

Rock opera

Rock-garden maestro Peter Berg regards each stone as an instrument with its own song to sing, and in this steeply sloping garden in Luxembourg he orchestrates those rocks with a chorus of plants in magnificent harmony

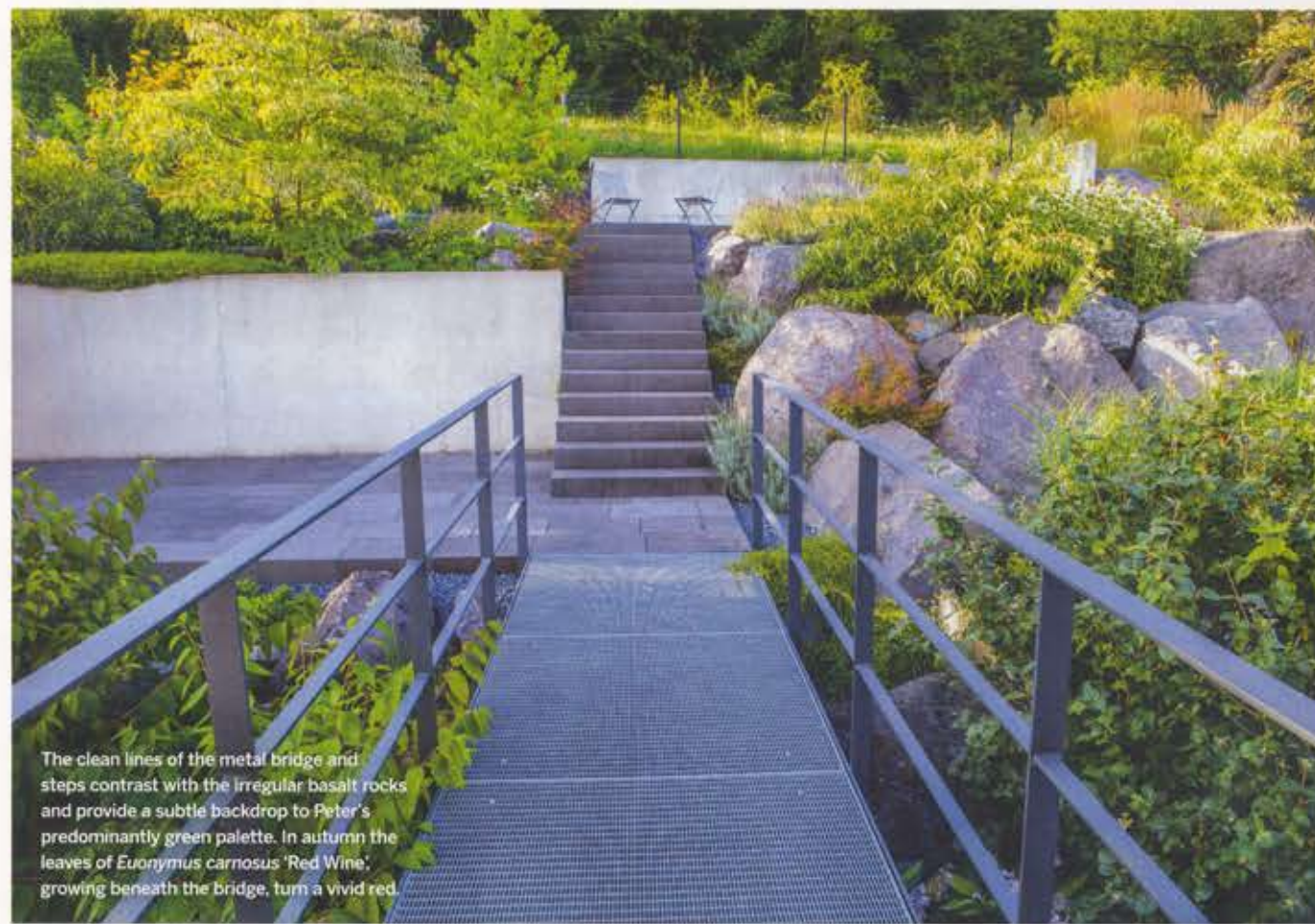
WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS



In brief

What A seriously sloping modern rock garden.
Where Gutland, Luxembourg.
Size 750 square metres.
Street level is 11m higher than the garden's end.
Soil Heavy clay.
Climate Cold winters with snow, hot summers.
Hardiness rating USDA 6.

