

Overflowing with good ideas

The garden at Balcombe Mill House, East Sussex

Island beds brimming with naturalistic plantings of perennials and grasses have brought the once-renowned garden at the Mill House, Balcombe, West Sussex, back from the brink, reveals **John Hoyland**

Photographs by Mimi Connolly







ALL gardens go through change, but those surrounding the Mill House in Balcombe, West Sussex, have survived an impressive cycle of highs and lows. In the 1930s, the gardens were renowned for their exuberant borders and understated meadows. The then owner, Maude Haworth-Booth, was a friend and disciple of William Robinson who lived and gardened at nearby Gravetye Manor. Her book, *My Garden Diary*, which contains a foreword from Robinson, describes dense plantings of hardy perennials mixed with shrubs, climbers and native plants to create a naturalistic-looking garden scene of the sort that Robinson championed.

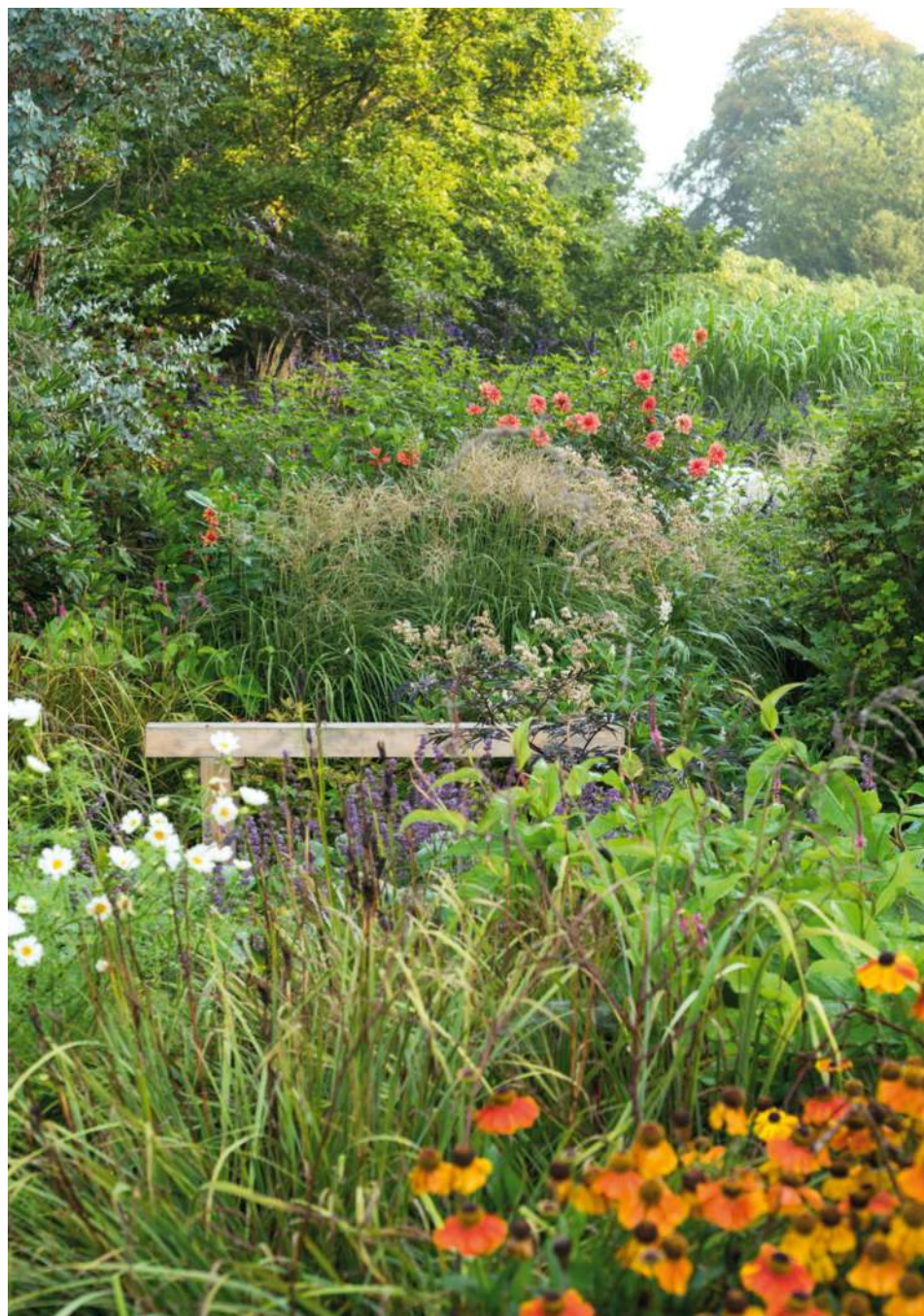
When Graeme and Alison Musker acquired the property in 1998, the garden's glory days were long past, choked by bindweed and smothered with ground elder. The Muskers sought the help of local gardener Alex Bell and, since then, they have nurtured, cajoled and, sometimes, strong-armed the garden back into being a place of beauty and tranquillity.

