

Owners Dominick and David have strived to make their hillside garden sit easily in the landscape. Here in front of a former cow shed, now used for tools, the couple have partly hidden an old hay rake they found on the property with lush planting dominated by native foxgloves.

Natural harmony

Dublin-based garden designer Dominick Murphy and his partner David Butler have used native plants and local materials to carefully maintain the character of their nine-acre plot in west Wicklow

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In brief

What Naturalistic garden with several distinctive areas around a farm cottage on a remote, windy hillside.

Where Co Wicklow, Ireland.

Size Nine acres.

Soil Neutral to acid.

Climate Cool temperate.

Hardiness rating USDA 8.

Looking up, or even down, at Dominick Murphy's restored farm cottage on a remote hillside in west Wicklow it's hard to detect any garden at all, which is exactly how Dominick and his partner David Butler want it to be. The gravel entrance drive sweeps down the hill past an expanse of meadow grass, intersected with wide, mown paths – an indication that this is, in fact, a gardened space, but one that subtly blends into the wider landscape of fields, hedges, stone walls, woods and rounded hills. Metal farm gates lead through a shrubby walkway that opens on to a stone terrace, one of the first spaces Dominick, a Dublin-based garden designer and horticulturist, created after clearing a thicket of spruce below the house.

From the start the couple were determined to retain the character of the nine-acre plot, with its dry-stone walls and farm buildings, and to respect its history as a place where people have lived since the Bronze Age. They also wanted a garden that would ultimately be easy to look after, and would be sustainable. The garden has evolved over the past eight years but the overall design – a series of interconnecting areas that have a similar naturalistic feel – was sketched out at the beginning by Dominick. Materials were to be re-used as much as possible. Re-routing the drive created surplus soil, which they used to furnish the tall retaining bank for a reflective pond on the western boundary where timber from felled spruce was used to make a cantilevered platform. Farm buildings that were still sound were retained, including the corrugated iron roofed barn that's a dominant feature in the walled garden, which sits directly below the house.

The two large meadows to the west of the drive are framed and separated by new hawthorn hedges. "I put in these hedges to ground everything," explains Dominick. "I don't want to be competing with the landscape."

This desire to blend in with the surroundings has driven the choice of plants throughout the garden. The meadows have no

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Blending boundaries

Dominick's tips for linking your garden to the wider landscape

1 Take a good look at the landscape you're in and note the natural colour scheme. Here, for example, there is a lot of purple and pinks from foxgloves, loosestrife and willowherb, creams and whites from elderflowers, hawthorns and cow parsley, and splashes of yellow from gorse and ragwort. Drawing on these colours as our main planting palette helps us to ensure the garden blends in with the wider landscape. But it's not only colour, there are also natural rhythms to observe. The willowherb grows in blocks, which is why we use block planting.

2 Where possible, position seats where they will offer a view out to the landscape. In a large garden like ours, it's important to have stopping points. When we walk the dog in the evening, we take a different route every time, and vary where we sit so that we can enjoy different views.

3 Create boundaries that sit comfortably with the land beyond. Our boundaries are either stone walls, which are made from pieces of granite that were on site, or hedges and trees. If we had used post-and-rail fencing or block walls they would have looked out of place both from inside and outside the garden. For the hedging, we chose hawthorn to ground everything; we didn't want to compete with the landscape.

4 Create a series of viewpoints – don't be afraid to take down trees to do this. We felled a number of mature spruces to give us wonderful views from the meadow across to two distant hills. In the walled garden we opened up a section of the wall to reveal the view to the west, and made an elevated deck that allows us to see over the wall to Lugnaquilla, the highest peak of the Wicklow mountains, to the north.

5 Use materials that come from or relate to the landscape. All the timber in this garden, including the boardwalk path that gives a dry shod, all-year route through the grassy bank above the stream, is from trees that had to be cut down. The other hard landscaping elements – grass paths, stepping stones and gravel – are all drawn from the land around us.



Dominick and David wanted a garden that would be easy to look after and sustainable



1 In the walled garden, Dominick has filled a central bed with mixed perennials, including *Ligularia stenocephala*, and used the grass *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' behind to add movement.

2 The original approach to the house is now a grassy pathway, which Dominick regularly mows, allowing the wild grass around to grow freely.

3 Timber from felled spruce was used to create the cantilevered platform over the reflective pond at the bottom of the wild garden. It's surrounded by mostly native species with a few yellow flag irises added for colour.



▷ introduced seed – they are strictly a mix of native grasses and wild flowers – and the other areas are a combination of wild species and plants that sit comfortably in shape, colour and form with the natural flora, what Dominick calls “plants that are one step up from nature”.

In the wild garden that slopes down from the gravel courtyard to the pond, shrubby plants grow directly out of the grass – they need to be robust enough to survive these demanding growing conditions – and include natives such as *Angelica sylvestris*, flag iris, gorse and dog rose and some of Dominick's ‘one step ups’ such as the hazel cultivar *Corylus maxima* ‘Purpurea’. To the north of the house is Shoe Wood, a grove of mossy-limbed elders where geraniums, epimediums, *Vinca minor* and *Hedera helix* at ground level, mix with a middle layer of ferns, *Libertia formosa*, *Kirengeshoma palmata* and *Hypericum androsaemum* and acers creating light canopies between the elders.

