

In brief

Name Manor House, Ayot St Lawrence

What Private garden with formal lawns and topiary, and walled garden containing productive vegetable plot.

Points of interest Walled garden, parterre, neoclassical pavillion and new Courtyard Garden.

Where Hertfordshire

Size Three and a half acres

Soil Heavy clay

Climate Mild but level and open to winds

Hardiness rating USDA 8

Bright-orange *Tulipa 'Ballerina'* light up the Courtyard Garden. Here, designer Julie Toll has used copper beech and green beech domes to break up the planting in the beds, while yew blocks and pillars of hornbeam create an original backdrop. The bricks for the path were hand made by Coleford Brick & Tile (colefordbrick.co.uk) in the Forest of Dean.

Modern manors

Take one Tudor manor, two owners with contrasting styles, add the design flair of Julie Toll and the result is a calm, well-balanced garden that oozes contemporary style while remaining loyal to its glorious past

WORDS TIM RICHARDSON PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS

This is not a garden achieved on a wing and a prayer: successive owners have invested a great deal in the garden over the past decades, and it shows

With elegant formal areas defined by topiary, let-it-all-hang-out herbaceous plantings and a serious productive walled garden, the garden at the Manor House, Ayot St Lawrence, apparently boasts 'a bit of everything' in quite a small area. But it holds it all in balance thanks to a high standard of continuing maintenance. This is not a garden achieved on a wing and a prayer: successive owners have invested a great deal in the garden over the past decades – and it shows.

Designer Julie Toll, who's been associated with the garden since 1996, says the owners buck gender stereotypes because "she loves formal topiary and he likes informal plantings". The garden's oscillation between these opposing interests is one of its strengths.

The original redbrick manor house was built in 1536 by Nicholas Bristowe, a keeper of the crown jewels, on land owned by Sir Thomas Parr, father of Katherine Parr (Henry VIII's last wife). Notwithstanding the distant royal connection, this was, and remains, a small manor house of the kind inhabited by gentleman farmers, although it was 'modernised' during the reign of Queen Anne with a new western façade.

The first thing visitors see is the parterre that prefaces the delightfully 'olde-worlde' Tudor front of the house. This is visible through the Peacock Gates, which form a break in the long, beech hedge that bounds the eastern side of the garden. Originally designed by John Brookes, the parterre is a perfect counterweight to the architecture. Julie respected its existing dimensions but updated it by adding a brick pathway, box pyramids and plantings (tulips in spring, then a dwarf patio rose) in the box compartments.

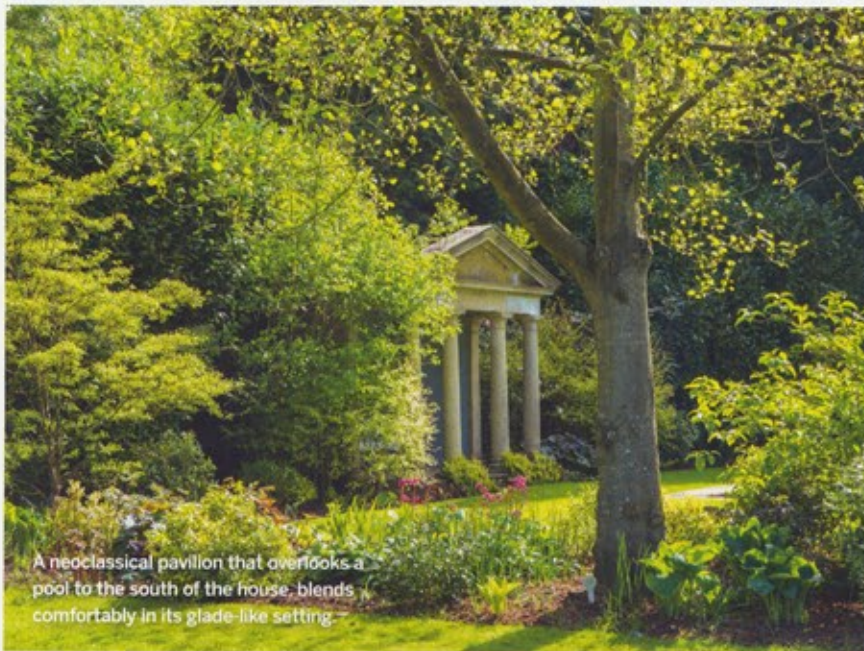
Moving from here to the south side of the house the formality continues in the form of a small neoclassical pavilion in 18th-century



Orange 'Ballerina' tulips add a warm note to the formal box parterre – and a heady scent in spring.



Specimen trees, such as this *Cornus* in the lawn near the new parking area, provide focal points throughout the garden.



A neoclassical pavilion that overlooks a pool to the south of the house, blends comfortably in its glade-like setting.



