



The spreading boughs of a sweet chestnut shade two reclining chairs, which overlook one of the wild flower meadows surrounding the garden.

COUNTRY SCHEME

INTO THE WILD

Boundaries blur in this Buckinghamshire garden where formality gives way to rolling landscape

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Even in the most formal area of the garden, planting is relaxed and meadow-like, with poppies, purple-spiked *Salvia nemorosa*, and a delightful little white clover, *Trifolium ochroleucon*. The metal bench is framed by box roundels and backed by yew hedging.



What looks like a water feature in the middle of the parterre garden is actually a pool where Alessandra's two young daughters like to swim.



The original terrace has been softened by garden designer James Alexander-Sinclair, 07515 336356, jamesalexandersinclair.com, who put in four beds and steps leading down to the lawn.



The gravel garden (also right) opens off the kitchen where *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' and statuesque cardoons lend colour and texture.



Contained by a mature beech hedge, the greenhouse is where Alessandra grows dozens of varieties of tomato.

Five years ago, Alessandra and James Mark moved from Tuscany to Buckinghamshire. Since then, they have transformed an unpromising garden, with flat lawns and little planting, into a floral paradise alive with butterflies, bees and birds. The position is majestic: at the top of a wooded valley overlooking the Chilterns and surrounded by parkland trees, including a towering sweet chestnut and beech with which Alessandra fell in love. "They were the reason we bought the house," she explains. "You cannot buy trees like that; but you can do up a house."

Alessandra describes the 1920s thatched house as "an oddity" as it bears a resemblance to a South African ranch but with Arts and Crafts detailing. It was in poor condition when they took it on, but Alessandra knew she could cope; it was the garden that was more perplexing.

The Marks' previous home had been in Tuscany, amid vineyards and olive groves. "I did the garden there myself because it was all quite simple," says Alessandra. "Here, everything was sloping in different directions and was far too complicated for me. I needed a designer to deal with the various levels."

Alessandra turned to James Alexander-Sinclair. "I had never used a designer before," she says, "but James followed my brief beautifully." Once

they had decided on the basic structure, they worked through the planting together, with James introducing Alessandra to unfamiliar wild flowers and cottage garden plants. "I now have flowerbeds that change every month and are full of new gems."

"I wanted wilderness and romanticism within a formal structure," Alessandra explains. The different levels of the garden actually lent themselves to achieving this. There is a formal area of about two acres, then the land drops away to fields, an orchard and woodland. Even around the house, there are no hard and fast divisions: the planting in each part flows out into the other spaces and the countryside beyond.

A slab-like terrace outside the house was broken up and softened with four beds, divided by passageways, with steps leading down from each to the lawn. Filled with white *Rosa* 'Penelope' and *Dianthus carthusianorum*, they reach their peak in high summer.

The main set piece is a parterre garden framed by Cotswolds stone walls on two sides with a raised water feature at its centre which, despite its formal appearance, is in fact a swimming pool for Alessandra's two daughters. It is encircled by four beds of cottage garden plants, which offset the harder lines of the structure. Planting here includes white foxgloves, campanula, *Sanguisorba armena*, lavender and

astrantias. Beyond, Alessandra's tennis court is half-hidden behind two low hedges, a yew and a line of pleached limes.

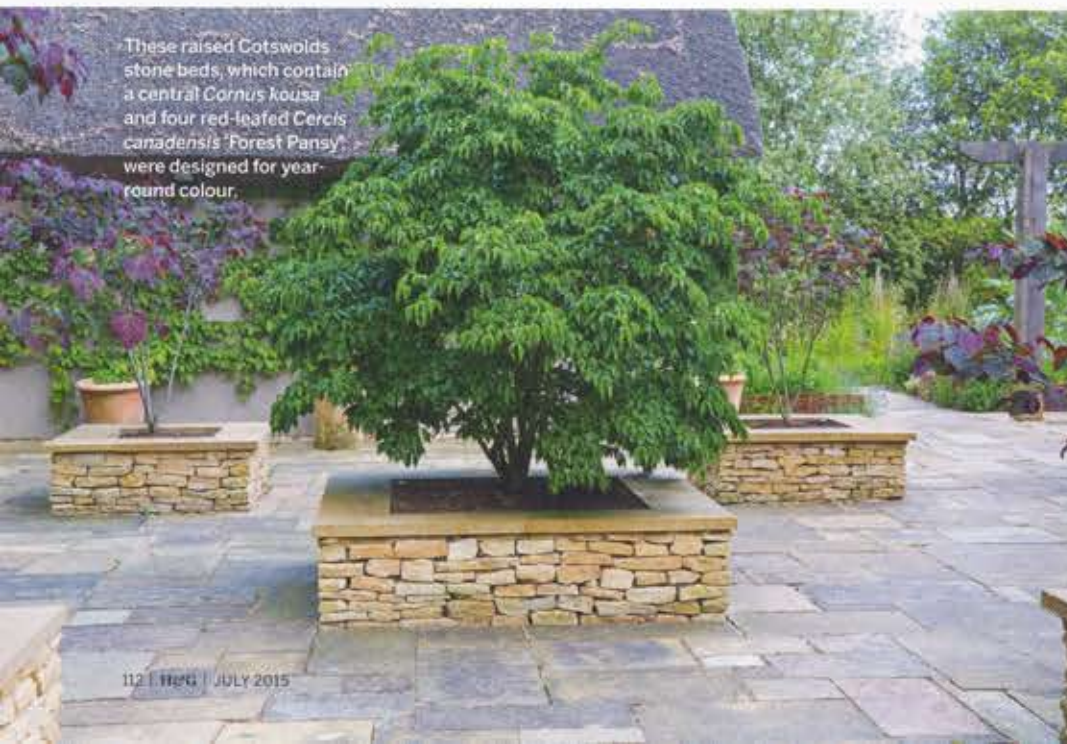
Outside the kitchen is a romantic gravel garden, a contemporary take on a parterre, with a pergola covered in *Rosa* 'Sombreuil'. This area is dominated by lofty cardoons that complement the ornate style of the house. Culinary herbs are also grown here, as well as *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant', cirsium, *Clematis recta*, *Libertia* and rustling, swaying grasses such as *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'. The kitchen garden and greenhouse, where Alessandra grows dozens of varieties of tomatoes, are set away to the other side of the house, above a wild flower meadow and enclosed within a winding beech hedge.

Goldfinches and bees dive among the wild flowers and long grasses, bringing immense pleasure to Alessandra and the rest of the family. "In creating this garden, I feel I have restored something to nature." □

GARDEN GUIDE

Soil Sticky clay on chalk. **Orientation** The back of the house faces south.

Special features Mature parkland trees, beech and yew hedging, specimen trees, a kitchen and a parterre garden.



These raised Cotswolds stone beds, which contain a central *Cornus kousa* and four red-leaved *Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy' were designed for year-round colour.



The gentle slopes of the Chilterns provide a pastoral background to the wild flower meadows.



The venerable sweet chestnut gives welcome shade for summer lunches.