

# A stark beauty

ON A CRISP WINTER'S DAY SUE AND TOM STUART-SMITH'S SCULPTURAL GARDEN IS DELIGHTFULLY OUTLINED IN A FILIGREE OF FROST

*West Garden* Frost bends but does not break the billowing grasses, which include low-growing *Hakonechloa macra* on the right, while the tall skeletal cardoons are majestically oblivious to the weather. »





### At home with...

**Owners** Award-winning landscape designer Tom Stuart-Smith and his wife, Sue, who live here with Dachshund Rolo and Jack Russell Rabbit. Their grown-up children, Rose, Ben and Harry, visit often.

**House** A 17th-century timber-framed barn.

**Garden** A dramatically planted south-facing courtyard. The main garden has semi-formal planting of perennials and grasses. There is a lawn with open views and a productive veg plot.

*In 1986 and newly married,* Sue and Tom Stuart-Smith began work restoring the old timber-framed hay barn that was to become their home. The barn was part of a disused farmyard that had been in Tom's family for many years and was just yards from the house Tom grew up in and where his parents still live. No garden existed – around the barn were corrugated-iron sheds on a compacted layer of rubble and old concrete, and, beyond the barn, open fields.

'When we came here, we spent most of the first two years raking barrow loads of stones off the ground,' says Tom. 'We enlisted the help of family and friends in stone-picking parties and tried to give the impression that this was the most desirable weekend activity imaginable,' says Sue.

Fast forward 28 years and Tom Stuart-Smith is an acclaimed garden designer with eight RHS Chelsea Flower Show Gold medals and a host of successful large-scale projects to his name – and the garden that he and Sue began on a patch of stone and rubble has expanded into the fields and is acquiring an international reputation.

Back in 1986, the derelict yard was the first area to be tackled and, over time, was planted up with a profusion of roses, bulbs and herbaceous flowers, arranged among low box hedges. But, two decades later, some of the hedges had box blight, the space seemed overcrowded and both Tom and Sue felt change was needed, though it wasn't clear what.

In 2006, Tom made a garden for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show that featured a wall of weathered Corten steel and six water tanks in the same material. It won him a gold medal »

### Scene setting

The view from the main garden to the 17th-century barn is punctuated by tall fastigate yews.

### Structural balance

(Opposite, bottom left and right) The lighter tones of euphorbia and *Stipa gigantea* are highlighted against the dark cloud-pruned yew.



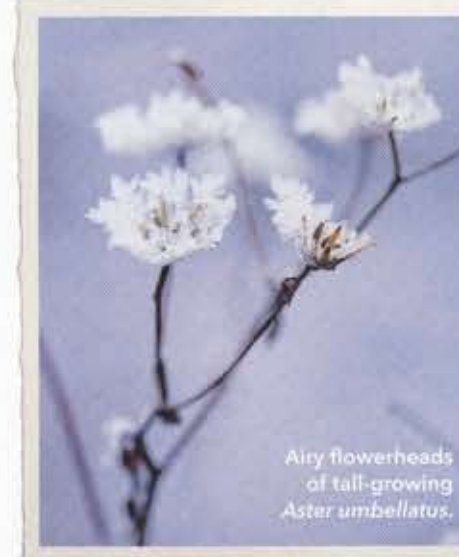
Steps lead to the West Garden. The columns of *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata' are mirrored by bare spires of *Populus nigra* 'Italica' beyond.



*Ilex aquifolium* – the common holly.

### What makes this garden so special...

'It takes on a new life in the off-season – we can escape the relentless demands of the summer garden and enjoy a quieter time'



Airy flowerheads of tall-growing *Aster umbellatus*.





*What we love most about this garden...*  
 'The state of quiet decay that the garden goes into during the winter'



**Modern  
Country  
Classic**

**The winter garden**

Create a garden that looks dramatic at the darkest time of year.

**Need to know...**

- The gardens that hold up best in winter are those with structure. Plant hedges instead of fences as they'll absorb wind, change with the seasons and attract wildlife.
- Use evergreens as foils for the bare outlines of deciduous shrubs or trees.
- Choose perennials, such as sedums and many asters, that keep their framework of stems and flowerheads intact after flowering.
- Ornamental grasses bring movement and their flexible stems will keep standing in windy weather.
- If you have a lovely view, draw it into the garden by framing it with trees or hedges.

