

How we made our garden

Peter Hart

In 1990 Marjorie and I moved out of London into the relative peace and quiet of the Hampshire countryside. We had bought a property with about 1.7 acres of land in the village of Medstead. Owned previously by horse lovers, there was no garden at all, just a flat rectangular plot, 650ft long and 100ft wide, divided into three paddocks with a large stable block. On the top of the hill, at 200m above sea level, we soon learned of the severe Medstead microclimate; our lane had been cut off for 6 days during the 1987 storms. Little in the way of shelter, just field hedges separating us from

surrounding fields and properties, two sizeable trees along the long boundaries, an ash and a beech, and an old gnarled Bramley apple tree; that was the starting point for all that was to follow.

When we moved to The Willows we had nothing other than a passing interest in gardens and plants. We were both busy with our careers, our focus of attention was the house, and the large plot of land fell rather low on the priority list. We took down the paddock rails and bought a sit-on mower and just mowed the grass. However, it wasn't too long before we started to think about what we were going to do with the land. But how do two untrained novices set about designing

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Fig. 1 The area around the pond 2002

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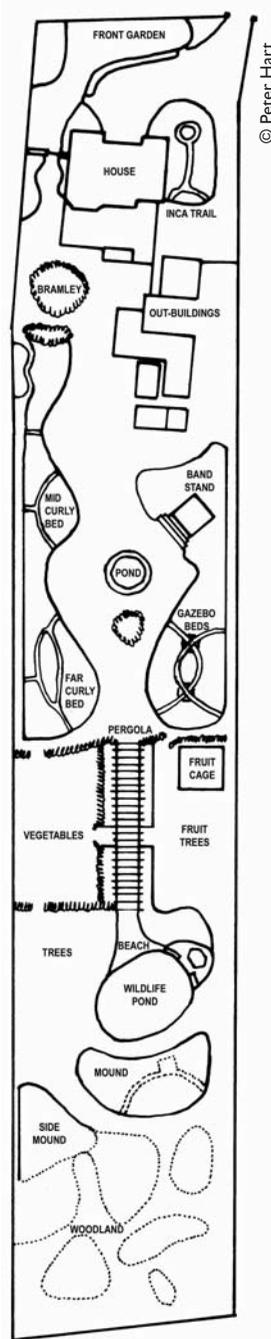


Fig. 2 The planting round the wildlife pond has become lush and dense

and making a garden of this size? We started visiting open gardens, we borrowed books from the library and joined the local garden club – but we hadn't yet heard of the HPS! Margery Fish's book *We Made a Garden* made a lasting impression, such that when we eventually visited East Lambrook Manor we felt we already knew it well. We had many attempts at sitting down with paper and pencil to draw an overall plan but blank paper was all that materialised. We tried making lists of must-have features but that didn't work either. If you don't have any specific ideas but just a desire to make a nice garden the list includes everything that comes into your head. We lacked the discipline and ideas that come from experience, so our first conclusion was to put aside the idea of an overall plan, which is more the domain of the experienced, trained garden designer and burgeoning Andy Sturgeons, and concentrate on smaller parts, one step at a time.

Our first effort was to lay out a relatively small area on the east side of the house bordering the drive, about 40ft by 20ft. We purchased a lorry load of York stone and with it constructed a low retaining wall edging the drive and a crazy paving style path to a circular feature that we termed 'The Fairy Ring'. With a recent holiday to Peru still fresh in our minds, we called this project 'The Inca Trail'. The Yorkstone has mellowed beautifully over 20 years, developing a patina that concrete paving lacks. A considerable quantity was left over and is still being used in other project areas around the garden. The Inca Trail was planted with a backbone of assorted shrubs and tough perennials, in particular hardy geraniums, astrantias and hellebores, and The Fairy Ring has become a rockery with many saxifrages, dwarf primulas and sempervivums.

Our next step was to put in a series of three curly-edged beds extending some 180ft along the western border of the property, with bark mulch paths to access the inner areas. The beds become larger as you progress down the garden so that the contours and planting have a tiered visual impact seen from the house. With a mixed planting of large shrubs and perennials, the shrubs have rather taken over and were indeed planted too close together in the first place. After 17 years the beds have taken on a woodland character with shady under-planting and it's a constant battle to keep the paths open.



The Willows garden plan

With heavy clay soil and a neutral PH across the site, waterlogging can be a problem in winter and initial preparation is hard work. As it was originally a grass meadow, we put insufficient effort into the initial preparation of the ground and as a consequence perennial weeds have been a problem. Careful applications of Roundup over the years have largely dispatched the ground elder, wild raspberry and deep-rooted weeds but it is still a challenge to keep the beds under anything approaching control.

It was now 1996 and after 6 years only 5% of the plot had been gardened: something bold and adventurous was needed. We decided on a pond, a large wildlife pond (figs 1 & 2), well down the garden. Armed with hosepipes we mapped out an area on the ground about 55ft x 35ft that looked appropriate, and we had some ideas about where to put the spoil. We called for quotes; it was a bigger project than we felt we could undertake ourselves. Sandy Worth from Water Meadow Nurseries made some

very helpful suggestions and undertook the project. The spoil formed two crescent-shaped mounds that, after settling, were heavily composted and planted with shrubs and trees. A path over the mound at the back of the pond provides a good viewpoint over the pond and its surroundings

The pond proved a major trigger for ideas on how next to proceed. Each development gave rise to further ideas, and so on and so forth, and so the overall plan was finally taking shape. We placed a summerhouse at one end of the pond with a deck cantilevered out over the water, bog gardens to both sides and bridges between to provide access. The bog gardens were not one of our great successes, drying out as they lack a water feed from the pond.

