



Fig. 1 *Pulmonaria* 'Pippa's Pink'

In the autumn of 2007, after a year in France, we returned to the Suffolk coast and the bungalow we'd just bought, set in a two-acre plot. In the 1930s the bungalow had been transported from East London, where it had been a small chapel; it was full of character and asbestos, and clearly lacked any insulation or foundations. The plot, though wonderfully spacious and quiet, was full of head-high bracken and nettles and a huge number of trees, variously alive, dead or dying. We had been in occupation for over a week before I even found my way to the end of the garden. It was clearly going to be a project, and our immediate priority was to make the bungalow habitable and start the process of planning, then building, our new house; the garden had to take second place for the first couple of years.

The plot is about 200m in length and 70m at its widest, and like all the properties along our road it had been carved out of heathland some time at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It had remained largely uncultivated until the early 1970s, when the owners started intensive planting of trees and shrubs. By the time we arrived many were very overgrown, some arriving at the end of their lives. The soil is poor, compacted sand, and we knew from previous experience that, even with copious mucking, trees and shrubs take many years to develop a good root system before showing much sign of enthusiasm above ground.

The front part of the garden around the old bungalow was grassed, the rest divided into two broad areas by a row of fourteen

## Not losing the plot

### Gordon James

large × *Cuprocyparis leylandii* beyond which the wilderness started. A path to the back of the garden had been regularly strimmed by a local handyman, but any exploration off the path was at best difficult and in places impossible.



Fig. 2 A little tidying was required...



Fig. 3 Garden plan 2018

On the plus side, there were some fine shrubs and trees, and those that were less than fine would provide firewood. Indeed, eleven years later we are still heating both the house and water from wood sourced from the garden, and it looks as if we have enough in store to last for some years. Fig. 3 shows a general plan of the garden as it looks in 2018; however, it must be stated that the plan makes it look far more organised and groomed than it does in real life, particularly on this wet November day as I sit writing.

During the first year in the bungalow, between

planning our new house and converting the garage-workshop into a habitable temporary home, we began clearing as much of the plot as possible of the grosser weeds and dead wood in order to see what we had got! In the process we discovered the numerous species of animals that share the plot with us, and started thinking about how we could start to create a garden out of this

wilderness. Having retired from teaching a year before with the intention of 'downsizing our lives', we began to wonder if we'd chosen the best path!

Our initial priority was to create an attractive area around the house which would rehouse the plants saved from our previous garden and stored on a friend's land while we were in France. At the same time we started to tackle

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Fig. 4 New front lawn, April 2011

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Fig. 5 Front garden, July 2015

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Fig. 6 Excellent plants from HPS seed include *Lychnis chalcedonica*, *Verbascum nigrum* var. *album*, *Echinops ritro* and a campanula, probably a *C. latifolia* variety that came from a pack of mixed seeds



Fig. 7 Also from HPS seed and now robust shrubs, *Colutea x media*

the jungle of buddlejas and scrub immediately behind the leylandii to develop into an orchard. In the furthest third of the plot the mixture of mature trees included some large sycamores, beech, oaks, cherries, rowans, sweet chestnuts and the odd conifer, an area that the grandchildren named the 'Wild Wood'; it looks after itself fairly well, and is largely left alone.

Our garden is home to many of the species of mammals in the area; some, like fallow deer, are very attractive but also destructive, particularly in the winter months; the muntjac deer simply roam around eating anything that they come across; badgers cross the garden regularly; and mice and voles enjoy nibbling off the more succulent plants. A large mole population specialises in creating megalithic-sized mole-hills while burrowing just below the surface, uprooting and undermining anything freshly planted. Initially rabbits were a major problem but, through judicious filling in of their burrows and help from our resident stoat, the rabbits are now largely restricted to the Wild Wood.

During 2009, the front of the garden became a building site as the old bungalow was demolished and the new house built, so our first job was to restore the grass areas around the house which involved weeks

of levelling, raking and seeding (fig. 4). Another priority was to plant the shrubs which we hoped would eventually grow through our rather ugly chain-link fence along the road. We chose cultivars considered reliable and easy, but it proved difficult to establish plants in this area of poor, sandy soil where they had to contend with the east wind blowing straight off the North Sea and attacks by deer and voles. The area required intensive, regular weeding but, as ground-cover plants became established under and around the developing shrubs, we began to win ground and today many of the shrubs are mature (fig. 5). Needless to say, each area that we attempted to develop required copious amounts of organic material to be incorporated into the soil before planting could even be contemplated.

The garden contained several fine trees and shrubs, including a magnificent Monterey Cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) and a Judas tree (*Cercis siliquastrum*) which flowered profusely through the spring as we started building the house. There were also several large flowering shrubs, including a splendid light-leaved, blue *Buddleja davidii*, and popping up here and there various daffodils and snowdrops. Although we had a starter pack of

plants from our old garden, they didn't go far, so each year we've acquired many new plants from the HPS seed list, which has proven a wonderful method of covering large areas with interesting plants (figs 6 & 7). We've also enjoyed exploring nurseries, local and more distant, and purchasing new shrubs, trees and herbaceous plants, a process which is likely to continue well into the future. We follow the general rule that if a plant we like seeds itself and thrives, we try to leave it alone and work round it; the gravel edges around the house are particularly popular with self-sowers (fig. 8). However, there have been times when drastic relocation was necessary, as in the case of a gangly *Chimonanthus praecox* growing behind the garage that we were about to convert into our temporary home. In 2008 it was moved further down the garden where it settled in well and produces profuse fragrant yellow flowers each January (figs 9 & 10).