**Plant protection**  
 (Left) Bamboo cloches are placed over young plants to deter rabbits.

**Vegetable plot**  
 (Above) Winter greens growing in the raised beds. A beech hedge to one side helps to shelter the garden.

and an award for best garden in show. Sue discovered after the show that there were no plans to re-use the wall and water tanks. 'I felt there should be a future for them, so I arranged for them to be delivered to our home,' she says.

There they sat for months until Tom came up with a plan that involved dismantling the existing courtyard garden, altering the ground levels, installing the wall and tanks and re-planting the space around them with flowering perennials and low-growing grasses.

Now, in winter, this space is stripped back to the hard-landscaping bones, with only the dried and bleached grasses standing bright against a backdrop of evergreen *Osmanthus heterophyllus*. Here and there, drifts of stalwart flowering perennials, including the sedums, retain their dried flowerheads and keep upright late into the season.

In a line west of the barn, the garden marches out into the countryside through garden rooms with high clipped hedges that enclose lawns and frame views out into the fields. The spaces here are mainly controlled and empty with the emphasis on the high hornbeam hedges and the spires of Lombardy poplars, *Populus nigra* 'Italica'. Then there is a contrast of mood as you return to the barn through a series of intensively planted spaces filled with an abundance of perennials and grasses, many at head height.

But as winter takes over, it's the same story here as throughout the garden, and what's left when winds and weather have passed through are the stems of the hardiest plants, the many grasses and the shapes and forms of the »





### On our doorstep...

**Visit...** 'Ashridge Estate (01442 851227, [nationaltrust.org.uk](http://nationaltrust.org.uk)), near Berkhamsted. It is lovely to walk through the ancient woodland and rolling downlands.'

**Shop at...** 'Clare James (01923 263195), a health food shop in Kings Langley. You can also buy local eggs and honey.'

**Go for a meal at...** 'L'Aventure (020 7624 6232) in St John's Wood, north-west London. We can reach this classic French restaurant in just 20 minutes.'

hedges and trees. For Tom, the bleakness of winter is part and parcel of gardening, a season to be enjoyed for what it is. 'With no extravaganza of red and yellow stems, very few berries, no variegation and no spiky phormiums or yuccas to liven things up into a state of subtropical delusion,' he says. This sounds austere and it is, but it suits the situation of a garden that perches uncompromisingly on the edge of open fields and doesn't turn its back on the outlook.

However, on the other side of the barn, even in winter, there's life and productivity in the vegetable garden where Sue is head gardener. The plot was relatively small to begin with and because the ground was poor, raised beds were constructed and filled with good soil. 'I have recently been able to extend the area to include space for fruit and flowers for cutting, which gives me a lot of pleasure,' says Sue.

How long the winter garden stays looking good depends on the weather. A cold, hard winter keeps the last of the plant skeletons upright and shows them magically transformed by frost and snow. Mild, wet winters tend to end the display early, as plants collapse. Generally, the last of the herbaceous will be cut back somewhere around the end of January. Whatever the weather is doing this marks the point when things move forwards. A thick mulch of spent mushroom compost will now be put on all the beds in readiness for spring and the new cycle of growth. 'It is just about then that we finally start to look forward to the busy days of summer,' says Sue.

**The Barn, Abbots Langley, Hertfordshire WD5 0RZ.**  
Open through the NGS – visit [ngs.org.uk](http://ngs.org.uk) for details.

**Hornbeam hedges** Light catches the twiggly framework of the bare hedges, looking northwards to the field from the West Garden.



### Sue and Tom's plants for frosty interest

- 1 *Dipsacus fullonum* – the seedheads are loved by bees and goldfinches.
- 2 *Hakonechloa macra* has an arching shape and warm winter colouring.
- 3 *Cenolophium denudatum* flowers for ages and adds delicacy to the garden.
- 4 *Sedum 'Karl Funkelstein'* has flowerheads that keep their shape well.
- 5 *Phlomis russeliana* has distinctive pom-poms on long stems in winter.
- 6 *Eryngium giganteum*'s sharp outlines are a strong feature.
- 7 *Stipa gigantea* – 'A long-lasting diaphanous starburst,' says Tom.
- 8 The tall stems of *Inula racemosa* create a sculptural quality.



FEATURE ANNE DE VERTEUIL PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS (SUE AND TOM) VICKI COUCHMAN/THE SUNDAY TIMES/NEWS SYNDICATION