



Late-summer's lease

The Old Rectory, Duntisbourne Rouse, Gloucestershire
Gardens 'tipping into wilderness' are not what she produces for her clients, but that is exactly what the garden designer and writer Mary Keen enjoys most in her own Cotswolds garden, which she describes here

Photographs by Marianne Majerus



AUGUST always used to signal the end of summer flowers. Thirty years ago, dahlias were grown in allotments or only used for picking and annuals were rarely seen except in cottage gardens. Orange was frowned on and, apart from the scarlet *splendens* used in the bedding schemes of parks, very few people had heard of salvias.

Today, we're lucky that the old taboos have vanished; new plants arrive all the time and the late-summer garden lasts until the first frosts strike. I love September, when flowers are gaudy and taller than I am. Now, in the beds below the house, dahlias have succeeded tulips, peonies or roses as the showstoppers. *Dahlia* Admiral Rawlings, Babylon Red, Pontiac, Winston Churchill and a good crimson *D. coccinea* teeter over a haze of smaller flowers.

In spring here, the wild background is a dark-purple *Lunaria* Munstead Purple, which we're trying to replace with a perennial, bluer form of honesty that I collected in Corfu. Both lunarias seed everywhere and make a good link plant all year. Some of them are pulled out, but, around now, we rub off the outer seed casings from those that remain to reveal their silver halos. Like dead-heading, it's ridiculously time-consuming, but worth it for the ghostly backlight that glimmers between the brighter plants.

Self-seeders do much of the work in this garden and they suit the free and easy style that I increasingly prefer in the flowerbeds at home. Clients are less enthusiastic about gardens tipping into wilderness, but I enjoy the lavishness

Preceding pages: Sunflowers, rudbeckias and heleniums illuminate the autumn garden. *Above:* *Scabiosa columbaria* subsp. *ochroleuca* and *Deschampsia Goldtau* create a silvery haze. *Right:* Dahlias and salvias in an old copper, with magenta *Persicaria orientalis*



of plants appearing where they want to be and that seems to work better here than organised clumps of too many different varieties. Welsh and opium poppies, *Angelica* Vicar's Mead, the lovely fleabane *Erigeron annuus* and a curious garlic cress, *Peltaria alli-acae*, seed through the different beds.

Some have to be pulled up. The grass *Sporobolus heterolepis* and *Scabiosa columbaria ochroleuca* threaten to take over the new meadow bed that replaced a Sheffield Pictorial Meadow, but any wild cyclamen or *Anemone apennina* are welcome to stay in the orchard. Snowdrops, oxlips and *blanda* anemones colonise the dell. I have noticed that German visitors seem happier with the 'plants-in-charge' look than do some English garden groups.

In summer, the front of the house is overgrown with wisteria, Banksia roses, *Buddleja agathosma* and clematis, so that looking out through south-facing windows feels like being underwater. (They do get cut back for winter sun.) With almost two acres and only five days a month of skilled help, it's important to be realistic about what can be done once one is past the age of three-score years and 10.

It helps that I prefer creating atmosphere to fussing over tidy perfection, but I do want energy to spare for tending auriculas, pelargoniums, annuals and half-hardies, as well ➤

Facing page: Dahlias twinkle like jewels through a veil of scarlet *Persicaria amplexicaulis* and azure *Perovskia*. *Below:* Box hedges wend their way through the garden, creating sheltered and discrete areas





Facing page: Purple balls of *Succisa pratensis* contrast with rust-coloured heleniums. Above: Old hedges form protective arms around the former vicarage

as greenhouse work. I would also be sad to lose the kitchen garden, which is Charles Keen's domain, where I'm allowed to add a few rows of cut flowers.

High horticulture just can't happen everywhere. Topiary and paths and edges are trim, but self-heal and plenty of moss grows on the lawn. We do stake and deadhead the grander plants and I'm thinking about Chelsea-chopping the phlox next year, which might save a bit of time. Watering on our dry soil is demanding and I find it hard to resist pots, deployed around the front and back doors and along the side of the house.

None of this is sensible, but, until it ceases to be enjoyable, I will carry on. Some older gardeners go for shrubs, but that's too static for me, although the summer garden does include a backbone of shrubs that flower well in September. *Rosa Cerise Bouquet* is wild enough to be included, but the China roses do better in the Cotswolds than old favourites such as *Rose de Rescht* and *Jacques Cartier*.

Single-flowered *Rosa chinensis mutabilis*, with petals of shot-silk pink, fading to pale-orange, and crimson Bengal Beauty both perform for months and never get blackspot. *Perovskia* is good on the dry slope above the flowerbeds; fastigate box furnishes the winter months when snowdrops carpet the beds.

Sometimes, in hot years, when everything gets a little too tousled and seedy, I begin to long for the clarity of February and March with *Crocus tommasinianus* (the true form) in pools of mauve in the orchard and snowdrops everywhere. Hellebores do well here, but so, unfortunately, does ground elder in one or two places.

This is a long battle that we will never win. I did empty one quarter of the summer garden about five years ago and used a lethal poison, which meant no planting for months, but, the following year, the elder was back again—a bit subdued, but back. Now, we live with it, digging it out where we can and, because we use plenty of half-hardies and annuals, there are moments when this is easy to do.

The garden is very private and very different from the gardens I make for clients with Pip Morrison. Paths are deliberately narrow, which makes people slow down. Hedges are cut with rounded tops, so that I hope the place feels more accessible than many gardens that open or that are featured at the height of June in magazines. This may be because one of the things I mind most about is encouraging visitors to enjoy hands-on gardening. If somewhere is less than perfect, it feels realistic, rather than unattainable.

Like all gardeners, I plan small changes, get crazes for new plants and imagine that next year will be better. Plants are unpredictable things; weather, time and maintenance all affect the end result.

The two years I have recently spent writing about one of the best managed gardens in England have made me realise how little I know. In spite of that, I still enjoy the imperfections, the struggle to make a garden work. I think one of the things all gardeners should remember is that making a garden is a process and there's never a finished product.

'Paradise and Plenty: A Rothschild Family Garden' by Mary Keen, will be published later this month (Pimpernel Press, £50)