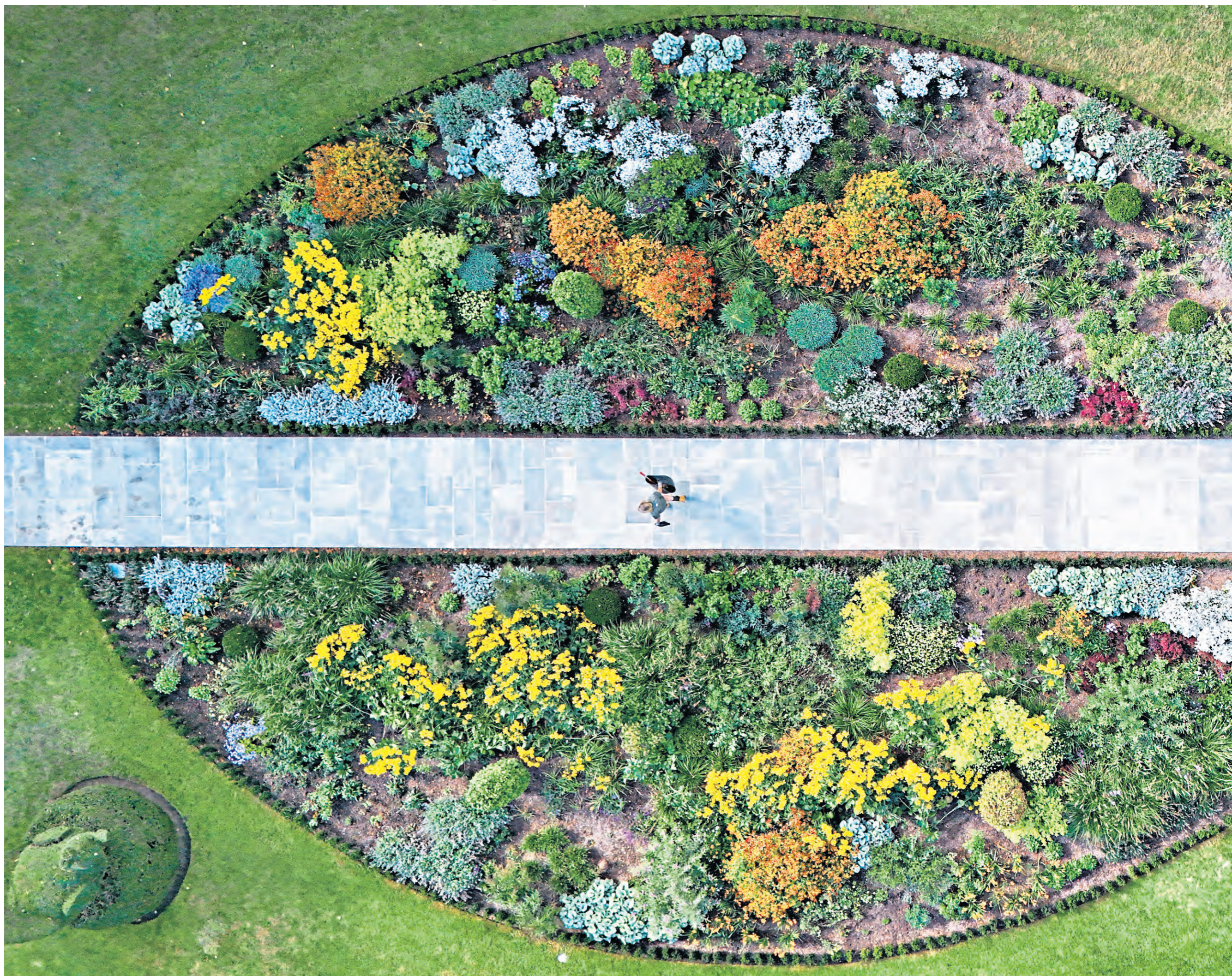


Gardening



No chemicals, no digging and no fake grass: Cliveden gets an eco-makeover

The famous borders at the historic Long Garden are now much more accessible to visitors, and hospitable to insects, says Val Bourne

The Long Garden at the National Trust's Cliveden in Buckinghamshire has just had an eco-friendly revamp. The twin borders, some 200 metres in length, were originally laid out by Norah Lindsay (1873-1948) in the 1930s. Lindsay was famous for her elegant country-house style, but the past century, colourful bedding plants replaced much of her original scheme.

