

Still walking on the wild side

At Gravetye Manor, once the home of Victorian 'wild gardener' William Robinson, the borders still resonate to his ideals. They feature superb combinations from a dazzling palette the great plantsman would likely have applauded >>

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The long border at Gravetye Manor (main photograph), which faces south over the meadow, has long been an impressive feature, as can be seen in an image from the early 1900s (inset, above). Today, Head Gardener Tom Coward includes in its mix *Persicaria orientalis* with drooping pink flowers. Fast-growing annuals such as this have been great allies in creating bold effects in a short time. Here the persicaria is mixed with another favourite, tall, white-flowered *Erigeron annuus*, as well as yellow *Helianthus*, purple verbena and green fountains of *Miscanthus*.

Gardening in the 'wild style' has become fashionable recently, though it is the most difficult kind of gardening to do convincingly and well. Nowhere is it done better, however, than at Gravetye Manor, near East Grinstead, West Sussex, once the home of Irish gardener and writer William Robinson (1838–1935), whose book *The Wild Garden* (1870) changed the way we look at gardens.

While Robinson was working as a gardener at the Royal Dublin Society's Botanic Gardens at Glasnevin, what he called 'pastry-cook' gardening was all the rage in England: busy, fussy beds filled with bright exotic annuals. But Robinson encouraged gardeners to place 'hardy exotic plants under conditions where they will thrive without further care'. The book (and the look) was a huge success and in 1871 Robinson set up a new weekly periodical called *The Garden*, which he edited until 1899 and sold in 1919 (it merged into *Homes and Gardens* in 1927; the RHS adopted the title in 1975). This let him buy the 405ha (1,000 acre) Gravetye estate and make a garden, guided by the principles he believed in so passionately.

Hardy herbaceous plants replaced gaudy annuals. Large lawns stretched in front of the house, uninterrupted by fancy scalloped beds. Plants were arranged in generous, wide borders, where self-seeding was encouraged. The great jagged chunks of spar that dominated Victorian rockeries were never allowed in Robinson's garden. He laid stone in natural contours to provide homes for alpine plants, while in a wildflower-filled meadow that sweeps down from the house to the lake below, he planted thousands of bulbs to naturalise in the grass.

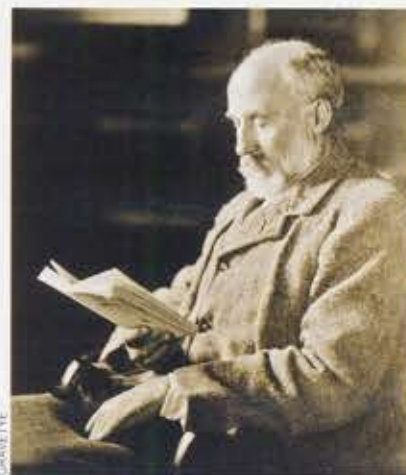
His garden revived

While Gravetye has been an elegant hotel for some time, the garden was recently brought back to a state of great beauty by Head Gardener Tom Coward. The flower garden to the west of the house is once again a miracle of profusion: tall, creamy spires of verbascum tower over pink explosions of sedum and bistort, annual sunflowers in tawny shades of terracotta reach higher even than the robust clumps of their perennial cousins, *Helianthus* 'Lemon Queen'.

Related *Helenium* are great allies when you have a great deal of space to fill and Tom uses *H. 'El Dorado'*,



Characteristic Gravetye gables overlook exuberant planting in the flower garden.



Man of principles

Influential Victorian garden writer William Robinson (above) shaped the gardens at Gravetye Manor to his gardening ethos. In the flower garden (right), sunflower heads of *Helianthus annuus* 'Magic Roundabout' peer over narrow red spikes of *Salvia confertiflora*. Domes of *Ammi visnaga*, white tinged with green, dominate the foreground.