Left Thanks to Peter's careful placement of basalt boulders and sympathetic planting scheme, the modern house appears almost to rise naturally out of a rocky mountain. Using a variety of trees and grasses Peter has given the garden a strong structure to which the owners are beginning to add their own selection of perennial favourites.



The clean lines of the metal bridge and steps contrast with the irregular basalt rocks and provide a subtle backdrop to Peter's predominantly green palette. In autumn the leaves of *Euonymus carnosus* 'Red Wine' growing beneath the bridge, turn a vivid red.

Ever since the first man swung the first mattock into the first divot we've been battling with slopes. The problem was solved by ancient civilisations by simply building walls and making flat terraces upon which they could grow rice or wheat or even flowers. The centuries have passed and technology has worked wonders but, no matter how sophisticated society may have become there will always be gardens with slopes. This is particularly true in Europe where there are more, and bigger, mountains. Fortunately the Europeans also have a genius in their midst. And that genius is Peter Berg.

When Peter started out 30 years ago, rock gardens were often little more than a heap of broken paving stones that looked more like dogs' graves than a mountain; a misguided homage to the great edifices built by, for example, Joseph Paxton at Chatsworth – updated so convincingly by Dan Pearson at this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show. It is a style of gardening that sadly seems to have lost its popular appeal – until you spend time with Peter.

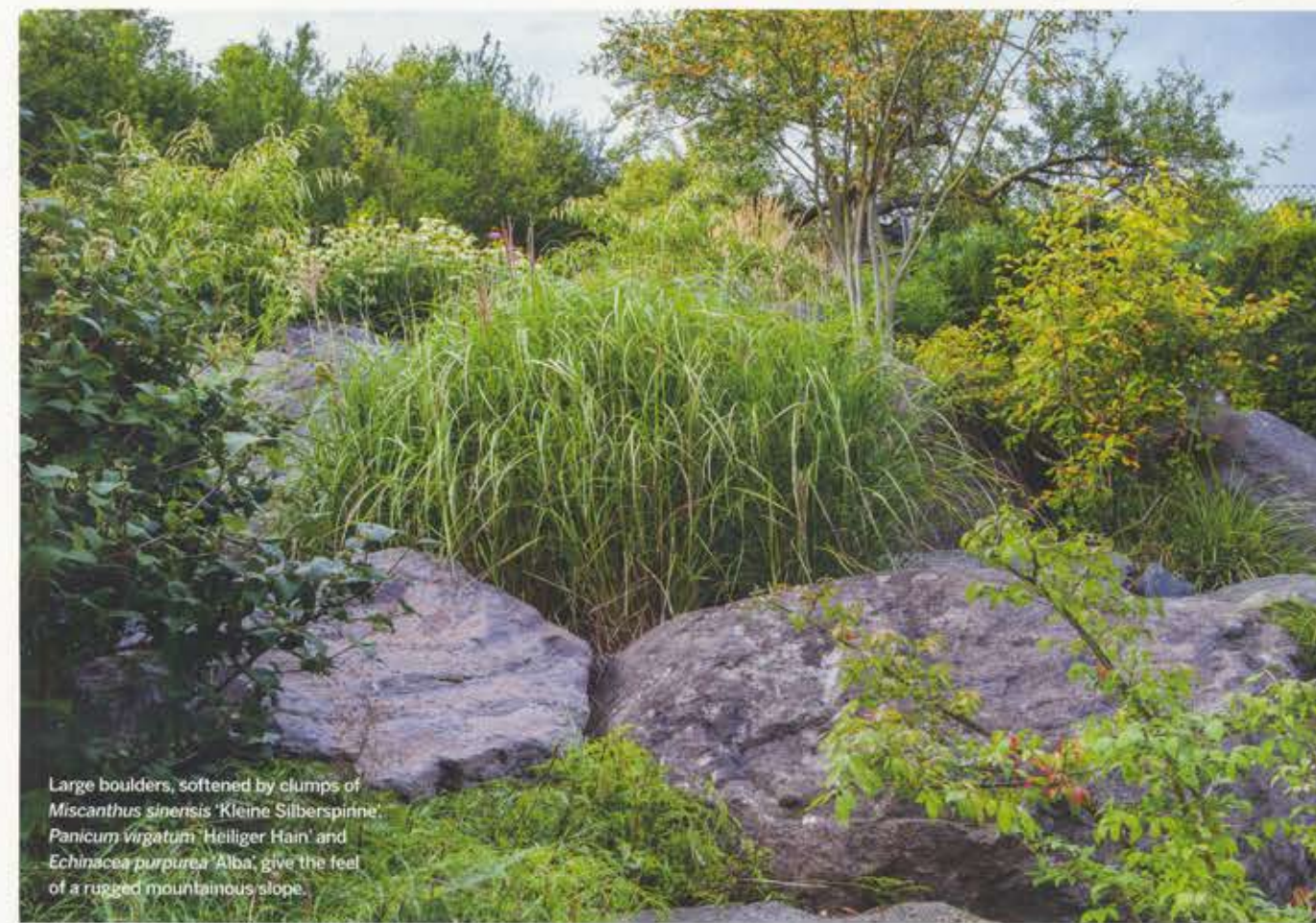
Peter was brought up in the Eifel region of Germany where the Ardennes meet the Rhenish Massif in a great geological crescendo that produces amazing veins of great stone. Rock is in his blood and he uses great boulders of basalt in his gardens. This project in the Gutland region of Luxembourg is a case in point. "I was brought in before the house was built," says Peter, "which is the best time as it means that we can co-operate with both the architect and the client to make sure that both garden and house join together well."