Bedding plants are high maintenance: they need lots of water in summer and greenhouse heat in winter. Moreover, they have to be removed once winter beckons – and bare ground doesn't sustain wildlife, or help the planet. As Sheila Das, the National Trust's Head of Gardens and Parks, explains, the Trust is adapting its gardening approach and working "with our available resources and the changing climate".



In 2023 the Trust asked the award-winning designer James Scott of The Garden Company to redesign the borders with sustainability and wildlife in mind. Cliveden's enthusiastic head gardener Anthony Mason tells me that

Scott's design "uses a biodiverse mixture of shrubs, perennials and grasses, interspersed with newly planted domed yew 'pincushions' and beech 'beehives'". Elements of Norah Lindsay's original design have been retained,



including her original topiary. "The six-foot high peacocks, wine bottles and helter-skelter spirals, now 100 years old, are still there; and we've kept the original statues as well."

Previously, artificial grass had been

used in several well-trodden areas including the Long Garden, due to the large number of visitors that Cliveden receives. Scott has replaced this with a wide York stone path, which has made the borders much more accessible to all.

◀ Turf wars: the artificial grass pathway has been replaced with York stone, and borders are softer; but the topiary stays

Automatic gates open and close at both ends, but are firmly locked at night to discourage grazing rabbits and deer from straying from the wooded slopes sweeping down to the Thames.

Lindsay's trademark style makes use of vertical accents, from front to back. Fortunately, many spires and taller perennials are also pollinator-friendly. Examples used here include the tall columnar yellow daisy *Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Herbstsonne' and *Verbena hastata*. Since planting, both plants have been insect magnets, and Cliveden's visitors have remarked upon the number of bees and butterflies visiting the borders during the exceptional summer of 2025.

"Birds abound here," says Mason. "Last winter a flock of waxwings descended on the garden to feast on the berries, followed by lots of twitchers." The graceful species rose, *Rosa glauca*, offers bird-friendly orange-red hips

ASK THE HEAD GARDENER



What are the best small trees to plant in heavy clay soil? Our gardening expert Tom Brown answers your horticultural dilemmas

Q I moved to a new home this year which has a sloping garden with heavy clay soil. I would like to introduce some low-growing trees; what should I plant?
—Laura

A I am privileged to work in a large garden where I can plant a range of trees, many of them quite large. For the majority of us, our gardens at home are more restrictive in terms of space, and more challenging in that we have to make do with one specific soil type.

The reality is that we may only have room for one or two trees in our gardens, so that selection process is particularly important. Making sure you plant the right tree will give you a

lot of bang for your buck, with potentially a long period of interest, whether that be flowers, fruit or foliage. And November is a perfect time for planting trees because the soil is still warm and has a lot of moisture, allowing young trees to establish successfully. It's also a good time to shop for trees as they are widely available, available in container-grown, containerised or bare-rooted form.

This range of options can, however, be mind-blowing and intimidating, so to help you choose a smaller tree for your garden and your clay soil, I'm going to tell you my top five with their various requirements. Have a look at these, and whatever you choose, and I wish you lots of pleasure with it.



▲ Lilac will bloom and scent the air in early summer



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◀ A drone's-eye view of the Long Garden shows a looser and more resilient scheme that still reflects the swagger of the original design



'When it comes to maintenance the team leave everything intact as long as possible'

during autumn and winter and grey-green foliage and single-pink flowers in summer.

The tired box edging, which was suffering from box moth caterpillar and blight, has been replaced by a dwarf hybrid yew named *Taxus x media* 'Hilli', also known as Hill's yew. This recent American cross between English yew (*T. baccata*) and Japanese yew (*T. cuspidata*) develops golden tints in autumn.

Late-season grasses continue the golden thread and they play a vital role in the naturalistic planting scheme. They provide drama and winter interest, but their foliage is an important refuge for hibernating insects and small mammals. *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Silberfeder' rises to six feet or more by the gated entrance of the garden. It provides tempting glances along the complete vista, seen through a shimmering veil. It flowers reliably throughout the country, producing six-foot-high silvery plumes that persist through winter.

Mason is particularly fond of a knee-high hardy grass named *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Cassian's Choice'. The golden autumn foliage sets off the dusky bottlebrush heads and, once winter light descends, every bristle develops a translucent halo. The upright feathery heads of *Calamagrostis acutiflora* 'Waldenbuch' provide a taller screen, and the upright stems move and shimmer in the breeze.