The many large cypresses in the garden left very little open space, so we were relieved when in late 2010 a team of a dozen or more tree surgeons arrive to remove those growing through the 11,000-volt power cables crossing our proto-orchard (fig. 11), followed by a team of power workers to

relocate the transformer. This created a whole new space where we could put more fruit trees and a soft-fruit area, and re-site the greenhouse (fig. 12). And it allowed us to plant a mixed shrub and herbaceous border down the eastern flank of the garden.

There was a pair of derelict pigsties on the west side of the garden and, adopting an idea from *Gardens Illustrated*, we built a tractor shed, appropriately roofed with corrugated pig arcs. The area in front of this shed is a perfect place to enjoy the late afternoon sun and thus the 'Tractor Shed Garden' was conceived. During spring and summer 2013, it started to take shape (fig. 13), with a bench and table constructed from timbers rescued from the demolition, and many of the plants grown from HPS seed over the previous couple of years. By the following June this new garden was looking quite mature and colourful (fig. 14), and by 2018 the tractor shed itself was almost hidden beneath an enormous American Pillar rose and a large *Clematis montana*.

At the same time three other areas, two close to the house and one edging the fruit cage, were carved out, well mucked, and planted. They were christened the 'Old-Shed Garden', the 'Parking Garden' and, in honour of our neighbour on that side, 'Pat's Shrubbery'.



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Fig. 8 We leave self-seeders alone – *Silene mexicana* tends to function as a self-seeding annual here and *Cerinthe major*



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Fig. 9 Moving the chimonanthus



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Fig. 10 Chimonanthus nearly a decade later



Fig. 11 Our team of tree surgeons



Fig. 12 Relocated greenhouse and fruit cages

Other smaller areas of planting sprang up around the house and down one side of the drive. By 2014 a number of areas were planted with a mix of shrubs and perennials, and the next part of our plan was to join them together so the garden had a more defined shape; and of course, to continue the battle against the encroaching weeds and visiting herbivores.

Since 2011 we have been members of the HPS Pulmonaria Group and from the annual meetings we started to acquire a collection of different varieties, all of which required a home. The ideal place for them seemed to be the strip of land along the western edge of the garden, joining Pat's Shrubbery which was now full of well-established

shrubs, and the small border behind another neighbour's garden. The strip had been planted with eight Himalayan birches (*Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii*) so the path we made in March 2016 to edge the new border had to wind between them; thus was born the 'Serpentine Border' (fig. 15). Apart from the pulmonarias (figs 1, 16 & 17), which



Fig. 13 Laying out the Tractor Shed Garden, May 2013



Fig. 14 And in June 2014



Fig. 15 Serpentine border

seem to do very well here and have overflowed along the edges into neighbouring areas, we've planted a number of winter- and early-spring-flowering plants including sweet box (*Sarcococca confusa* and *S. hookeriana*), hellebores and drifts of snowdrops. Any resemblance to the winter garden at Anglesey Abbey near Cambridge was entirely intentional.

The other major development in the garden



Fig. 16 *Pulmonaria angustifolia* 'Blaues Meer'

was inspired by *Planting Design for Dry Gardens* by Olivier Filippi, who has a remarkable dry garden and nursery just outside the small town of Mèze on the Languedoc coast in southern France. Olivier's garden relies very heavily on mulching with thick layers of gravel. The first of our own gravel gardens, marked on the plan as West Gravel Garden, is in an area first planted in the early days of the garden. Then in 2017



Fig. 17 *Pulmonaria* 'Saint Ann's'

we cleared all but the larger plants and landscaped it on two levels before replanting and covering it with a thick layer of small gravel to conserve water, since the soil tends to be very dry owing to nearby conifers (figs 18 & 19).

In May 2017 we visited Olivier's nursery and garden near Mèze and were inspired to create a second gravel garden immediately behind the house. The landscaping was carried out in November 2017 (fig. 20) and planted



Fig. 18 Laying out the first gravel garden, March 2017



Fig. 19 First gravel garden, May 2018



Fig. 20 Developing the second gravel garden



Fig. 21 After a little clearing up...



Fig. 22 ... a new planting area

in 2018, including some plants bought from Olivier's nursery, and a number of different lavender varieties. Seeing the garden in Méze, it was obvious that such areas need to be fairly extensive to work successfully, so we hope, should we still have sufficient energy, to extend these gravel areas further up the garden.

Also in 2017 we decided that the nearly dead leylandii 'hedge' which extended for nearly 50m along the east side of the front garden needed to be dealt with. In the early days we'd taken out a small section in order to resite the garden shed and a wood shed. Now we removed long sections of the hedge and built timber fences, planting in the shelter that they provided.

New projects also have a habit of coming about by accident. After a windy night in January 2018 I discovered that half of our lovely Monterey Cypress had split away, falling across an adjacent beech. After a little clearing up (fig. 21), it became evident that a large potential planting area (fig. 22) could allow the gravel gardens to expand. Possibly we are heading for a more joined up garden after all. The future will tell. 🌿

**Gordon James** says he's always been a keen amateur botanist (with a botany degree), gardener and photographer. After a career in primary education he is now one of a team of two dedicated and very worn-out plot-savers.