At that point the plot was a bit of empty grassland sloping steeply up a hill, but by the time Peter began landscaping, a crisp, modern house had been built and the garden was basically a 10m-deep hole. Peter's job was to fill that hole with a garden working up from the house. He began, as he always does, with a visit to the quarry where he chooses his rocks. These are then ferried to the site and lifted high over the house by crane to where Peter stands looking at the rocks as they fly over his head deciding where each should

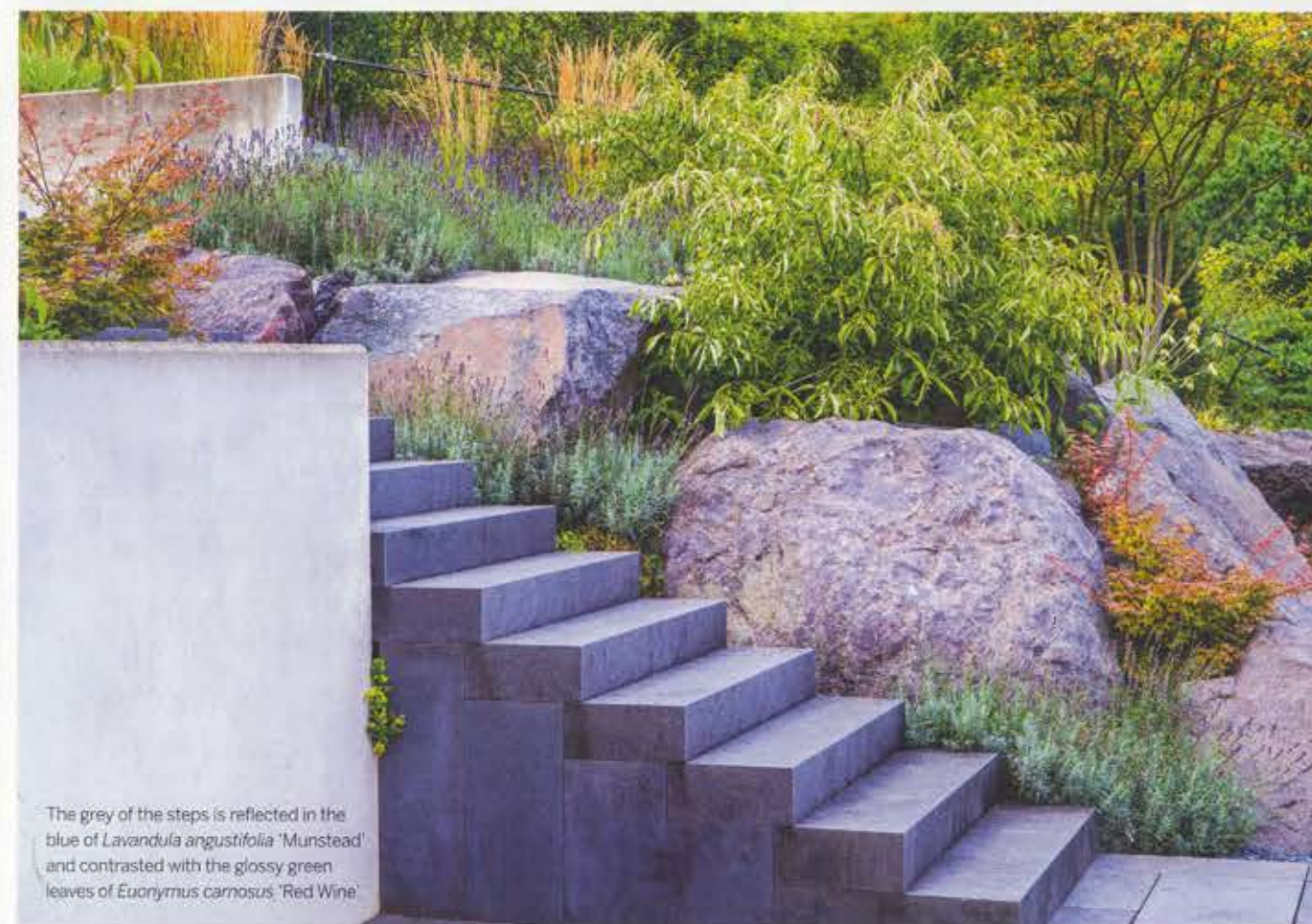
Suggestions for slopes

Most gardens have some sort of level change, which can usually be solved by steps or slopes. For more challenging slopes there are other techniques to try

- **Terracing** is the simplest solution. Break the slope into a series of plateaux with retaining walls of brick, stone, gabions or sleepers.
- If you want to try replicating Peter's rockwork technique, make sure your **rocks are as big as you can find** – and move. In the garden set them in a rough approximation of how they were in the ground. Make sure that the layers run the right way.
- If planning a grassy slope **make sure you can mow it safely**. Steps should always be as generous as possible. Make them wide and deep, which will also provide you with space to place containers on each of the treads.
- Planting works well on slopes as it **gives extra height** to whatever is at the top, but when planning bear in mind that the top of any slope will always be drier than the bottom.



Large boulders, softened by clumps of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Kleine Silberspinne', *Panicum virgatum* 'Helliger Hain' and *Echinacea purpurea* 'Alba', give the feel of a rugged mountainous slope.



The grey of the steps is reflected in the blue of *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Munstead' and contrasted with the glossy green leaves of *Euonymus carnosus* 'Red Wine'.



The sloping site allows Peter to play with different heights, creating layers of interest using only a limited palette of mostly trees and grasses with occasional perennials.

▷ go. In this garden he built up layer upon layer of interlocking rock over the course of six days. There is no concrete; it is basically an enormous dry-stone wall.

