

Glorious Glyndebourne

We sing the praises of one the opera house's leading stars – its glorious gardens

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM

A rambling country house that nestles in the Sussex Downs, miles from major cultural centres is an unlikely place for an opera house, but it was here, at Glyndebourne, that 80 years ago the eccentric music lover John Christie established what quickly became one of the world's great opera houses. The bucolic setting of the house and its well-tended gardens was, for many patrons, as important as the music. Vita Sackville-West wrote that 'the graciousness of civilisation here surely touches a peak where the arts of music, architecture and gardening combine...' For 50 years the gardens were developed and managed by John's daughter-in-law, Mary Christie, with the guiding hand of her friend and mentor, the late Christopher Lloyd.

All gardens need to be regularly reinvigorated and so, five years ago, I set about helping Gus Christie, the current owner of Glyndebourne and John's grandson, to coach the gardens back into singing as beautifully as any of the performers on stage.

One of the most important areas of the garden is a 110m-long and 20m-wide, double herbaceous border that skirts the house and leads directly into the theatre's foyer. The border is seen from a higher terrace above, from the lawns below and, most particularly, from the Yorkstone path that runs through it.

The terrace border is used by the Christie family and Glyndebourne staff throughout the year but during the annual Festival, between May and August, thousands of visitors promenade its length, admiring the views across the sweeping lawns and out to the Downs.

Creating a border that is appealing all year round takes much preparation and thought in the planting and a great deal of skill and experience on the part of the gardening team in its maintenance. The next few pages show how we achieve this throughout the year in this part of the Glyndebourne gardens.

• Turn the page to see the border through the seasons ▸

Main image The wide terrace skirts the house and leads directly into the foyer of the opera house. It's a popular spot for visitors to promenade during the festival.

Far left The view over the terrace extends across the wide lawns towards the Sussex Downs. A line of *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata' divides two of the garden's lawns.

Centre left Enclosed by tall yew hedges these herbaceous borders were laid out by the late Christopher Lloyd. The central feature of the garden is a stone urn surrounded by golden wands of *Stipa gigantea*.

Left A recently replanted border is punctuated by columns of *Rosa Penny Lane* (= 'Hardwell') and planted with leucantherums, alstroemerias and *Calamintha nepeta*.



Spring

In April and May, snaking arcs of clipped box balls enclose plantings of tulips and early flowering perennials. Shrubs on an upper terrace at the back of the north side of the border have been pruned during the winter so that they grow close up against the terrace wall and cascade over the back of the border, allowing low-growing perennials to grow underneath them.

Tall columns of clipped, Portuguese laurel, *Prunus lusitanica* ‘Myrtifolia’, punctuate the opposite side of the border. In an area as long as this the repeated patterns made by the laurel and the box help to unify the border. In smaller borders, a single plant or groups of plants can have the same effect. The laurels also frame the views over the Downs and echo a line of Irish yews that divide two of the garden’s expansive lawns.

The tulips are removed as soon as they have finished flowering, leaving room for the herbaceous perennials to fill the spaces. Annuals grown by Glyndebourne’s garden team are waiting in the cold frames and are planted immediately so that there are is no bare soil. Covering the soil mitigates against the damage that can be caused by a combinations of the winds that blow across the Downs and the unforgiving sun on the dry chalky soil.

At this time of year most herbaceous plants are low growing, so flowering shrubs, such as *Magnolia wilsonii* and wisteria, trained as a free-standing shrub, are used to provide flowers at eye level. Staking herbaceous perennials using metal hoops and stems of hazel, grown on site for the purpose, starts now before the plants become too tall. ▹

Plants for spring

1 *Wisteria floribunda* ‘Geisha’

The wisteria is pruned as a shrub rather than as a climber and creates a curtain that hangs over the back of the border. This cultivar has very long racemes. 8m. AGM*.

2 *Tulipa* ‘Ronaldo’

The sumptuous, deep-maroon flowers have a smoky sheen on the petals and look spectacular when backlit by low spring sunshine. We plant them in groups of 30 or 40. 40cm. USDA 4a-8b†.

3 *Magnolia wilsonii*

The elegance and rich perfume of the flowers compensate for their fleeting nature. Regular mulching ensures that the shrub thrives on the chalky soil that normally it would not like. 8m. AGM. RHS H6†.

4 *Persicaria microcephala* ‘Red Dragon’

In the spring the shoots are bright, polished red but quickly open to mounds of plum and grey foliage. By the end of the summer its stems meander through neighbouring plants. 45cm. USDA 5a-8b.