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Fig. 3 The pergola in 2002

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Fig. 4 Laburnum and honeysuckle on the pergola

Between the mounds and the far southern boundary we planted a woodland of mainly native indigenous species. Out with the hoses again, we formed a number of planting areas, separated by wide grassed paths, and planted some 50 bare-rooted trees. This area of the garden has proved a great success, with very few plant failures and minimal maintenance, just a little bit of path mowing that reduces year by year as the shade from the tree canopy increases. Now, 15 years on, it's a real woodland with some trees approaching 40ft in height. We have planted many spring bulbs amongst the trees and are looking for suitable shade-loving plants for summer and autumn ground cover.

After the pond and woodland projects were completed we embarked on our 'Grand Pergola': 80ft long, 13ft wide and 8ft tall, it leads down the centre of the garden to the beach and the pond (fig. 3). It was a major construction job – 18 piers constructed from reclaimed Victorian bricks, a substantial heavy green oak wooden top section and a paved floor with planting pockets. The central four piers are clothed with wisterias, and other piers with clematis, vines, climbing and rambler roses. The penultimate section before the pond provides a laburnum arch and finally there are honeysuckle and jasmine (fig. 4). Planting beds run down both sides of the pergola for herbaceous perennials. The eastern side of the pergola is our fruit garden with various fruit trees, and soft fruit is grown here in a cage. Initially we were undecided what to do on the western side of the pergola. We had an idea of some themed gardens and put in yew hedges to break up the area and for a time just mowed the grass.

By 2002 most of the garden had been developed, but there was still a blank canvas on the eastern side opposite the curly beds. Several years previously we had put our vegetable garden here but it now seemed out of place. It suddenly dawned on us that the undetermined area to the west of the pergola would make an ideal vegetable plot, sheltered by the yew hedges and with mains water laid on. Ten 4ft-wide beds were constructed with paved paths between them (fig. 5), a total of 300ft of bed length and a 5-year crop-rotation plan adopted. We grow more than enough produce to keep us in fresh vegetables the whole year round, though a major disadvantage of starting a vegetable garden in a previously uncultivated area is the proliferation of wireworm, which indeed damaged our crops for the first two or three years.



Fig. 5 The vegetable garden



Fig. 6 The gazebo beds in 2012

With the vegetable garden moved, the way was now clear to develop the eastern side of the garden. Large curved-edge beds were made mainly to mirror the shape on the western side with two paved semi-circular paths to provide inner access. Where these semi-circles intersect we placed two wrought iron gazebo structures with clematis scrambling up the supports. These gazebo beds (fig. 6), as we call them, are our main area for planting now. A formal circular pond was placed in the centre of the garden as a focal point and a rather grand sitting area constructed, 12ft square with columns, balustrading, Indian natural paving and a pergola-style top. We call this our ‘Bandstand’ (fig. 7)!

By 2004 the main structures of the garden were all in place. Since then we have added some smaller beds near the house and restyled the front garden with roses. A new sitting area is in the planning stage with possibly a scree garden. Most people develop their garden from the house moving outwards, but we have taken the unusual approach of starting from the far end and

working backwards! However, this makes logical sense where diggers, trucks and heavy wheeled machinery are involved which you wouldn’t want to move over already developed garden.

We record all plant acquisitions, seed sowings and their planted locations in an Excel spreadsheet, and this proves invaluable particularly when deciphering faded and broken labels when only a few letters are visible. Some 2000 plants and 1000 seeds are recorded, but significantly fewer are still in existence: such is life. Early on in the garden development we joined the HPS and ever since have reaped the benefits of the seed distribution scheme, plant sales, visits and the camaraderie of our fellow members.

Looking back over the last 20 years and reflecting on our successes and failures, think big is a clear message. How many of us regret not buying a larger greenhouse! The pergola, bandstand and wildlife pond are key features meeting this criterion. The yew dividing hedges, although slow to develop, are now mature and need minimal maintenance to look good the whole year round. Rabbits and deer proved a major problem until we incorporated suitable netting and walling along the boundaries, a



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Fig. 7 'The Bandstand' in 2004 before the planting matured

major effort in itself. Paths first constructed using pea shingle have been converted to paving to ease maintenance, and paving in the vegetables makes access so much easier in the winter. Initially we constructed a gravel bed over a Plantex membrane for the central area in our gazebo beds. Planted with grasses, heleniums and other late-summer



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Fig. 8 The round pond



Fig. 9 Looking south from the house

perennials through holes cut in the membrane, it was not the labour-saving result that we had hoped for. The end-of-season plant debris is very difficult to clear from the gravel and the following season regrowth often moves along the root structure trying to surface under the membrane. Eventually we scrapped this approach and reverted to a conventional bed.

With a garden of this size, our efforts largely concentrate on the big picture and fire-brigade reactions. We rather neglect the niceties of deadheading, tidying and pruning, and are rarely on top of the weeding. Plants and shrubs are left largely to their own devices and as a consequence they seed around and some with thug-like ambitions have proved difficult to control. For example, *Persicaria mollis*, tall and stately, established well but, five years on, had taken over the curly beds and proved a major job to remove.

The garden is now developing an atmosphere of real maturity, and the shrubs and trees have reached generous proportions. We are well aware that the years are ticking by and the need to ease the maintenance tasks is likely to influence the way that the garden will develop in the future. But for now we enjoy it as it is. 🐼

Peter Hart's particular horticultural interests are the structural design of gardens, growing and propagating plants from seed and cuttings, and growing vegetables for the kitchen. His wife, Marjorie, is the artist, and has an eye for colour and for placing plants in the garden. Together they edit the Hampshire Group's newsletter.