Within this wall he has created flat areas for planting, terraces and steps, made from cut basalt slabs, a vegetable garden, beehives and beautifully placed trees. The rocks also form pathways through the garden – nowhere is inaccessible – and flat rocks make seating areas and tables. Peter describes the process rather beautifully: “Each stone is like an instrument, which plays its own song; my job is to bring them all together like an orchestra so that there is harmony between rocks and, equally importantly, in the spaces in between.” These spaces are planted with a limited palette of plants. Peter draws no planting plans, instead he talks to nurseries and wanders around choosing each plant beginning with some magnificent trees and going down to simple combinations of perennials. “I like to plant a grass and intersperse it with one or two perennials – always using only green and the colours of the sky – for example *Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Hameln’ with *Geranium* ‘Philippe Vapelle’ and the later flowering *Ceratostigma willmottianum*.”

All of Peter’s gardens have this extraordinary balanced calm. Enormous lumps of ancient stone have been sensitively teased into place so that they not only form beautiful gardens but also seem to have been returned to the earth where they will sit contentedly watching the flowers grow for the next million years. Like I said, the man’s aw genius. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

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Peter’s recommendations for rock-garden planting

Cornus controversa

A great tree that Peter likes for its tiered shape. With some judicious pruning, it can be remarkably transparent. 9m. USDA 5a-8b.

Quercus palustris

The North American pin oak grows far better in continental climates than other oaks and has richer autumn colour. 12m. AGM*. RHS H6. USDA 4a-8b.

Gleditsia triacanthos f. inermis

Another tree that is quite transparent, although Peter only likes the green varieties, never the yellow. Works particularly well as a multi-stem. 12m. USDA 3a-8b.

Miscanthus sinensis ‘Adagio’

A small and compact ornamental grass that is fantastic in snow. 3.6m. USDA 5a-9b.

Pennisetum alopecuroides ‘Hameln’

Perfect for softening the edges of rocks. Peter uses it a lot with sky-coloured perennials. 90cm. USDA 5a-9b.

