about, nurturing their own food supplies."

GEOMETRIC SHAPES

With the garden extending to over an acre, space to fit in all of the couple's requests wasn't an issue. The challenge was to make this exposed, sprawling plot feel like an intimate, welcoming haven. And the solution? Separate spaces laid out in a geometric framework, connecting the house to the garden. "Overall,

a sense of sanctuary and privacy was required around the house while maintaining a visual connection with the surrounding countryside," explains James. "These spaces can be put to different uses – dining, reading, relaxing – so extending the living space from the house itself," he continues. "Crab apple trees and clipped yew hedges were used to strengthen the geometry before the areas were over-layered with softer, more naturalistic planting in deep borders."

Further hedging, trees and grasses were also used to screen the garden from the property nextdoor, including a handsome row of

hornbeam trees forming a pleached hedge. On the extensive terrace next to the house, a dining area is surrounded by deep beds, while a lounge area sits on the edge of a wildflower meadow, screened by tall grasses.

Mown paths through the meadow area add an invitation to explore further to an orchard of fruit trees featuring rare heritage fruit, complementing the vegetable garden. "Views out of and within the garden needed to be created and framed," says James. "An extra contemporary touch was added by using a modern sculpture, which I designed bespoke. This leads the eye and frames wonderful views across the Chilterns," James adds.

HAPPY CLIENTS

Ruth and James were blown away by the design and, aside from a couple of tweaks to ditch the greenhouse and any yellow flowers, gave the

go-ahead for work to start. "I don't like messy plants with variegated, spindly or furry leaves, or yellow flowers except for tulips and daffodils!" Ruth says. "But we loved the design. We weren't sure what to expect but James was brilliant!"

Work began in January, taking just over three months as the weather went from bad to worse. With the site on heavy clay soil, which holds onto water and excludes the air needed by plant roots to thrive, French drains were fitted to channel the water away from the ornamental garden close to the house and into the meadow area. Raised green oak beds for the vegetable garden were also added, and filled with a more advantageous soil mix.

But the result was worth the wait. "Our garden now looks stunning in every season," says Ruth. "In the winter there are swaying grasses with crystals of frost, then early colours that bring the anticipation of spring, the



THE HEAVY CLAY SOIL causes waterlogging so French drains are dug and the water redirected via channels to the meadow.



FOUNDATIONS FOR THE TERRACE are put in place, with deep beds marked out to break up the expanse of paving.



IT TAKES A MONTH to lay all the paving and paths, using Imperial Black Basalt (POA, cedstone.co.uk).



HUNDREDS OF PLANTS are delivered and laid out, ready to be put into the soil. The base for the sculpture is up too.



THE BESPOKE SCULPTURE is safely positioned on the base, set among a circle of pebbles in the main terrace bed.



THE ROUGH GRASS is dug out and the soil turned over, ready for the wildflower meadow that will improve the plot's biodiversity.

‘It’s a lovely haven for bees and butterflies as well as us’

magnificent blooms of summer, and the flowers that just keep on flowering while leaves are turning crimson and rusty in the autumn.”

SUCCESSFUL SPACE

The garden now gradually shifts from a snug space near the house to a wildflower meadow that connects with the surrounding landscape, with paths inviting exploration. The design was shortlisted for a Society of Garden Designers award and then the high standard of skill and craftsmanship was recognised by a British Association of Landscape Industries’ National Landscape Award. “It was wonderful to be recognised among our professional peer group,” says James.

But what really matters is the happy hours now spent by Ruth and James in their fabulous outside space. “My favourite spots are the kitchen and vegetable gardens, the lounge area for the perfect sundowner, and the terrace where we eat homegrown produce looking out over the meadow,” says Ruth.

And they’re enjoying it more than ever. “Before the pandemic, we both worked in London – I’m a lawyer and James is a product leader – but we now work from home,” she adds. “We used to only experience the garden at weekends but now we use it the whole time. It is a lovely haven not only for us but also for bees, insects and butterflies. We can’t help but smile and feel happy wherever we’re outside.”

James’ expert tips to grow awesome alliums

💡 Mix and match allium varieties to get an interesting combo of sizes and purple shades.

💡 For a natural effect, grow in casual groups or small clusters.

💡 Alliums grow best in a sunny spot and need well-draining soil, so dig in some compost to help with drainage.

💡 Make the colours seem more vibrant by pairing with acid green *Alchemilla mollis*.

💡 You can buy potted plants now but it’s much cheaper to plant bulbs in autumn – plant at a depth of three times the height of the bulbs.



Purple palette

A simple colour scheme ensures the different areas of the garden tie together. “The blues and purples look stunning against the black-barn structure and are showcased by the natural greys in the hard landscaping,” says designer James. “As well as the visual effect, bees and butterflies are attracted by the insect-pollinated plants. With the movement of long grasses and the hum of buzzing bees, it’s a very sensory experience.”

*Love this dry river?
Turn to p55*

* Agapanthus

This sun-loving plant has a holiday feel, its long stems swaying with purple flowers from midsummer onwards.

* Alliums

These are great for colour from late spring to early summer. “I like to use a variety for different shades of purple and varying sizes, all floating like musical notes above lower layers of planting,” says James.

* Iris ‘Jane Phillips’

A beautiful iris that has lilac-blue flowers with a white beard. It looks stunning against cool grey stone.

* Catmint

Nepeta produces gazillions of lavender-blue flowers from late spring to late summer and is useful to soften a planting scheme.

* Salvia ‘Mainacht’

A great variety with bushy plants crowded with dense heads of deep purple flowers, enhanced by dark stems. It works well singly or in groups.

* Verbena bonariensis

This tall and sparsely leaved plant brings heavenly dots of bright purple flowers to borders, and attracts butterflies too.