‘It’s like being in a “Swallows and Amazons” book’

‘The first year, the garden was left fallow,’ says Mr Bell, ‘and we simply started digging out weeds, including about 70 self-sown alders.’ Planting began the following year in the parts of the garden closest to the house, three mid-18th-century former millers’ cottages that have been joined to create a single home. Skirting the house is a terrace built of huge slabs of Horsham stone and looking as old as the cottages—although, in fact, it was laid recently—which leads to an impressive mixed border, nearly 40 yards long.

Howarth-Booth’s book contains fold-out pages with a detailed planting scheme of the border, which Mr Bell briefly considered re-creating, but then realised that modern varieties would provide a longer flowering period with less maintenance. ‘I and my colleague Nathan Carey are here only one day a week, so there’s no way we’d be able to keep up a border needing such intense attention.’

Mr Bell’s solution for the huge border has been to repeat long-flowering perennials such as nepetas, *Salvia verticillata* ‘Purple Rain’, *Geranium* ‘Rozanne’ and several varieties of penstemon interspersed with ephemeral flowers that include peonies and, later in the year, asters. ‘Repetition is key here. I love the eye being bounced along the whole length of the border,’ says Mr Bell. To provide a backbone to the border, he has planted domes of pittosporum, *Prunus lusitanica*



Preceding pages: Seventy self-sown alders and mountains of weeds had to be dug out before the garden, with its huge border, could be replanted. *Facing page:* *Salvia* ‘Amistad’ contrasts with white tufts of *Pennisetum villosum*, the fountain grass. *Above:* *Helium* ‘Sahin’s Early Flowerer’ and *Cosmos bipinnatus* ‘Psyche White’

and common bay, which he keeps tightly clipped so they serve as a background to the flowering plants and, in winter, give attractive silhouettes. He has also included several specimens of *Rosa* ‘Felicia’, a silvery-pink shrub rose with a fruity perfume that grows well in mixed borders. The dominant colours are pinks and blues and the feel of the planting is loose and relaxed, with ferns allowed to seed throughout and *Erigeron karvinskianus* encouraged to insinuate itself into the tiniest cracks on the border’s retaining wall.

Threaded through this tapestry of perennials, grasses, shrubs and roses are annual

plants. ‘The annuals are my department,’ Mrs Musker explains. ‘I started growing them for the first time 10 years ago and I am addicted.’ Sunflowers, ornamental tobacco plants, cosmos, *Echium* ‘Blue Bedder’ and *Cerinthe major* ‘Purpurascens’ are sown every spring and nurtured in the garden’s small greenhouse until ready to plant out in late May. ‘I still can’t believe that such tiny seeds can produce all this in a few short months. It is so thrilling and so easy.’

Where the garden slopes away from the border, Mr Bell has recently created island beds filled with hydrangeas (reused after ➤



Top: The grand borders today, with repeating clumps of long-flowering perennials.
Above: Ducks from the one-acre mill pond help to keep the slugs under control

decorating a family wedding), deutzia and *Viburnum plicatum* that are softened by the swaying wands of *Molinia caerulea* 'Skyracer'. 'There was no overall grand design to this garden,' he says. 'It has grown organically, piece by piece. I have an idea, discuss it with Alison and Graeme and, if they like it, we develop it together.'