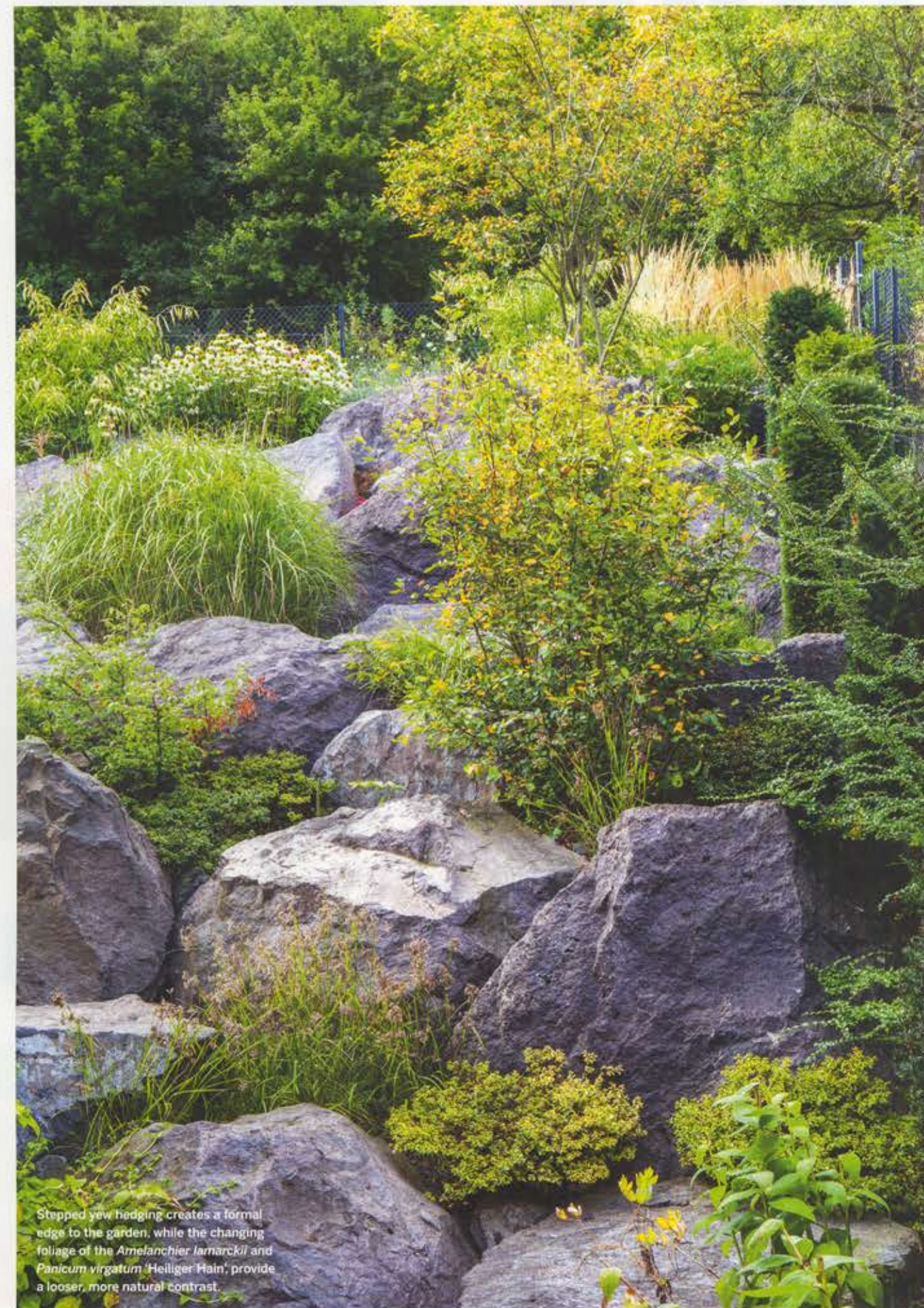
Salvia nemorosa ‘Caradonna’

A perennial that requires no staking is a bonus for Peter as he says he has no time for that sort of thing. 60cm. AGM. RHS H7. USDA 4a-8b.

Herniaria glabra

Provides excellent cover for tree roots and as rock edging. Pretty much indestructible. 15cm. USDA 7a-11.

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



Stepped yew hedging creates a formal edge to the garden, while the changing foliage of the *Amelanchier lamarckii* and *Panicum virgatum* ‘Heiliger Hain’ provide a looser, more natural contrast.