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## Design? What design? Heather Booker

Fig. 1 Edge of woodland

The most frequently asked question by garden visitors is ‘how did you go about designing this garden?’ And the simple answer is: ‘I didn’t design it!’

We bought this two-acre plot in Lee Bay in north Devon because it had a stream running down its full length (fig. 2); the house and barn were almost derelict, but that could be remedied with some hard work. Having a stream was worth it.

Back in 1965, I knew almost nothing about decorative gardening, but a fair amount about vegetable growing; and botanising wild flowers was a hobby, which helped. However, I was full-time self-employed, initially working nine hours a day, so any form of gardening took a back seat. At this time, most of the land was covered in bamboo, Japanese knotweed and brambles, so it was some years before gardening could commence.

By chance, I was asked to be secretary of the recently formed Devon Committee of what is now Plant Heritage, which consisted of professional gardeners and some knowledgeable amateurs. Doing surveys of important gardens in our area gave me a steep learning curve to climb, with regard to special plants – herbaceous, shrubs and trees – available from small nurseries, or

often by division or cuttings contributed by committee members.

As plants were bought or received from friends, I researched what conditions they liked: cool, moist and sheltered from strong winds; or hot, dry and sunny. That was all the designing; the rest was luck and a willingness to move any plant that didn’t look happy, or was aesthetically in the wrong place, to a different spot.



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Fig. 2



Fig. 3 *Sorbus devoniensis* visible in the centre



Fig. 4 *Wollemia nobilis*

When we started, the house was visible from the end of the garden. Now, 40 years on, the trees planted then form not only a visual barrier, but much-needed shelter against the north-west wind, which gets funnelled up our valley from the bay only 300m distant.

In the garden, *Drimys winteri*, *Paulownia tomentosa*

and *Taxodium distichum* are now all 10m tall. A seedling of a 100-year-old *Pinus radiata* which has achieved 30m was planted in 1975; it is now only 6m shorter than its parent. I find it difficult to believe I planted all these as tiny seedlings or rooted cuttings. The taxodium in particular is one of my favourite trees, with beautiful light-green, finely dissected foliage that turns a warm foxy brown in the autumn.

*Sorbus devoniensis* (fig. 3), an endemic in north Devon, produces an abundance of small, edible (if you're desperate) fruits, which used to be cooked into jams and jellies. *Thujopsis dolabrata* is the only conifer I can recognise with alacrity, by looking for the two white 'paint splodges' on the underside of their leaflets.

A recent addition to this part of the garden is *Wollemia nobilis*, with the diagnostic twisted leaflets

on its new growth (fig. 4). Profits from the sale of this recently re-discovered member of Araucariaceae, in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, go towards its conservation in the wild. Prior to the discovery of the living tree in a secluded canyon, it was only known as a fossil with an approximate minimum age of 50 million years.

A very steep wooded hill makes up part of the southern section of the woodland garden; it receives no direct sunlight for six months of the year. In contrast, the area around the house and cottage (a converted barn) is in the sun for about ten months a year; it has two patio gardens, with echiums, aeoniums, *Solanum laciniatum*, *Vallea stipularis* and a perpetually spreading clump of *Musa basjoo*. Digging up the musa's huge roots to control its ambitions is not for the faint-hearted! Being monocarpic, once a shoot produces bananas it dies, so removal is necessary.

The definitely non-hardy aeoniums are dug up and transplanted into the greenhouse each autumn – great fun as the slightest nudge causes chunks to break off. Excellent cuttings for propagation but I've run out of friends who need any, due to my steady supply over the years. Their paucity of root never ceases to amaze me. How can such a small root ball sustain a 2m-tall *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop'?



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Fig. 5 *Ageratina ligustrina*



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Fig. 6 *Rodgersia pinnata* 'Daphna', a seedling I named after a friend



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Fig. 7 *Rheum palmatum* 'Ferguson's Red' in springtime

*Ageratina ligustrina* (fig. 5) comes from Mexico; but nobody has told it that it's a Zone 10 (above freezing only) plant, and it flowers incessantly from mid-June right through to January, its delicious perfume

pervading the patio.

The lawn area has shrunk considerably over the years. Various beds, now containing a variety of herbaceous perennials, have been dug out of it (figs 6 and 7). Those that I think give

fantastic value for the space they occupy are various grasses including *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Silberfeder', *M.s.* 'Malepartus', *Stipa gigantea* and *Imperata cylindrica* 'Rubra'. They move in the slightest breeze but are unharmed by the storm winds. In contrast stands the 2m-tall, stiffly-vertical *Canna x ehemanii*, with its eye-catching deep-pink pendulous flowers, still unspoilt well into November. It stays in the ground all through winter, as it has for the last 20 years, but I take the precaution of mulching it with the old foliage in case we have a sustained frost.

I'm still shifting plants to better positions. 'Designing still in progress!' 🌸

**Heather Booker**, having been a member of the Hardy Plant Society for many years, considers it the most friendly and welcoming of gardening groups. Her two-acre garden is open under the National Garden Scheme from May to September. Open most days 'Garden Open' notices are on the gate ... though not all days, so it would be wise to check the day before a proposed visit by email to [booker@loveleebay.co.uk](mailto:booker@loveleebay.co.uk).