Pleached hedges and clipped yew balls continue the topiary theme into this section of the walled garden, marked by softer planting. A stainless steel fountain by Arcangel Metalwork provides a contemporary flourish to the central pool.

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▷ spirit with a long rectangular pool before it. Mature trees, including a fine *Liriodendron*, help to create a glade-like setting and prevent this from coming across as a 1980s-style accoutrement. Julie has added twin borders to flank the canal, with *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Rosea' and *Aster amellus* 'Veilchenkönigin' singing out at different seasons.

The west lawn is overlooked by the Queen Anne façade, where a small terrace is bordered by a low box hedge and pink dwarf rose, with *Choisya ternata* Sundance (= 'Lich'), hebes, euphorbia and the tender *Dregea sinensis* growing against the house. This last shrub is one of the unusual plants that – along with specimen trees around the west lawn, such as *Quercus rubra* and various magnolias – are the legacy of its former owner Jacqueline Duncan, head of Inchbald School of Design.

A converted wooden barn to the northwest of the house has been dignified by a quartet of sentry hornbeam domes with clipped *Pittosporum* balls below. Around the adjacent swimming pool, several *Cornus mas* specimens announce herbaceous borders dominated by garnet penstemons, sedums, heucheras, lilacs and *Physocarpus opulifolius* Lady in Red (= 'Tuilad'), while yew cubes lend the note of structural formality that is a constant in this garden.

From here a door leads into the Courtyard Garden, informally named 'the curvy path garden', where hornbeam trees, yew blocks and domes of chestnut – both green and copper – create a dynamic and intriguing structure and a feeling of flow through the space. "I wanted to create a pleasant journey from the house to the walled garden and the stable yard," explains Julie. "The owners walk through this several times a day." Height is provided by groups of *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii*, while the planting moves ▷

Elements of structure

Julie has updated John Brookes's parterre (pictured), with box pyramids and also replaced some of the original gravel with brick paving.

In the apple orchard (see page 45) Julie has used non-standard topiary shapes, mainly variations on the lollipop and cakestand themes. "I tend to resist using standard shapes," she says. "I always go to Belgian or German topiary nurseries to find unusual specimens."

Around the Courtyard Garden (see page 38), Julie has planted a row of striking hornbeam lollipops. "I wanted to screen the cars," she says, "but I didn't want a solid hedge. So I planted blocks of yew hedge and a tree between each."

Within the the Courtyard Garden, Julie has placed copper beech and green beech domes to break up softer plantings of *Tulipa* 'Ballerina' in spring and, in summer, *Rosa Sweet Dream* (= 'Frymihicot').

The metalwork gates at the entrance to the kitchen garden (see page 44) are flanked by a pair of stepped hedges – another example of Julie's non-standard box topiaries. These bookend a paved path flanked by apple trees.

Julie has also dotted several specimen trees around the garden, including *Cornus mas* and the peel-bark maple, *Acer griseum*, that work well with the predominantly shrub-based planting.

Design features

1 The Pear Tree Gates to the walled garden, are one of several pairs of decorative gates in the garden that, along with statues and other work, were commissioned from Arcangel Metalwork (arcangelmetalwork.co.uk).

2 The aluminium conservatory was made to a bespoke design by Alitex (alitex.co.uk). It contains citrus plants and tender specimens, such as *Tibouchina urvilleana*. At the centre of the vegetable garden, the pool (just visible in the centre of the image) was inspired by a well Julie once saw in a German monastery. It was made by Access Garden Products of Northamptonshire (garden-products.co.uk).

3 Julie used contemporary Corten steel for the edging against the raised beds in one section of the walled garden – “I thought it would not be good to be a slave to historical precedent throughout the garden,” she says.

▷ from orange ‘Ballerina’ tulips and alliums in spring, through rudbeckia, echinacea, panicum and stipa grasses, to kniphofia, amsonia and *Euphorbia amygdaloides* ‘Purpurea’ later in the season.

The walled garden is announced by Julie’s non-standard topiary in the apple orchard and allée. Spring bulbs abound beneath the apple trees, including camassias, tulips, narcissi and bluebells. Beyond, there are abundant quarters devoted to herbs, fruit and vegetables, divided by pleached hornbeam hedges. One distinctive feature is the many sitting places across the garden. This is a space designed to be enjoyed as well as worked.

The exterior of the walled garden is the site of a long, shrub border, of interest in its own right, with *Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’ and *Ilex crenata*, enlivened by daylilies and a host of other flowering plants. There is detail to be discovered throughout this garden, such as shade-loving plants and more topiary near the new parking area. For this is an intensely worked garden that never stands still. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address The Manor House, Ayot St Lawrence, Welwyn, Hertfordshire AL6 9BP.
Open 17 May, 11am–5pm, under the National Gardens Scheme (ngs.org.uk).



Spring flowers abound in the meadow grass beneath the mature apple trees. The informality of this orchard is playfully offset by the miniature lollipop yew topiary.