The influence of the late American designer James van Sweden, who was a friend of Dominick's, can be seen in the most gardened part of the plot, a walled garden with a large central bed filled with swathes of grasses and perennials, including the native moor grass *Molinia caerulea*, and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’. “I chose the grasses for the movement they bring to the garden,” says Dominick. “The deck we made that overlooks the walled garden and across to the peak of Lugnaquilla is my favourite part of the garden.”

He has allowed the occasional exotic – bamboos enclose a boundary path, creating a passage from dark to light; astelias provide structure around the terrace – but predominantly it is a garden that is in restful harmony with the surrounding countryside. □



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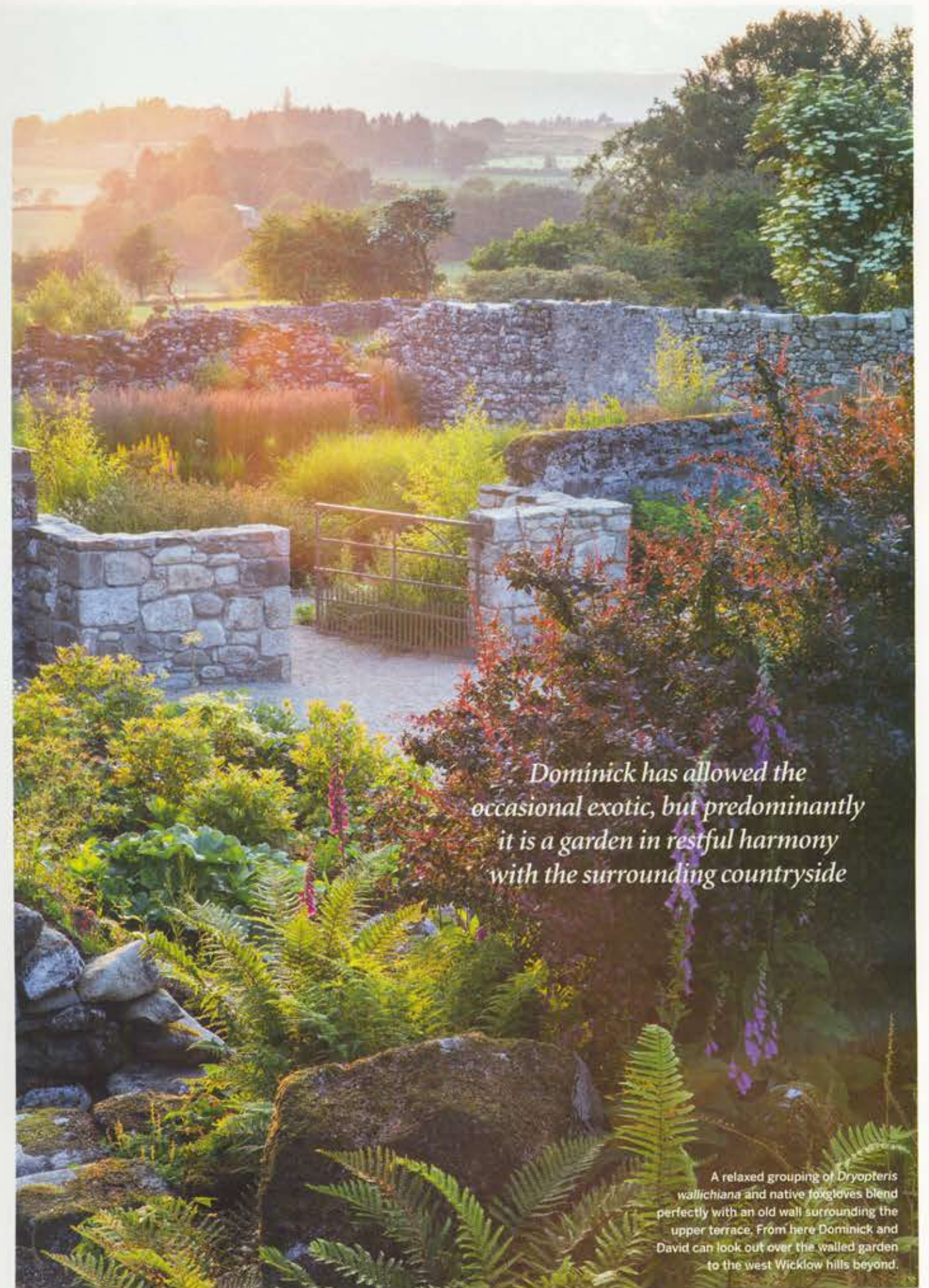
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Making an entrance

Metal gates are a dominant feature in this garden. The majority were found at local salvage yards and have been painted a restful shade of beige grey (colour reference: RAL 7006). The small gate into Shoe Wood (left) is the only original gate, and Dominick had it copied by local metal fabricator Stephen McDonald (+353 (0)89 492 4938) for the entrance to the house. Stephen also made the gate into the walled garden (right), a variant on the vernacular farm gate, with its distinctive half moon. Bars were incorporated at the base to keep rabbits out.

Dominick uses gates to announce a change of space, from meadow to driveway, from woodland to stream crossing, from gravel terrace to walled garden. “I love gates,” he explains. “To me a gate invites, it says come and see what's behind here.”



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A relaxed grouping of *Dryopteris wallichiana* and native foxgloves blend perfectly with an old wall surrounding the upper terrace. From here Dominick and David can look out over the walled garden to the west Wicklow hills beyond.