

PRIVATE VIEW

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS | WORDS TAMSIN WESTHORPE

This romantic Hertfordshire garden has evolved thanks to a love of plants and a soft and gentle approach to design



Over the past four years, Sarah Marsh has transformed her husband Ian's garden, turning it from a regimented design to one that has curves, twists, turns and dramatic colour changes. The half-acre plot is very private and sits at the rear of The Mill House, which is Grade-II listed and dates back to 500 years ago. 'Wherever you are in the garden, you can hear the mill race as it thunders by,' says Sarah. The millrace is behind a tall leylandii hedge, as it is too fast to garden close to it. ►

private view

Sarah has always gardened, but not just in the UK. She has also gardened in Bahrain, where tropical plants and camel manure featured in her daily gardening routine. Her last UK garden provided many of the plants that now flourish in the sandy, silty soil of this Hertfordshire plot. 'A friend and I moved some very large magnolias and acers from my last garden,' says Sarah, 'and I'm thrilled at how they are flourishing here.'

'My husband Ian is not a gardener, so I have been able to transform the garden as I wish. Like most men, he is keen on the lawn, so when initially marking out borders together with a hosepipe, I'd kick the hose further out into the lawn when he wasn't looking!'

The garden is ever changing, and Sarah has never drawn a plan. 'It took me the first two years to get to know the garden,' she says, 'and it has grown and developed

organically.' She is fully immersed in the garden, and works with it. The result is a relaxed garden that offers an interesting journey through the space.

Being west facing, the garden is the perfect site for most plants. Sarah describes herself as a plantswoman rather than a designer. 'At the moment, the garden definitely has a strong peak in spring, but in years to come I aim for it to be a year-round garden,' she says. She plants more than 2,000 tulip bulbs a year, and changes the colours from year to year. Each tulip bulb is lifted after flowering, and new bulbs are planted in November to ensure a top display each spring. 'I simply choose the tulips that catch my eye in the catalogues,' she explains.

When asked which spring gardens she visits for inspiration, Sarah says she doesn't have time, as spring is when The Mill House opens for the NGS.

► TOP TERRACE

The terrace is home to Sarah and Ian's two tortoises and is a favourite spot for cat Millie. The summerhouse at the far end of the garden, from Timbergarden in Ely, is a focal point, edged with orange *Tulipa* 'Cairo' from Peter Nyssen. The bright green acer by the summerhouse is *Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku'. Sarah enjoys splashes of colour rather than colour-themed displays, and allows forget-me-nots to seed.



'The garden has been created organically - I walk it, look at it and feel it. I am immersed in it, and know exactly how it works'

► SUN TRAP

Sarah's swing seat, bought 20 years ago, sits in front of a hedge of pyracantha and forsythia. It offers the best view of the garden and is a sun trap. Ian built a concrete pad for the seat to sit on to make mowing easier. The dashing red and white blooms that leap from the border are the mid-season tulip 'Burning Heart'. Sarah plants early, mid and late types to ensure the tulip display lasts as long as possible.



▲ COLOUR PUNCH

The mosaic furniture set (which was a gift) brings year-round colour to the garden. Sarah is keen on punchy primary colours. Her container displays reflect this, and change every year. She admits it is hard to refrain from buying violas and pansies for pots. The almost jet-black *Viola* 'Molly Sanderson', with a neat spreading habit, is joined by an unnamed pansy and a tray of beetroot waiting to be planted in her potager.

▼ A PATH MOST TRAVELLED

Meander down this flower-lined path to travel from the summerhouse to the potager. An old apple tree and the yellow *Acer shirasawanum* 'Aureum' are joined by sugar-pink tulip 'Menton' and orange tulip 'Apeldoorn'. Later in the year, climber *Rosa* 'New Dawn' adds perfume. ►



SEASONAL SENSATION

By the greenhouse in the potager, Sarah has created a spectacular contrast with ruby wallflowers and *Tulipa* 'Pink Impression'. 'I leave my wallflowers in for about three years, take cuttings and replant,' says Sarah. 'I know I have the colours that I want, and wallflowers left in are much bigger and bushier.' Pinching out the tips of the wallflowers when planted will also encourage bushy plants, she says.

FLOWERS, FRUIT & VEG

Now over a decade old, the box parterre was originally planted by Ian before he met Sarah. Nothing is planted between the hedges, but Sarah is tempted to try foxgloves in the future. In the raised beds, which Ian created for Sarah's birthday, are tulips 'Havanna', 'Couleur Cardinal', 'Hermitage' and 'Prinses Irene', planted with broad beans, lettuce and garlic.



SPRUCED SHED

To soften the look of the essential shed that is nestled in the corner, Sarah has planted a row of summer-fruiting raspberries against it, which she took as suckers from a friend's garden. The shed is also decorated with a collection of old tools, which are real conversation pieces on Sarah's open garden days.



'I change the colour scheme every year with tulips - it's just like changing your nail varnish'

BURNING DESIRE

Although Sarah changes her tulip display every year, she wouldn't be without orange types. Orange is far and away her favourite colour. This pot by is planted with *Tulipa* 'Abu Hassan', orange violas and a golden carex. The variegated background is *Rhamnus alaternus* 'Argenteovariegata', which is a useful foliage plant for the flower-arranger's garden. ▶





▲ **TULIPA 'CAIRO'**

This dashing tulip reaches 50cm in height, and is perfect for cutting. Enjoys full sun, and a well-drained fertile soil. For the best results, plant fresh bulbs every autumn.



▲ **PRIMULA DENTICULATA**

This plant originally came from Sarah's mother's garden, and is divided regularly in early spring. Thrives in moist soil in sun or part shade. Flower stems are 30cm tall.



▲ **TULIPA 'CHINA TOWN'**

This tulip has long-lasting blooms and is an early type. The foliage is variegated, so interest lasts before and after the flowers. Requires full sun or part shade. Height 45cm.



▲ **NARCISSUS 'SUN DISC'**

A delightful late-flowering jonquilla daffodil with numerous button-like blooms. Sweetly scented, and looks great here in containers with violas. Height 20cm.

'I love having plants here from my mother's garden and my previous gardens, as they bring back memories'



▲ **HATS OFF TO THEM**

The central point of the garden is marked with a holly tree that is many years old. Over the years, Ian has clipped it into a top hat shape. He clips it every September, and to make the task easier, has created a hole in the centre of the canopy to lean through to clip the foliage. Very little will grow under the deep shade of this tree apart from bergenias, which offer a splash of pink in spring and early summer.



SARAH MARSH is a passionate plantswoman who has gardened all her life. She opens the garden of The Mill House in Welwyn, Hertfordshire, this year for the NGS on 22, 25 & 26 April (2-5pm).

She works as a gardener three days a week in private gardens, as well as looking after her own ever-changing plot. Her ambition is to slowly transform her home garden into a plot with year-round interest.