

Irish gem

Passionate plantswoman June Blake has used her painterly eye to masterfully fuse contemporary design with colourful planting in her Co. Wicklow garden

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Raised beds edged with flat, shale stones to match the house, are filled with an airy mix of wild and tame planting, including the pinks and purples of the tall *Knautia arvensis*, *K. macedonica* and *Papaver somniferum*, the edges softened by *Geranium Rozanne* (= 'Gerwat').

In brief

What Densely planted garden underpinned with strong geometric frame in the centre and softer, curving lines where the garden meets the surrounding countryside.

Where Co. Wicklow, Ireland.

Size Three acres.

Climate Cool temperate, falling to -5°C in winter.

Soil Predominantly loam with acid soil in woodland area.

Hardiness rating USDA 8a-9b.

The gravel approach to June Blake's three-acre garden surrounding a former farm steward's cottage in Co. Wicklow encapsulates the spirit of this contemporary garden that sensitively melds new with old, wild with tamed. Carved out of a sloping field, the approach retains the original width of the farmyard entrance but June has framed the central section in rusted steel, which tones perfectly with the rusted farm gate. This comfortable path runs along a north-facing border that banks up across purple, pink, bronze, cream and green foliage and flowers to a head-high screen of thalictrum, veronicastrum and filipendula.

The rest of the garden is revealed via two entrance paths: the lower one leading to semi-shaded woodland planting and the upper one opening on to a stone terrace. Here the sea of perennials and grasses in a grid of nine rectangular beds is framed magically by a contorted *Larix decidua*, rescued by June when an oppressive wall of laurels and sycamores were taken out soon after she moved into the house in 1998.

June came late to horticulture, after many years dividing her time between her jewellery business and the family sheep farm. But plants are in her blood. Her brother Jimi is a renowned plantsman whose own garden, Hunting Brook, is up the road from June's. It was Jimi who persuaded her to re-train in horticulture, after she'd retired and moved from the neighbouring family farm, leading

her to clear space for a nursery. A couple of years later, she laid out the garden.

The central raised beds, edged in flat shale stones and connected by wide gravel paths, were inspired by the strong lines of the house. "I wanted everything to connect back to the house, to a window, a door, the line of contrasting bricks, the roof lines," she says. The central path leads up through the densely planted beds, past an arc of umbrella-shaped *Aralia echinocaulis* to wooden sleeper steps set into mown grass. At the top is a grassy mount. June always leads visitors to the mount first as the view it offers not only encompasses the whole garden, including the farmyard and its restored cow house (an award-winning holiday house), but also the borrowed landscape of trees and distant hills. There's not a house in sight.

From here she takes them round the meadow, studded in spring with red tulips and camassias and now an airy confection of *Knautia arvensis* and *K. macedonica*, down the grassy bank that skirts the garden on the far side. Suddenly, the upturned trunk of a dead elm comes into sight and below it a rectangular reflecting pool, delineated in rusted steel and kissed by the flower heads of *Stipa gigantea*, which dangle over the stone wall. Although this is a garden of contrasts, nothing jars thanks to the use of local materials – much re-used from the farm itself, such as the seat made from a felled sweet chestnut and the zinc drinking

1 Warped railway sleepers punctuate a path mown into grass through swathes of meadow planting that leads to the top of the mount.

2 In this border a pale-flowered *Rodgersia pinnata* stands out against the lime green of ferns and *Alchemilla mollis*.

3 On the left, self-seeding *Papaver somniferum* and *P. rhoeas* add vibrant notes to a mound of fresh foliage of *Crocodylia 'Lucifer'*, punctuated by purple-leaved *Senecio cristobalensis*. The magenta-purple flowers of *Geranium 'Anne Thomson'* soften the path's edge.

4 June allows the opium poppy, *Papaver somniferum*, to grow where it self seeds.

5 The restful reflecting pool is framed by two simple seats in polished concrete.

6 To the front of a busy border, rosy-red *Achillea millefolium* 'Red Velvet', is contrasted with cool blues of *Allium cristophii* and *Nepeta 'Six Hills Giant'*.

