

A TOUCH OF ITALY IN NORTHUMBERLAND

Miranda McCormack

We have lived in our present home for about 11 years and there has always been one area which, ever since we moved in, has been regarded as an eyesore and very difficult to maintain. It is a three-sided depression in the ground, roughly the size and shape of a double garage and in full view of the kitchen window. It is parallel to the boundary hedge and is positioned so that its fourth side opens on to an area of lawn on a lower level to the rest of the garden. When the depression was created, the excess soil had been piled up in a long mound running from one side of the depression and parallel to the boundary down to the end of the garden. On the brow of the mound had been planted a row of sea buckthorn and hypericum whilst on its inner edge grew a motley collection of uninteresting shrubs. The rectangular area between the boundary hedge and the mound was sheltered, due to the mound's height and the size of the sea buckthorn.

At some point in the past (I can't remember when), I thought it was a good idea to have an Italian theme for this part of the garden, mainly because Hadrian's Wall skirts the village. Therefore, this area required a total re-vamp and a planting list drawn up. I needed to research what plants and shrubs to choose in order to achieve the feel of an Italian garden; but not knowing which books were the best to use for this purpose, I chose *Edith Wharton's Italian Gardens* by Vivian Russell, and *The Garden Lover's Guide to Italy* by Penelope Hobhouse. The latter I found particularly useful as it gave descriptions and plans of the gardens and their plantings. From these, I made copious notes and sketches and, where possible, made a note of specific plant names as mentioned in the descriptions.

I wanted the entire area to be re-designed so that the sheltered area behind the sea buckthorn would have an allée feel. That is to say it would be a green avenue of shrubs and perennials providing all year interest: at the end of this avenue should be an Italian-type sculpture. The garage-sized depression would be turned into a sunken patio of local stone consisting of access steps, raised beds and a few more ornaments. Work inside the house took priority, so the hard landscaping of the depression would have to wait until finances allowed. In the meantime, the allée section could be developed and planted.

The uninteresting shrubs on the inwards facing borders of the new avenue put up no fight to being ripped out; it was easy to dig over the remaining area and add manure and home grown garden compost. Luckily for me, my husband does like, and is good at, DIY. He used reclaimed floor joists to edge two parallel raised beds which run the entire length of the sheltered lawn. These beds serve two purposes; firstly, to keep soil from sliding down the incline underneath the sea buckthorn and secondly, to provide a border edge for the plantings.

Along the border's edge, I wanted a low hedge so I planted small box plants at about 6 inch intervals. To provide a green leafy backdrop at the back of the borders, I put in a mixture of *Sarcococca hookeriana* var. *humilis*, osmanthus, camellia and choisya. In the middle I planted azaleas and box balls interspersed with ferns, hostas, Solomon's seal, irises and hepatica. For spring interest I planted cyclamens and *Narcissus* 'Paper White' (the latter is a bit tender but manages to survive, heavily mulched and under shrubs). A *Grevillea* 'Canberra Gem' and *Prostanthera cuneata* grow happily in a very sheltered spot.

At the end of the avenue I wanted a Roman statue. Unfortunately, statues of the Emperor Hadrian are a tad bit illusive and expensive, but luckily I found a bust of Julius Caesar for only £90, and despite being made of concrete, he has weathered down very well. Lichens now cover his head and shoulders, and birds find his head a handy lookout post. With the arrival of Julius, the avenue is essentially finished.

As in many other gardens, this area has developed and matured. I am pleased to say that it requires very little maintenance. I clip the shrubs to form ovals or ball shapes to keep them to scale, under control and to provide form and structure. Weeds are suppressed by heavily mulching with my own composted garden shavings. I have since added a line of bricks between the lawn and the old floor joist edging: this stops grass growing into the border and provides a hard surface for the lawnmower wheels to run on. Every now and then, I make a small alteration or add a new plant if mentioned on my original planting list. I am pleased with the final result, as this part of the garden always looks tidy, it's easy to maintain and a pleasure to look at no matter what time of year.