The dominant feature of the garden is not the spectacular border, nor the island beds that surround it, but the one-acre mill pond, a still, calming antidote to the brouhaha of the herbaceous borders. 'I grew up on the Scilly Isles,' reveals Mrs Musker, 'and have always yearned for the peace and tranquility of those islands. Here, we have found some of that. I sometimes take a book with me in the boat and drift on the pond. It is so, so peaceful.'

The pond attracts wildlife throughout the year, offering enchanting scenes to gaze at



Left: Graceful wands of *Gaura lindheimeri* 'Whirling Butterflies' combine well with grasses. Right: *Dahlia* 'Autumn Lustre' has proved able to withstand the damp winters

even in midwinter, when it is too cold or too wet to venture into the garden. 'We can get cross with the damage the wildlife can do, particularly the ducks, but it is their space we are merely borrowing,' says Mrs Musker (in that acceptant tone gardeners adopt when describing insurmountable problems).

Mr Bell also has to contend with very wet soil throughout the garden. During the winter, the lawn and flowerbeds closest to the pond often turn to swamp. 'We have adapted our plant palette to cope with these conditions,' he explains. 'Some plants are naturally happy with their roots in wet soil; others we have found, by trial and error, will cope.' Sometimes, there are surprises. *Salvia* 'Amistad' and *Dahlia* 'Autumn Lustre', both plants that, theoretically, should not pull through wet winters, survive in a damp part, albeit looking somewhat bedraggled in the spring.

Around the pond and its feeder streams, the planting is naturalistic, even romantic, with boardwalks making narrow paths that meander through sedges and purple loosetrife against a leafy background of alder and willow. There are clearings with log seats and even a woven willow wigwam. 'This part of the garden is enormous fun,' points out Mrs Musker. 'It's like being in a "Swallows and Amazons" book and children love it down here as much as I do.'

From the far side of the pond, a bench, positioned to receive the last rays of evening sunshine, allows views of the water, over the lawns and island beds towards the vast herbaceous border. It is a stirring sight and a testament to two decades of hard work and imagination, as well as the dedication of the owners and the gardeners to once again create here a glorious garden. 🐸

Alex Bell recommends the following plants for wet soils

Persicaria polymorpha

Although a cousin of the native bistort, this perennial will shoot up to 7ft tall, topped by a froth of creamy-white flowers from July to September. It is a dramatic sight more reminiscent of a flowering shrub than of a herbaceous perennial. Many reference books suggest a well-drained soil, but it is still thriving after standing in swampy conditions over several winters.

Astrantia major

In the Lake District and other parts of the country with high rainfall, the masterwort will reseed itself enthusiastically, but never to the extent that it becomes a menace. At Balcombe, the species and the white-flowered form, *Astrantia major* 'Alba', both

survive being submerged in the winter, but the red-leaved hybrids may not be so robust.

Darmera peltata

A North American native that grows on the banks of woodland streams, it is no surprise that *Darmera peltata* revels in the conditions at Balcombe. The rounded leaves are 18in wide and have earned the plant the moniker of 'Umbrella plant'. The pink and white flowers grow at the end of fat stems and appear, improbably, long before the leaves.

Miscanthus x giganteus

Its name spells it out: this is a giant of a grass that can reach 10ft tall with pendulous leaves that have a white central vein. Vigorous, but not invasive, it rustles in the slightest breeze. Mr Bell also recommends

other cultivars of miscanthus for wet soils, including *Miscanthus* 'Yakushima Dwarf', which grows to only 4ft tall.

***Sanguisorba tenuifolia* 'Purpurea'**

The foliage forms a neat, compact mound of fresh green leaves that then produces an unruly mass of 4ft-long wiry stems. In mid-summer, the plant's profusion of wine-coloured flowers resemble tiny bottlebrushes.

Rodgersia aesculifolia

A plant that is often seen struggling, with brown leaves and few flowers, in drier gardens, *Rodgersia aesculifolia* thrives in the moist soil at Balcombe. It is worth growing for the foliage—crinkled leaves a foot wide—but the explosion of creamy-white flowers on 4ft-tall stems is spectacular.