

SEASONAL COLOUR

# Shades of AUTUMN

*Stands of specimen trees draw the eye through this striking contemporary garden, featuring reflective water, flowing grasses and flaming sedums, to the wooded South Downs beyond*

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Although the word “clunch” might not be familiar, you sense it does not mean rich and fertile. Belinda Wilkinson first heard it used by her builders to describe the soil of her new garden, which had not only been churned up by the previous owners’ horses, but also by 18 months of building work on its derelict 17th-century farmhouse. Yet Belinda could see past the flinty, chalky debris and knew that the densely wooded South Downs that form the backdrop to her garden would be its starting point.

Once Belinda, her husband, David, and young sons, George and Joshua, moved into the farmhouse in 2005 – taking on two abandoned cottages, a 16th-century threshing barn and a cart barn in the process – she began designing the area around the house as soon as she could. Ideas came from various sources. For instance, Belinda decided to replicate the massed plantings of lavender she saw while on holiday in the south of France. Specialist lavender supplier Downton Nursery, in Kent, suggested the variety ‘Folgate’, advising her to prune it back hard every year after flowering. Outside the old cart barn, now a music studio, Belinda put in box and Himalayan birch, and around the swimming pool *Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’, which keeps its striking florets long after the colour has faded. She also commissioned a rectangular reflecting pool, edged with sandstone and clipped box. “We had it lined with dark blue-green glass tiles which mirror the Sussex skies,” she says, “so it adds movement to the garden, even on still days.”

However, Belinda had difficulty planning the area beyond the house. She wanted to draw in the landscape and to make

**PREVIOUS PAGE** The swimming pool with its striking views of the rolling South Downs landscape.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE** In the foreground, *Sedum telephium* ‘Matrona’ provides rich seasonal colour and echoes the tints of the turning leaves on the trees.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW** Red *Sedum* ‘Herbstfreude’ and the bronze seedheads of *Phlomis russeliana* light up the copper-coloured bark of a *Prunus serrula* (Tibetan cherry).

**ABOVE** Clipped box balls and the specimen tree *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii* (Himalayan birch) add interest to the cart barn, which is now a music studio.

**RIGHT** The old brickwork and weathered wood of the nearby barns form a pleasing backdrop to the faded autumn glory of *Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’.



**ABOVE** Belinda has brought elegance and structure to the brick terrace near the old cart barn with topiary and white-stemmed ornamental Himalayan birch.

**LEFT** Sculptural seedheads and delicate grasses catch the light, adding a layer of texture to the garden.

**OPPOSITE PAGE** Standing tall at the edge of the circular lawn is the stately blond grass *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’.

sense of the large, blank canvas that had once been a paddock and fruit orchard, but was unsure how to do it. A neighbour who also gardens recommended that she talk to a locally based design company, Acres Wild, formed by Ian Smith and Debbie Roberts, who have a knack for selecting plants that amplify the landscape, creating visual coherence and beauty all year round.

Debbie suggested moving away from the formality of the area around the house to something more flowing, with informal plantings of grasses, such as *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’, and perennials with sculptural seedheads, such as *Sedum telephium* ‘Matrona’ and *Phlomis russeliana*. She also suggested a circular lawn, connecting it with the rest of the garden via curved grass paths, as well as billowing mounds of cloud-pruned box to echo the rise and sweep of the Downs.

In addition, Debbie incorporated strong woodland colours with specimen trees such as *Prunus serrula* (Tibetan cherry), which has copper-coloured ornamental bark, and the crimson crab apple *Malus* ‘Evereste’. Dense plantings of *Sedum* ‘Herbstfreude’ flame when in flower in September, then gently fade to burgundy, lasting well until the end of the year. Meanwhile, the grey-green of the Russian sage *Perovskia* ‘Blue Spire’ complements the autumn tints. As the trees shed their leaves, their subdued colours are matched by the antique brown seedheads of phlomis, echinacea and grasses.

As for the clunch, it did not entirely disappear from Belinda’s life. She rediscovered it by accident when browsing through a paint catalogue where it was described as a soft chalky grey. “I decided to paint my kitchen that colour,” she says, “to remind me of those early days.”





**ABOVE** Grass paths run between beds made using reclaimed railway sleepers in the kitchen garden.

**LEFT** Seedheads of *Phlox russeliana*, which are kept all winter to catch the frost, edge one of the curved walks circling the lawn.

#### GARDEN GUIDE

**Orientation** An acre of garden within a two-acre site. Predominantly south facing with sweeping views of the South Downs.

**Soil type** Initially flinty and very poor because builders had churned up the site and scraped away the top soil, but now considerably improved.

**Special features** A contemporary country garden that has been planted to visually complement the wooded countryside.

**Design** Ian Smith and Debbie Roberts, Acres Wild, 01403 891084, [acreswild.co.uk](http://acreswild.co.uk).