5 *Staphylea pinnata*

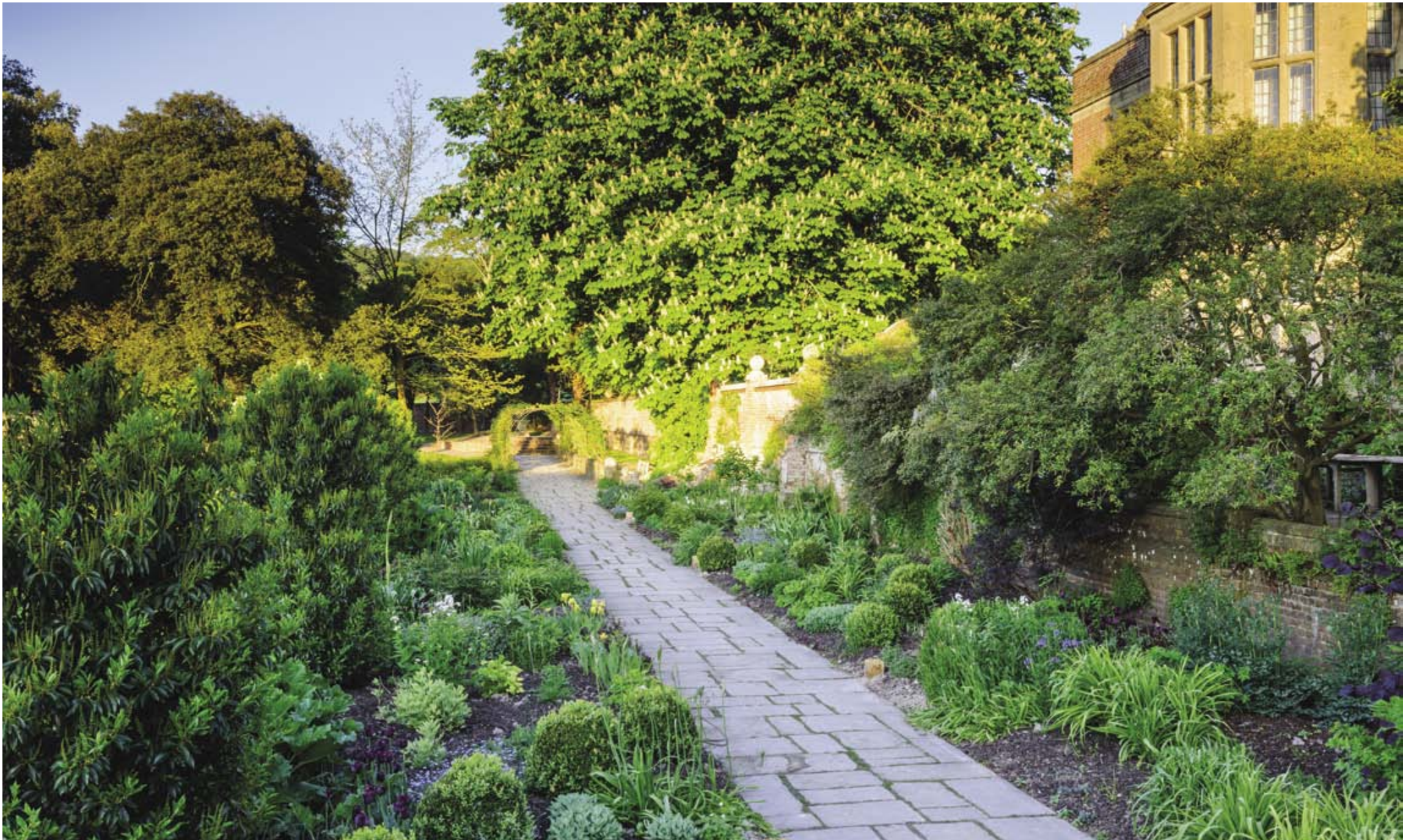
This tall shrub acts as a full stop at the end of the border. The panicles of ivory-white flowers cover the plant in May and are sweetly scented. 3m. USDA 6a-9b.

6 *Aquilegia atrata*

Allowing *Aquilegia* to seed itself about gives a relaxed, loose feeling to the border. Unwanted colours or seedling are simply pulled out or hoed off. 60cm. USDA 3a-8b.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.

†Hardiness ratings given where available.



Midsummer

By midsummer the border is full and exuberant but needs constant attention to keep it looking good. Regular deadheading prolongs the flowering of roses and perennials, particularly the daylilies and keeps plants looking fresh and tidy. Seedheads are left for as long as possible and only removed once they stop being attractive or when they start to fall over. The dried spires of the foxtail lilies, *Eremurus*, and of *Nectaroscordum siculum* often add to the beauty of the border until the end of July. Plants that age less gracefully are cut down as soon as they have finished flowering. The white cloud of *Crambe cordifolia*, for example, is removed as soon as it is over and its cabbage-like foliage cut back.

