

The rose garden is filled with alliums in May, soon to be followed by masses of roses. Many paths criss-cross the space, leading to the angel sculpture.

Labour of love

The owner of Old Bladbean Stud has happily created a high-maintenance garden and invented new ways to deal with the workload ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS | WORDS TAMSIN HOPE THOMSON



'It was a field of mud, but I took the view that I couldn't make it any worse!'

Carol Bruce uses wetsuit gloves for winter pruning and has a pedal-powered wheelbarrow. These are just two innovations she has developed over the past decade to create and maintain a three-acre garden on her own. Carol is always looking for ways to get jobs done more efficiently. 'I have a list that I work through every day,' she says.

When Carol and her husband Maitland moved to Old Bladbean Stud, near Canterbury in 2003, she was 32. She gave up her publishing job in London and committed herself to transforming the derelict ground around their house. 'I found myself with an opportunity. It was a field of mud, but I took the view that I couldn't make it any worse! It was a combination of a blank canvas and no expectations,' says Carol, who relishes failure as a way of finding out new ways to do things. The fact that she will try five ways of growing a crop before giving up on it tells you a lot about the type of gardener she is.

Over 10 years, she created five interlinked gardens, with no horticultural training, limited experience and no help. Starting with a rose garden at the furthest point from the house, she worked methodically, completing one area, then moving onto the next, finishing with a long symmetrical garden, the mirrored borders, in 2012. 'It was a way of making sure I'd finish,' she says. She didn't show the gardens to anyone

until the entire project was completed.

Although Carol gets her ideas from seed catalogues, and researches plants on the internet, it's her imagination that has fuelled the gardens' creation. She overflows with ideas on translating myths and fairytales, geometry and scientific theory, nature and landscape into gardens. She does not visit other gardens or act on outside influences, because she has always known what she wanted: a garden that would absorb her completely - mentally and physically. 'I wanted something high maintenance,' Carol says.

The season begins in May with a flood of irises, and continues through a series of showstopping highlights until October. 'Not having a peak season was a challenge,' Carol says, 'but the incentive needs to be there, to have something to look forward to.' Instead, each garden has its own peak season and character. In the rose garden, nine beds are laid out within a fan-shaped layout, with straight axis paths intersected by curved paths. In June and July, more than 90 old English shrub roses fill the beds with colour and scent.

From here, a path leads through to the yellow garden, which was intended as a place to sit and relax, and now serves as a tea garden for visitors.

GARDEN NOTES

Three-acre country garden of distinct areas

ABOVE LEFT This arch in the pastels garden is covered in *Rosa* 'Barbara Austin' and sits beside a swathe of white camassias. **ABOVE**

RIGHT The mirrored borders are a vision of blue and white with irises 'Jane Phillips' and 'Braithwaite', *Delphinium* 'Summer Skies' and clematis such as 'Blue Angel' and 'Perle d'Azur' on the white obelisks from Jacksons Fencing.

RIGHT Carol's stylish greenhouse from Hartley Botanic helps her to manage the enormous workload in the garden.



Next is the pastels garden - a traditional design with a square lawn framed by deep borders of mixed perennials, next to the house. On the other side is a narrow garden, with a long season of interest from symmetrical borders, and next to that a kitchen garden.

To keep this show going takes an enormous amount of labour. 'I work out how much time I've got for each job, and then how to do it in that time,' says Carol. This is where new ways of working, such as wearing wetsuit gloves, come in. Previously, Carol had to stop pruning in winter when her hands got too cold. Now, with her wetsuit gloves, she can keep going until it gets dark. Through trial and error, she's developed a comprehensive schedule to ensure she gets everything done.

'I approach everything as an experiment. It's important to eliminate unnecessary jobs and not mind failure. It's a scientific approach to inventing ways of doing things,' says Carol. She combines this no-nonsense mindset with a creative approach to design - inspired by emotions and memories, among other things - and a rigorous approach to colour schemes. ►

OLD BLADBEAN STUD NOTEBOOK

PERFECT PARTNERS

Allium hollandicum 'Purple Sensation' and *Knautia arvensis* (below) make a striking plant combination, the two shades of purple complementing each other perfectly. The scabious grows up and around the alliums, its small flowerheads contrasting well with the large round spheres.



SITTING PRETTY

This Lutyens bench, tucked into a border, provides a quiet place to contemplate the luxurious planting in the pastels garden. Carol has placed benches at strategic viewpoints around the garden. Similar benches are available from Crocus - www.crocus.co.uk

BEYOND THE GATE

This arch cut into the beech hedge provides a tempting view of the next garden, inviting visitors to explore beyond. It links the yellow garden and the pastels garden. Carol has chosen a gate that allows more of the next garden to be seen, rather than using a solid panel, adding a decorative touch to the beech arch.