These borders, which were only planted two years ago, have already endured a record-breaking hot, dry summer. The darker-leaved sedums have excelled despite this, and one of Mason's standout favourites is *Hylotelephium telephium* 'Karfunkelstein'. The

early foliage emerges blue-grey, but develops darker ebony tones just as pink domes of flowers appear in August. All these darker sedums have thrived this summer, and grasses need darker infusions of colour to prevent them from looking bland.

Stachys officinalis (now renamed *Betonica officinalis* 'Hummelo') provides magenta-pink flowers in summer. This, and the above-mentioned darker sedum *H. telephium* 'Karfunkelstein', were raised by German nurseryman Ernst



▲ The planting has been done with an eye to seducing pollinators

Pagels (1913-2007), who was best known for breeding many varieties of *Miscanthus sinensis*, and certainly influenced Dutch plantsman Piet Oudolf's planting style.

Catmints, or nepetas, offer months of lavender-blue bee-friendly flowers, and 'Walker's Low', a better version of 'Six Hill's Giant', was introduced in the 1980s by Walker's Low Nursery. The name is misleading: it's not that short, reaching up to two feet (60cm) or more. Acid-yellow highlights are provided

by the summer-flowering umbellifer *Patrinia scabiosifolia*; like all flat blooms, this sustains hungry hoverflies. These play an important part in eco-friendly gardens, because their larvae devour small pests such as aphids and whitefly. In spring, the acid-yellow arching heads of a Mediterranean spurge named *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *characias* 'Humpty Dumpty' are supported by grey rosettes of evergreen foliage. And, if you needed any more convincing, ladybirds overwinter in the foliage.

"When it comes to maintenance, the gardening team leave everything intact for as long as possible," says Mason, "because the seedheads and foliage add winter interest for our visitors, as well as helping wildlife. No chemicals are applied and a no-dig gardening regime has been adopted to reduce soil disruption and lock in carbon. Fewer weeds germinate when the soil is undisturbed. Compost, made in the garden, is applied as a moisture-retentive nutritious top dressing every second year, either in winter or early spring."

Cliveden's revamped Long Garden has not only pleased visitors greatly, but it the replanted borders has been attracting a wider range of pollinators, including hummingbird hawk-moths. By allowing the plants to die back naturally, the garden team has created shelter and food for insect life and birds during the bleaker months. Importantly, though, the Long Garden still captures the glamour and spirit of Norah Lindsay's style, so evident in the flamboyant peacock topiary.

Visit nationaltrust.org.uk and search 'cliveden' for times, prices and more

Acer griseum
Common name Paperbark maple
Soil Moist but well-drained soil, including clay, tolerant of acid and alkaline.
Aspect Full sun or partial shade.
Height Up to 12m but slow-growing.
Main season of interest Autumn colour and winter bark.

Cercis canadensis 'Forest Pansy'
Common name Eastern redbud
Soil Free-draining soil, including clay soils that do not flood in winter.
Aspect Sun or partial shade in a sheltered position, protected from strong winds.
Height Up to 8m.
Main season of interest Vibrant, pink

flowers appear on the stems in spring before the rich, heart-shaped purple foliage emerges.

Malus x robusta 'Red Sentinel'
Common name Crab apple
Soil Most garden soils, including clay that do not sit under water in winter.

flowers appear on the stems in spring before the rich, heart-shaped purple foliage emerges.

Euonymus planipes 'Sancho'
Common name Flat-stalked spindle
Soil Most garden soils that are reasonably free-draining.
Aspect Full sun or partial shade.
Height Up to 3m.
Main season of interest Wonderful autumn colour with scarlet fruits and orange seeds which dangle from the stems in October and November.

Malus x robusta 'Red Sentinel'
Common name Crab apple
Soil Most garden soils, including clay that do not sit under water in winter.

Aspect Full sun or partial shade.
Height Up to 8m.
Main season of interest Flowers appear in spring, followed by great autumn colour and red, bauble-like fruits that persist until Christmas on bare stems.

Syringa vulgaris 'Katherine Havemeyer'
Common name Lilac
Soil Alkaline, reasonably drained soil, including clay.
Aspect Full sun. Height: Up to 4m.
Main season of interest Beautifully scented, lilac flowers in early summer.

Aspect Full sun or partial shade.
Height Up to 8m.
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