Once again, the spaces that are left are filled with annual plants and tender perennials grown by the gardening team. Both groups of plants are quick to flower, are usually floriferous and enable us to make subtle changes to the border each year. Growing plants ourselves is an import aspect of the Glyndebourne gardens: it enables us to use plants that are not often commercially available and, by keeping plant miles low, helps the organisation’s commitment to reducing its carbon emissions.

Up to 80,000 people walk along the terrace between May and August so we have to choose plants that will soften the edge of the path without spilling too far into it, although at the front of the border, adjacent to the lawn, we do encourage plants to tumble down the retaining wall. Here groups of the long-flowering *Rosa Bonica* (= ‘Meidomonac’) mingle with the self-seeding daisy *Erigeron karvinskianus* and sprawling sedums. ▷

Plants for midsummer

1 *Digitalis ferruginea*

The upright spires look dramatic among the soft domes of box. The plant is a short-lived perennial and needs to be replaced every three or four years. 1.2m. AGM. RHS H7.

2 *Agrostemma githago*

Occasionally, the seedlings of the white *A. githago* ‘Ocean Pearls’ throws up a pink plant that harmonises well with the colour scheme so we leave them. 50cm-1m. RHS H4.

3 *Hemerocallis* ‘Catherine Woodbery’

Flowers are ephemeral, but the plant produces masses over several weeks. Regular deadheading is necessary to keep the plant looking tip-top. 50cm-1m. RHS H4.

4 *Veronicastrum virginicum* ‘Fascination’

The lavender blue flowers look good against the dark green of the laurel columns. Not staking the stems brings a lot of movement to the border as the plants sway in the wind. 1.8m. RHS H7.

5 *Rosa Glyndebourne* (= ‘Harpulse’)

Bred for Glyndebourne by Harkness Roses, this shrub rose flowers from May to September. Flowers are highly scented. 1.5m.

6 *Allium sphaerocephalon*

Small, claret-coloured flowers wave from the tops of slender stems. Threaded behind the box balls, they accentuate the swirling pattern. 60cm. RHS H7. USDA 4a-10b.



Late summer

By September the Festival is over. Dahlias and late-flowering perennials are used extensively but a lot of colour comes from tender perennials and late-sown annuals. Many tender perennials, particularly salvias, don't flower well until the end of summer and we use them to replace annuals or to take over from perennials that have finished flowering. There's a temptation to sow annuals too early in the year, which means they finish early. We sow cosmos and cleome in May and June to produce plants that will flower through to October.

The dominant colours in the border, chosen by Gus Christie's wife, the soprano Danielle de Niese, are purples, pinks, whites and silvers. We do stray from these but a restrained palette makes the borders feel more relaxing and harmonious. In the autumn we add deep red and cerise from plants such as *Salvia confertiflora* and *Persicaria orientalis*.

During the winter a thick mulch of compost is applied over all the beds. Shrubs are pruned to encourage maximum flowering and any perennials that have shown reduced flowering are rejuvenated by dividing them and replanting the fresh new growth. Tulips are planted from late November onwards ready for the start of the new season next spring. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Glyndebourne's gardens are open to ticket holders for the Glyndebourne Festival, which runs from 17 May – 25 August. glyndebourne.com.

For the chance to win two tickets for Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at this year's Festival, on 13 July 2014, together with programme book (total prize value £450), visit gardensillustrated.com. Closing date 30 April 2014. T&Cs apply.

Plants for late summer

1 *Cleome hassleriana* 'Rose Queen'

The fragrant, spidery flowers of cleome look good even into October. The flowers of this cultivar fade from dark pink to pale pink, giving a two-tone effect. 1.2m.

2 *Salvia guaranitica* 'Blue Enigma'

Tender perennial that has dark-blue flowers and almost-black calyces. Take cuttings or cut back the plant, dig it up and store in a greenhouse over the winter. 2.5m. RHS H4.

3 *Persicaria orientalis*

An imposing annual that is draped with cerise tassels. Seed needs to be sown early or in November and overwintered in a greenhouse. 2.5m.

4 *Dahlia* 'Bishop of Leicester'

Dark purple, almost black, matt foliage with pale lilac flowers. The tubers are planted deep and left in the ground over winter. 90-1.2m.

5 *Sedum* 'Carl'

A compact plant that doesn't have a tendency to flop open in the way that a lot of sedums do. Starts flowering in August and continues through to October. 30cm. AGM. USDA 4a-11.

6 *Aster novi-belgii* 'Professor Anton Kippenberg'

A compact aster that grows into tall domes of small daisy-like flowers. It starts flowering in September and continues until it is hit by frosts. 35cm.

