

In brief

What A country cottage garden.

Where Hitchin, Hertfordshire.

Points of interest Borders, vegetable garden, woodland, wildlife and ponds.

Size Half an acre.

Soil Wet clay.

Climate Cold and frosty winters; usually mild summers.

Hardiness rating USDA 8.

Embracing nature

A long-abandoned cottage garden has been given new life and a distinctive charm developed over 20 years by owners Julie and Tim Wise

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS

The generously deep main borders are filled with the spires of blue camassias, offset by pink silene, and backed by contrastingly neat yew hedges

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If you live in a very pretty cottage, surrounded by woodland, then it needs to have a good name. Rustling End Cottage is pleasantly bucolic, and effortlessly conjures up images of autumn leaves, the scent of somnolent roses and the memory of flocks of chattering coal tits. This has been home to Julie and Tim Wise for the past 20 years, over which time they have created a glorious cottage garden.

"When we first saw this house it was not much more than a shed in a field," remembers Julie. The garden was a tangle of undergrowth, with the only sign of cultivation being the fading outline of a small vegetable patch and a couple of stray dahlias. This did not deter them – Tim even proposed to Julie in the garden; they weren't allowed inside the house in case the roof fell in.

While Tim got on with renovating the house, Julie started on the garden. "I had no real idea where I was going but started by making a little garden by the back door." She then spent every available moment in libraries and visiting gardens, notebook at the ready.

She had one big advantage over most gardeners: her job as a senior cabin crew member with British Airways meant that, as well as visiting NGS gardens in English villages, she also visited botanic gardens in pretty much every major city from Sydney to San Francisco.

So, loaded with information and inspiration, she returned to Rustling End and set about making a garden. "Rooms," she decided, "were the answer. I liked the idea of not being able to see everything at once." The first step was to plant hedges of hornbeam. "The ground here is wet and heavy in places so that seemed the most sensible option." These hedges enclosed generously planted beds. Although the garden is only half an acre, the main path is 2.4m wide and the flanking borders 5m deep. "I based the path's width on two people walking together – two quite large people."

This path leads up to the house and forms the main axis of the garden. It goes from the hot terrace out towards the Wareham lawn, which surrounds a pond and is the only formal grass in the garden. To one side is another

1 The view from the terrace of the borders bursting with lime *Euphorbia characias*, blue *Camassia leichtlinii* subsp. *suksdorfii* and pink *Silene dioica*.

2 The revolving summerhouse in the woodland garden with the Japanese snowball, *Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Mariesii'.

3 The arching stems of Solomon's seal hang delicately over a profusion of other flowers.

4 The Wareham lawn offers some calm among the exuberance of the rest of the garden.

5 The woodland garden features purple-leaved *Lysimachia ciliata* 'Firecracker' growing through *Euphorbia griffithii* 'Robert Poland' with its bright orange-red flowers.

6 The leaves of the black elder *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* 'Black Lace' contrasts with the pale pink *Persicaria bistorta* and red campion beneath.

7 The terrace has drought-tolerant planting, including a pair of tall, thin *Cupressus sempervirens*, grass *Stipa gigantea* and sculptural-leaved *Acanthus mollis*.

Julie's tips for creating a cottage garden

1 Cottage gardens need a feeling of abundance, with lots of plants in every cranny. The secret is not to let it become fussy, so keep the palette simple. Using big groups of a few varieties and repeating them through borders is far more effective than single specimens.

2 "When we first got here the place was alive with birds, but they seemed to

lessen the more work we did in the garden." While the tangled brambles may be an inconvenience, they are home to creatures. Julie put back lots of hedges to give shelter and food for wildlife.

3 Every garden, no matter how natural it looks, needs care and attention. Without good maintenance the more thuggish plants take over and nature reclaims the garden.

