

COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

JULY 24, 2024

Talking dogs:
the secret
language of
the shepherd's
friend



Shooting on Lewis and fishing on the Test
Fired up: the foundry that made Trafalgar's lions
Loving lapwings, building with oak and summer in Paris

The odd couple

A private garden near Tunbridge Wells, Kent

Almost two centuries separate this Decimus Burton villa from its new contemporary garden and yet, writes Caroline Donald, they suit each other perfectly

Photographs by Rachel Warne







Preceding pages: Miria Harris's dramatic planting with *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna', geraniums and *Alchemilla mollis* and the new pool house above. Above: Geraniums, heuchera and *Rosa* 'Tuscany Superb', with clipped yew hedges, outside the Decimus Burton house. Facing page: Euphorbia and achillea hold the centre of a loose planting of grasses, with spires of *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Fascination'

A WHITE-STUCCO villa sits in welcome at the end of a meandering drive, reached via an unassuming country lane near Tunbridge Wells. The borders and turning circle are loosely planted with perennials, such as geraniums, heuchera and deep-red *Rosa* 'Tuscany Superb', punctuated by beech and yew, which are loosely clipped into balls and beehives to mirror the arch above the porticoed front door. All very charming.

Wander around the side of the house and past a towering lime, one of several parkland trees that suggest there might be more to the place, and bang: there's the big reveal. Beyond the lawn that runs along the front, the land drops away dramatically and the view opens to wide skies and a wooded and heathland landscape that stretches as far as the eye can see. Although the woodland is at heart beech, close up, Norway spruce inherited from previous owners, is the most apparent planting. Together with the rhododendrons growing on the steep bank descending from the property, they give the vista an almost Himalayan feel and only the occasional Gatwick-bound aeroplane overhead brings one back to Kent.

The owner moved here from London with his young family in 2020. 'We bought the house for the views,' he jokes. That their home is a fine Grade II-listed villa, built by Decimus Burton in the 1830s and surrounded by its own 50 acres, was a considerable bonus.

There were two major problems with the view, however: the overgrown rhododendrons

and Portuguese laurel that often blocked it and the local deer which wandered around as they pleased. The first thing the owners did on moving here, was pen themselves in, keeping the deer out, but the children in.

Although keen to have a garden with year-round interest and plenty of flowers for cutting, they knew little about gardening and brought in the London-based designer Miria Harris to work on a master plan. It was she who sorted out the fencing, using attractive estate railing and metal gates where visible; elsewhere, the fencing is more utilitarian.

'Pockets of colour complement rather than contest the view'

Family life is for now centred on the house and its immediate grounds, so Mrs Harris has introduced new pockets of colour within easy reach, not contesting with the longer views, but complementing them. None more so than the terrace that surrounds the orangery-cum-kitchen extension-cum-family living space to the east of the house, where the family spends 99% of its time. A steep rising bank forms a foreshortened backdrop to the terrace, allowing Mrs Harris's planting to take centre stage. With a wide, curving flight of steps cutting up the bank through the dense planting to the new pool house beyond, there is a touch of theatricality about the scene and most

of the cast here has been chosen for strong architectural forms, allowing the players to stay on the stage long after flowering.


As one might expect at the top of a hill, there is a fair bit of breeze, so Mrs Harris planted a selection of calamagrostis, molinia and miscanthus grasses to create a sense of movement among the perennials. The colours here, as elsewhere in the garden, are predominantly pink, deep red and purple, kicked off by double tulips and peonies in spring and lit up by tall pale-lilac candelabras of *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Fascination' in late summer.

The terrace itself is laid to formal York-stone paving to allow for bikes and scooters, with pockets of planting to soften it and lead the eye out to the wider landscape. Mrs Harris had a problem here: there are only a few inches before one hits bedrock. To get around this, she has installed subterranean containers, like sunken window boxes, into which to plant on the terrace and provide drainage from the hard standing, with a series of channels underneath. 'You can't change the fact that some of these plants are going to have wet feet some of the time; that is why hemerocallis features quite heavily, together with grasses that can tolerate these conditions.'

Due to the high water table, Mrs Harris has moved the herb garden to the other end of the house, where the walls of a Victorian conservatory still stand, as do the remnants of its tessellated floor. Where the glass once slotted into the top of the walls provides excellent free-draining pockets in which to plant →







Tough customers: plants for awkward situations

***Bistorta officinalis* 'Superba'** Mat-forming, with nectar- and pollen-rich pale-pink flowers. Copes with heavy soil in sun or part shade. Drought resistant once established

***Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Fascination'** Pale-lilac spires. Can cope with heavy clay in sun or part shade; loved by pollinators. Excellent, drought-tolerant perennial. Long season of interest

***Molinia caerulea* subsp. *caerulea* 'Poul Petersen'** A grass that can cope with moisture-retentive soil and drier conditions; helps with soil stabilisation

Alchemilla mollis The fluffy lime-yellow flowers that appear in early summer and furry leaves will soften harsh edges of hard landscaping

***Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna'** Long-lasting structure from flower spires, even after the deep-purple colour has faded

Beech columns and beehives These are all about celebrating different seasons, with their fresh green in spring, autumn colour and bare branches in winter

Anemanthele lessoniana Shade-tolerant grass that adapts well to different conditions and has narrow, arching leaves that turn red and gold in autumn

thyme, with pots for other herbs. A wisteria-draped metal pergola echoes the original structure and is another sunny place to sit.

Sometimes a judicious edit is all that has been needed. The journey down rolling lawn from the pool house to the main lawn was choked with rhododendron and laurel; now they have been removed, not only does one catch tantalising glimpses of beyond, but the Monterey pine, redwoods, weeping willows and old oaks can be appreciated. For parties on the front lawn—the owners were married here—the trees are lit from below.

Meanwhile, both the owners and Mrs Harris are full of praise for the gardener Jo Jones, who came from Sissinghurst and is an excellent florist, managing to find something for the house all year round. At this stage of child rearing, the couple are happy with the borders around the house and the young orchard that has been established, but that is not to say they have forgotten Mrs Harris's masterplan. There are still paths leading to the lake below to rediscover and a walled vegetable garden to build—all in the fullness of time. 🐌

Beech columns stand proud on the main lawn, where parties are often held, with daylilies growing through the grasses