In the mirrored borders, the colour palette is restricted to white and shades of blue. The blues darken in colour as you progress along the borders in a garden that is 91m long and only 18m across. 'There was the temptation to chop it up,' says Carol, 'but I decided to accentuate its qualities and echo the colours of the sky.'

In May and June, these colours come from banks of salvias and irises, clematis climbing up white obelisks, and delphiniums, with each plant appearing four times. Carol wanted to reproduce the staggered rhythms she saw while out walking along paths in a pine plantation - 'I got my inspiration from the effects in the forest of alternating shafts of light,' she says.

To keep the show going until October in the same colour scheme, she uses a 'changing cast of plants to play each role', so in the places where she has white spires, the plants change from foxgloves in June to delphiniums in June and July, through to *Verbascum chaixii* 'Album' in July and August, and *Liatris spicata* 'Alba' in September. In the pastels garden, she's also used different shades of the same colour to create an effect using layers of perennials - in some beds, the planting is six tiers deep. Her inspiration came from the idea of an artist blending pastels into each other. Blues move into mauves and pinks, then whites and yellows, with early season colour from camassias, irises and geraniums. Orange and red have been banned.

Looking at the finished garden, it's difficult to see where the failures have been, and that is its

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success. For many people, simply maintaining a 91m fruit and vegetable garden would be time-consuming enough, but Carol also finds time to dry all the crops she and her husband can't eat; they are now self-sufficient. The wheelbarrow trike that she uses to save time moving things around the garden sums up her work ethic. She could hire someone to help but, for Carol, this defeats the garden's purpose.

'I remember watching people looking for a job that would satisfy them,' she says, 'and I asked myself what it was that I found rewarding, and why.' She's found the answer.

Old Bladbean Stud Gardens, Bladbean, near Elham, Canterbury, Kent CT4 6NA. Open for the NGS on Sundays 31 May, 14 & 28 June, 12 & 26 July, 30 August, 13 & 27 September; 2-6pm. For more information, go to www.oldbladbeanstud.co.uk

TOP LEFT Cardoons and *Iris* 'White City' offer a fresh note at the exit from the mirrored borders. **ABOVE LEFT** A black metal lounger from a car boot sale is a great spot to relax in the rose garden, beside scores of alliums and white *Potentilla fruticosa* 'Abbotswood'. **ABOVE RIGHT** Carol uses clipped evergreens such as box balls and yew columns to offer structure to the herbaceous planting.

TOP GARDEN-MAKING TIPS FROM CAROL

- **Expect failures** - they make you robust to setbacks. It's a great way of fostering patience, and they provide the best opportunity to learn. If you don't have expectations of success, you're in no particular hurry for the results!
- **Think of yourself as a kind of 'plant zookeeper'** and learn about your plants' natural habitats. Five minutes on the Internet can reveal the climate and terrain they evolved for, their close plant relatives, natural geographical range and lifecycle.
- **Choose a handful of perennial species** to act as wandering stars, and let them self-sow throughout your garden. This will give your whole garden a unified identity and flow, while allowing you to collect

and grow one of each of a wide range of different individual plants.

● **Design your own annual cycle** of gardening activities to act as your motivational and organisational big picture. You can then select tasks for your to-do list knowing the contribution of each to the grand plan, and you will have a valuable tool for improving your system over the years.

● **Never act on impulse** - instead, plan on impulse, then act on the plan.



GARDEN CHALLENGES

GARDEN LAYOUT: 'The biggest challenge was working with an odd plot - which has no relation to the house and no centre, purpose or symmetry - to create a garden with meaning,' says Carol. 'I did this by thinking of the gardens as a journey, imagining a traveller passing through them.'

ALSO IN THE AREA

If you are visiting Old Bladbean Stud garden, Carol also recommends:

- **GARDEN Goodnestone Park Gardens** The flower-filled walled garden is beautiful in May. Kent CT3 1PL. Tel: +44 (0)1304 840107. www.goodnestoneparkgardens.co.uk
- **B&B The Abbot's Fireside** Tel: +44 (0)1303 840566. www.abbotsfiresidehotel.co.uk and **The Rose and Crown** Tel: +44 (0)1303 840890. www.roseandcrownelham.com Both offer accommodation in Elham.
- **FARM SHOP Perry Court Farm** Food hall, butcher, fishmonger and café. Canterbury Road, Bilting, Ashford, Kent TN25 4ES. Tel: +44 (0)1233 812302. www.perrycourtfarm.co.uk