Before...



and after!

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There followed a hiatus in the development of this area while my husband and I concentrated on decorating rooms in the house, but having finished the house we could then turn our attention to the second stage in this development.

Sufficient time had elapsed for the allée to mature into a lush avenue of greenery. The depression (well-named because of its effect on me) required our attention and, even though Tony is extremely good at DIY, we felt that because of its size it was too big a job, and therefore enlisted the services of a local contractor for the hard landscaping. Our brief to him was to create a sunken paved area using local reclaimed dressed stone; this would duplicate the existing supporting wall around the base of the house. The patio should have a flight of steps leading down on one side to the lower level; the steps should be central and exactly in the line of sight of Mr Caesar. During my research, I noted that all the patio/terraces in Italian gardens are elaborate and heavily adorned with pebbles, mosaics and fountains. Sadly, our budget did not stretch to such ornate features so we settled for a simple raised bed either side of the sunken terrace and a border along the top, ending with a quadrant-shaped border either side of the steps.

All the hard landscaping was completed in roughly two weeks and we were pleased to see that no damage was done to any part of the garden, except that the grass nearby was severely rutted and required a lot of TLC. To carry on with the Italian theme for the planting areas, we chose a mixture of evergreen shrubs and plants which had flowers in the yellow to red colour palate.

In the top long border, for structure and to provide some protection from wind, we planted *Taxus baccata* 'David' and *Hebe* 'Green Globe'. In the same border, in the far corner, we put *Clematis* 'Ernest Markham' and, halfway along, *C. 'Margot Koster'*, in the hope that they would grow over the walls and tumble down towards the raised beds on the lower level. I thought that clematis don't always have to grow upwards, and in this area I hope they will grow along the top of the walls as well as hang over the edge.

On the quadrant borders, we added taller plants which grow up to 2ft: *Iris pseudacorus*; *Trifolium ochroleucon*; lemon balm, and geums 'Eos' and 'Stevie Nicks' (Tony being into Fleetwood Mac). We

planted two pairs of *Chamaecyparis* 'Ellwood's Pillar', to add form and to repeat the structure in the allée, and two lines of box to echo the box hedging on the avenue.

In the sheltered raised beds on the lower patio, the colour theme continues with smaller-growing plants which can be better appreciated at close quarters; specimens of *Potentilla* 'Monarch's Velvet', *Saxifraga* 'Cloth of Gold' and *Corydalis cheilanthifolia*.

With the planting complete on the sunken garden, a few finishing touches were required. A pair of Chusan palms in terracotta pots stand either side of the steps, whilst a wrought iron seat is positioned in a sunny spot. Garden centres are ideal places to pick up small, cheap terracotta urns and ewers to add to the Italian look.

Now completed, the green allée is currently in its ninth year, and the sunken terrace in its third. I will splash out on new plants as and when money allows; if I see something unusual which fits the original criteria, a space is found for it. Some things have romped away; I bought an unnamed alpine geranium at a local village fair and a *Viola* 'Miracle Blue' at a local garden centre; both of these need regular division. Recent purchases have been *Correa* 'Mannii', a mint bush from Logan Botanic and *Mitraria coccinea* 'Lake Puyehue' - all three are perfectly happy with their feet heavily mulched. *Fatsia japonica* has proved to be an extremely useful filler of spaces; it grows well in most positions, it looks lush and exotic and if it grows too big, will survive a hard prune.

In one of the allée borders, a small bay was planted too near the front of the border. Within a few years it had gone mad, was nearly 6ft tall and causing a problem. The solution was to turn it into a standard bay tree.

In the sunken terrace, as with the green avenue, I occasionally tweak the planting. On the whole, Tony and I are extremely pleased with this part of the garden; the allée always looks lush and tidy, and the sunken patio area is sheltered from the wind and is home to interesting plants which creates a relaxing outdoor dining space. I hope that if Julius Caesar or Hadrian himself saw our handiwork they would be impressed with the attempt to create a part of Italy in Northumberland.

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