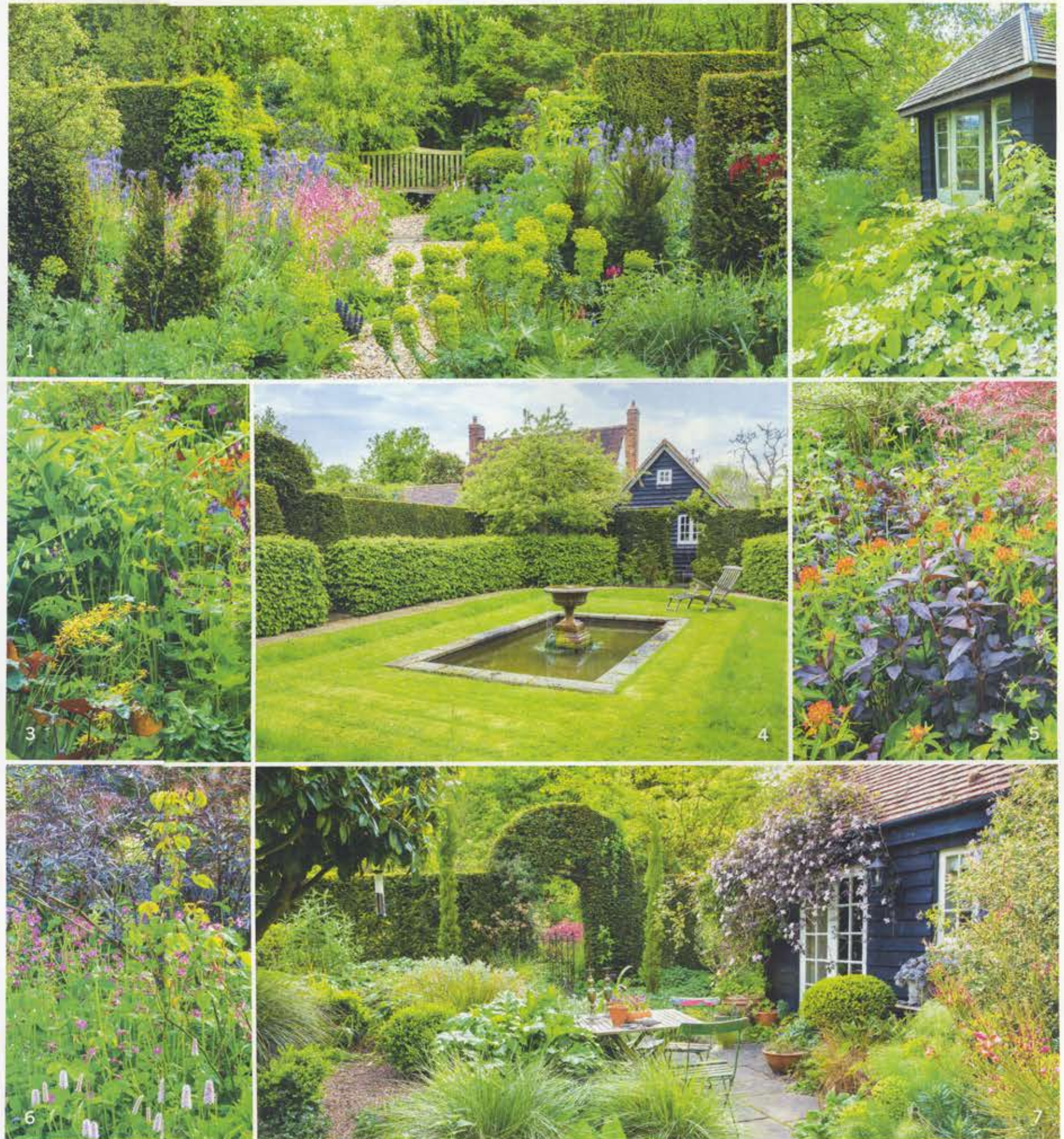
That said, try to make it as easy as possible; no one wants to be a slave to their garden.

4 Julie is quite random with her plant selection. "I have no colour scheme and am very happy with colour clashes – it all just adds to the excitement."

5 "One of my favourite parts of the garden is the paddock." It is the part that is most untouched: fenced off

but left with a corridor for the deer, and a wild-flower meadow. It's where country cottage meets countryside.

6 Contrast is important. In the front garden big wedges of box squeeze on to the paths and a chestnut tree in the corner is under-planted with ivy. "We also planted the enormous rambling rose, *Rosa mulliganii*, which snakes up into the tree."



8 of Julie's favourite plants

1 *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis'

Very long flowering with amazing gradation of colour from pink to peach. "I first saw it in Dan Pearson's garden at Home Farm and have loved it ever since." 1.5m. AGM*. RHS H5. USDA 5b-10b†.

2 *Camassia leichtlinii* subsp. *suksdorfii*

One of the very best early summer bulbs, with a beautifully clear blue colour. Goes brilliantly with grasses and fills a useful gap before the proper summer plants take over. 1-1.5m.

3 *Papaver orientale* 'Beauty of Livermere'

The brightest and best oriental poppy with flowers the colour of cherry-stained lips. Cut back immediately after flowering because it dies back very messily.

4 *Valeriana officinalis*

This works really well in this heavy soil. Tall and elegant with white or pale pink flowers in summer.

5 *Anemanthella lessoniana*

The pheasant tail grass is an excellent evergreen foil for most herbaceous plants. Not very long lived but readily seeds itself.

6 *Geranium* 'Ann Folkard'

A glorious magenta flower with lime-coloured leaves. A great cottage garden plant that scrambles through its neighbours. 50cm. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 5a-8b.

7 *Lysimachia ephemera*

An unusual plant but excellent in heavier soil. The leaves are a very attractive dusty grey, topped by small white flowers. Great as a foil to brighter colours. AGM.

8 *Silene dioica*

The native red campion. A prolific self-seeder so be wary, but no cottage garden should be without it as it looks delightful and has very striking seedheads as well. 90cm. USDA 5a-9b.



View through to the woodland garden with *Lonicera fragophylla* weaving through the yew, with mass planting of geranium beneath.

▷ path that snakes off into a wilder woodland garden based around a handsome old oak, around which Julie has planted stands of *Rubus* 'Benenden' and a fine *Euonymus hamiltonians* (an attractive form of spindle). There is also a neat vegetable garden and a greenhouse full of aconiums.

Three things drive Julie's passion for gardening. The first is the simple pleasure of having a garden. The second is nature: she is rightly proud of the ecosystems she has helped create. "We have recorded 62 types of bird, 21 species of butterfly, 45 different moths and 19 types of lichen on

the front gate alone." The third is an urge to share her garden. "We have evening openings with wine, which is popular."

As for the future, Julie and Tim are suffering slightly from the 20-year itch. I don't know what their next project will be, but I hope they ask me back to visit. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Rustling End, Codicote, Hitchin, Hertfordshire SG4 8TD.

Website rustlingend.com.

Open 1 August and 13 September under the National Gardens Scheme (ngs.org.uk).

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.

†Hardiness ratings given where available.