Balancing design and naturalistic planting

"It takes a lot of manipulation to make a garden look wild," admits June. Although she tends to let nature take the lead when it comes to placing wild flowers – allowing plants such as poppies or angelica, to grow where they self seed – June warns against letting nature take its course. "If you leave angelica you'll have nothing but angelica," she

says. "You need to be very selective and weed out unwanted seedlings."

Grasses, she feels, give almost any design a wild look. She especially loves *Stipa tenuissima* ("very soft, very tactile"), *S. gigantea*, *Eragrostis curvula* and *Miscanthus nepalensis*, and uses these throughout her garden, cleverly creating a link

to the wild grasses that grow in the outer fields.

At the edge of the fields she uses wild flowers too thuggish for a border, such as willow herb, to blur the boundaries, allowing the occasional better-mannered field flower to cross over to link with her garden design.

She also likes to use cultivars that are closely

related to their wild cousins, such as *Filipendula rubra* 'Venusta', which although similar to the meadowsweet that grows wild by roads is a more sophisticated pink colour. "Another group of plants I'm using a lot at the moment," she says, "are single-flowered, species dahlias. They look great and are extremely bee-friendly."



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8 of June's favourite plants

1 *Primula florindae* Keillour hybrids
Gloriously scented and available in a range of colours. The red and orange ones go well with silver pulmonarias, and the seedheads hold up well in winter.

2 *Geranium* 'Anne Thomson'
I love the deep magenta colour of this geranium and the fact that you don't have to cut it back after the first flush of flowers. The leaf is a lovely fresh green. 45cm. AGM*. RHS H7. USDA 4a-8b†.

3 *Knautia arvensis*
A wonderful tall knautia for a meadow setting. I cut the main growing centre out in May, which makes it branch more and means you don't have to stake it. 1.5m.

4 *Pulmonaria officinalis* 'Blake's Silver'
This is my own introduction, which I use as a foliage plant in the woodland walk. It has large silver leaves and pink flowers. After flowering, cut it back and the foliage will increase hugely. 45cm. USDA 4a-8b.

5 *Thalictrum* 'Splendide'
This very tall thalictrum has a lovely dark stem, fresh-green leaves and pure purple in the flower. It's sterile and flowers for a long time. 2.4m. USDA 4a-7b.

6 *Rodgersia pinnata* 'Perthshire Bronze'
The leaves are a wonderful mix of red, bronze and green, and the soft-pink flower is beautiful and scented. The flowers are followed by deep-red seedheads. It prefers moist conditions but doesn't like to be crowded. 1.2m.

7 *Epipactis gigantea*
This hardy, North American orchid, which tolerates dry conditions here, spreads slowly but reliably. Plant it near eye level to see the detail in the flowers. 45cm. USDA 7b.

8 *Eragrostis curvula*
This medium-sized arching grass is very good at the edge of the border. It has a long season of interest, flowering from midsummer to the end of autumn. 90cm. USDA 9a-10b.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.
†Hardiness ratings given where available.

▷ troughs that now serve as planters at the entrance to the yard.

Each of the main beds has its own identity – there's a hot bed, a big and bold one, a newly replanted airy bed that segues into the meadow. In some, one or two plants are dominant, such as the achillea bed close to the terrace. "The most important thing with this bed – it's the first one I see every morning – is that it looks good all the time," says June. "In spring it's packed with tulips and alliums, followed by achilleas and *Knautia macedonica*. *Chionochloa rubra* is its anchor plant in winter." Taller plants, such as thalictrum, actea, ligularia and *Artemisia lactiflora*, form leitmotifs across several beds and geraniums and silver pulmonarias soften the edges.

"Plants have to work very hard for me," she says. "I don't want a plant that's going to die after a year, as do most echinaceas."

Although June has tried lots of unusual plants she feels it's important to edit and admits she's just cut down a swathe of *Knautia macedonica* in full flower, because it was blocking the view from the house. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

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Open April to September, Wednesday to Sunday, 11am-5.30pm.

June cleverly mixes interesting shape and careful colour combinations in her borders.

