

An arch of sweet peas and *Clematis* 'Minuet' is the focal point for plantings of roses and *Achillea millefolium* 'Lilac Beauty' (left) and the 'old bed' with towering hollyhocks and thalictrum (right), easing down through delphiniums and *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna' to *Dianthus carthusianorum*, diascia and tradescantia.

Capture the CHARM

Discover how to make a dreamy cottage garden from the experienced owners of Grafton Cottage ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS | WORDS STEPHANIE MAHON



ABOVE The path to the summerhouse is lined with purple, blue, mauve, silver and white flowers including *Geranium pratense* 'Purple-haze', *Dahlia* 'Franz Kafka', *Eryngium bourgatii* 'Picos Blue', *Salvia verticillata* 'Purple Rain', delphiniums and violas, which are Margaret's favourites.

RIGHT Margaret and Peter Hargreaves have lived at Grafton Cottage for 40 years.

Margaret Hargreaves has been gardening the quarter-acre plot at Grafton Cottage in Staffordshire for 40 years. In that time, she and her husband Peter have transformed the previously unloved space into a quintessential cottage garden brimming with old-school annuals, perennials, shrubs and climbers, and framed with rustic trellis, arches and authentic features to really capture an 'olde worlde' style.

Margaret has always been captivated by this look, ever since she was a toddler. 'When I was young, Mum would grow lots of sweet Williams, and I was always fascinated with the colours of them,' she says. 'I'd stand and stare, and couldn't resist picking them. Later, she let me grow nasturtiums and cornflowers and things from seed, and eventually I took over her garden.'

When she got the chance to make her own home, there was no doubt in her mind what sort of house she wanted to live in, and what sort of garden she would make there. 'When Peter and I were getting married, I told him I wanted to live in a cottage, and I knew he had seen this one. We went all around looking at different houses, but no matter what he showed me, I just kept saying that I wanted this cottage,' Margaret says. ▶



Rosa 'Karlsruhe' climbs over a rustic archway with *Clematis* 'Henrietta'. At their feet grow *Astilbe superbum*, *Persicaria microcephala* 'Red Dragon', *Salvia microphylla* 'Pink Blush' and rosebay willowherb, which Margaret describes as 'a thug'.



ABOVE A newer planting of white and yellow with *Anthemis tinctoria* 'Cally Cream' and 'Sauce Hollandaise', 'Mrs E.C. Buxton' and 'Eva' with *Leucanthemum* 'Sonnenschein'. Flashes of blue are from *Geranium pratense* 'Blue Skies'.

BELOW, FROM LEFT *Erigeron* 'Schneewittchen'; *Dianthus* 'Tudor'; *Diascia rigescens* and *Dianthus* 'Doris'.

They bought the cottage and moved in, and then the hard work began, as there wasn't much garden to speak of. 'It was all concrete in the front garden,' she explains. 'Aside from that, there was a rectangle of lawn, a thick hawthorn hedge and a lovely old apple tree, and at the bottom there was a pigsty.'

The first thing Margaret did was to make the little borders edging the lawn much larger, and then she carried on her mother's way of growing, using flowers such as sweet peas and Canterbury bells. 'Under the apple tree, I grew bulbs and foxgloves. I bought a honeysuckle and after dividing up the space with a trellis, I grew it up that to disguise the vegetable plot.'

She says she never had a plan of what to do. 'It was just all in my head. It is always like that for me - I can see it in my mind, but I can't put it down on paper. I have to persuade Peter about these things... but he doesn't take a lot of persuading!'

LEARNING CURVE

As the years went on, Margaret became more interested in growing different plants, including annuals like love-in-a-mist. She developed a love of achillea, and also clematis, of which she grows about 100. The couple managed to acquire more land, and Margaret put in lots of perfumed roses from Peter Beales. 'When



I think back now, I see that because I wasn't knowledgeable enough, I didn't plant them as well as I could have done,' she admits, 'but gardening is a big, big learning curve.'

To help them develop the space and gain more knowledge, they started visiting National Gardens Scheme gardens. 'I learned a lot from going around and looking at other people's gardens,' Margaret explains. 'I always enjoyed the cottage gardens more than the more formal gardens. Eastgrove in Warwickshire was a real inspiration for putting plants together; it always looked so beautiful. I remember once standing on that red-brick herringbone path, and seeing a planting of silver eryngium with pink

flowers that looked gorgeous. That moment has always stayed with me.'

She and Peter also began to visit specialist nurseries all over the country to get plants, ideas and advice. 'I still love to go to people who propagate their own plants,' she says.

A garden like this is extremely high maintenance, Margaret admits, and requires a lot of upkeep. The borders are sorted out in autumn, ending the season with pruning the roses. They try their best to be organic, but admit they are defeated occasionally. For the most part, they ward off typical pests with home-made means, such as eggshells and beer traps for the slugs. ►

ABOVE The seating area by beds of (left) scabious, salvia, *Lychnis* 'Hill Grounds' and *Dianthus carthusianorum*, and (right) *Trifolium rubens* 'Peach Pink', *Achillea* 'Lachsschönheit', *Campanula rotundifolia* and *Viola* 'Isabella'.

BELOW, FROM LEFT *Catananche caerulea* 'Amor Blue' and 'Amor White'; *Rosa* 'Charles de Mills'; *Gillenia trifoliata*.





ABOVE A beautiful tiered display from low growers like white *Armeria* 'Brutus' and *Astrantia*, with purple bottlebrush *Trifolium rubens* and pale *Erigeron philadelphicus*, up to tall *Knautia macedonica*, phlox, delphiniums like 'Blue Tit' and 'Loch Leven', and white fluffs of *Persicaria polymorpha*.

BELOW RIGHT Grafton Cottage seen through a planting of *Cephalaria gigantea*, white rosebay willowherb and *Anthemis* 'Grallagh Gold'.

Now at the high end of her learning curve, Margaret is an undisputed queen of the cottage garden, and has great advice for others planning something similar. 'To get a cottage garden to look authentic is very difficult,' she says. 'I pick up old materials like watering cans and tools, anything antiquated or old.' In terms of the design, she recommends disregarding the lawn. 'It has to be more flowerbeds than expanses of lawn,' she explains. 'You should have somewhere to sit as well, and a veg plot is a must in a cottage garden, even if only small.'

GETTING THE LOOK

The planting is the main attraction, and Margaret has very firm ideas about what is good to grow, and also suitable for the cottage look. 'It's best to grow plants that are long flowering, hardy and perfumed,' she says. 'That is the inimitable thing about a cottage garden: it should be scented. My top choices would be dianthus, violas, sweet peas, roses, phlox, hollyhocks, geraniums, sweet Williams and Canterbury bells, plus annuals like cornflowers and larkspur. It's important to have softness from plants like *Senecio polyodon* and clary sage too.'

Grafton Cottage, Barton-under-Needwood, Staffordshire DE13 8AL. Open for the NGS on Sunday 28 June, 19 July, 2 & 9 August, with teas and unusual home-propagated plants for sale. www.ngs.org.uk

TOP COTTAGE-GARDEN TIPS

- **Don't be in a rush**, be patient. It looks stiff and starchy if you hurry, but so much better if you allow it to evolve over the years.
- **Put goodness into the soil** before you start with well-rotted organic material.
- **Visit lots of other cottage gardens** to get ideas and a sense of what is authentic.
- **Plant easy hardy things at first**, like phlox and geraniums. Take great care while planting.
- **Keep a diary** detailing planting, changes and tasks every year - it really helps.
- **Join the Hardy Plant Society** and The Cottage Garden Society for great advice.