'Sahin's Early Flowerer' and popular 'Moerheim Beauty', encouraging blue-flowered *Geranium* 'Orion' to scramble up into their tall stems. As summer progresses, broad yellow heads of fennel take over from ripening globes of angelica while dark-leaved dahlias (*Dahlia* 'Magenta Star' is a favourite) replace swaths of tulips. He even finds time to put together enchanting mini-gardens on the terrace, none more than 1sq m, but beautifully planted with black *Aeonium* and pewter *Echeveria*, feathery seedlings of *Grevillea robusta* and airy *Agrostis* grass.

'I was lucky,' says Tom. 'I inherited a garden with amazing structure.' He was not so lucky, however, to also inherit all the worst kinds of perennial weed: horsetail, ground elder, bindweed. The huge Long Border that stretches under the

High-summer luxuriance

Backed by verdant *Miscanthus* and leafy wintersweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*), tall-growing annual *Persicaria orientalis* – a plant popular in Victorian times but seldom seen today – waves its pink tassels above the sugar-pink blooms of *Phlox maculata* 'Princess Sturza'. Dark-leaved, single-flowered *Dahlia* 'Dovegrove' adds depth of colour into autumn with ruby blooms, while white fleabane (*Erigeron annuus*), blue *Perovskia* and the fine silver foliage of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light' provide some contrast.

south-facing wall of the flower garden was first weedkilled, then left fallow for two years before planting. His technique now is to use plenty of annuals. These are regularly refreshed and replaced, which gives gardeners an opportunity to dig out roots of any perennial weed that may lurk there.

Even in late July, he and his team of six may still be setting out fresh, pot-grown annuals to keep the borders looking vibrant – scented flowering tobacco (*Nicotiana sylvestris*) is a

favourite stand-by – and he favours plants with a long flowering season, such as a tall white fleabane (*Erigeron annuus*), given to him by Fergus Garrett, Head Gardener at Great Dixter in East Sussex, where Tom worked after training at RHS Garden Wisley. He uses two kinds of *Ammi*: *A. majus* with flat white heads of flower and *A. visnaga* which has handsome domed heads, slightly tinged with green. Pink and white *Cosmos* selections are threaded through stands of *Salvia sclarea* var. *turkestanica* and later-flowering asters. 'I'm always holding some plants up my sleeve,' he says. 'After all, you can't tell how much paint you'll need until you've finished painting the picture.'

The picture includes dark-leaved *Penstemon* 'Dark Towers' which grows with purple *Aquilegia vulgaris* 'William Guinness', mounds of >>

tender *Geranium maderense* and one of Robinson's favourites, *Rosa moyesii*, which bears flagon-shaped hips in autumn. Climbing monk's hood (*Aconitum hemslayanum*) scrambles through buddleia, and the feathery plumes of *Macleaya* just manage to top the grey spikes of cardoon. In all, Tom and his team have 10ha (25 acres) to look after at Gravetye. The wildflower meadow alone covers 2.4ha (6 acres) and by the time of his arrival was a degraded horse pasture. Last season alone, 2,000 blue *Camassia* were planted in the meadow, along with many more thousands of Tenby daffodils and pheasant's eye narcissus. Yellow rattle has been strewn about to suppress the growth of the most bullying areas of turf and, in the long grass of the adjoining orchard, Tom and his team are experimenting with naturalising perennials such as *Inula magnifica* and herbaceous geraniums as Robinson recommended.

Foibles revealed

An uncompromising man, Robinson was sure of his opinions and not afraid to shout them out loud. He had a row with the Director of Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew about Latin names, for instance. He hated them, and wanted Kew to use only English names, as he did. But he was illogical. He planted masses of Corsican pines (*Pinus nigra* subsp. *laricio*) at Gravetye, but loathed wellingtonias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) and other conifers from the Pacific coast of America. He called them foreigners, unsuited to our landscape. Why should wellingtonias be considered foreign, but Corsican pines not? It is wonderfully irrational. I like that splenetic quality in Robinson, but wondered if Tom ever feels the great man looking over his shoulder.

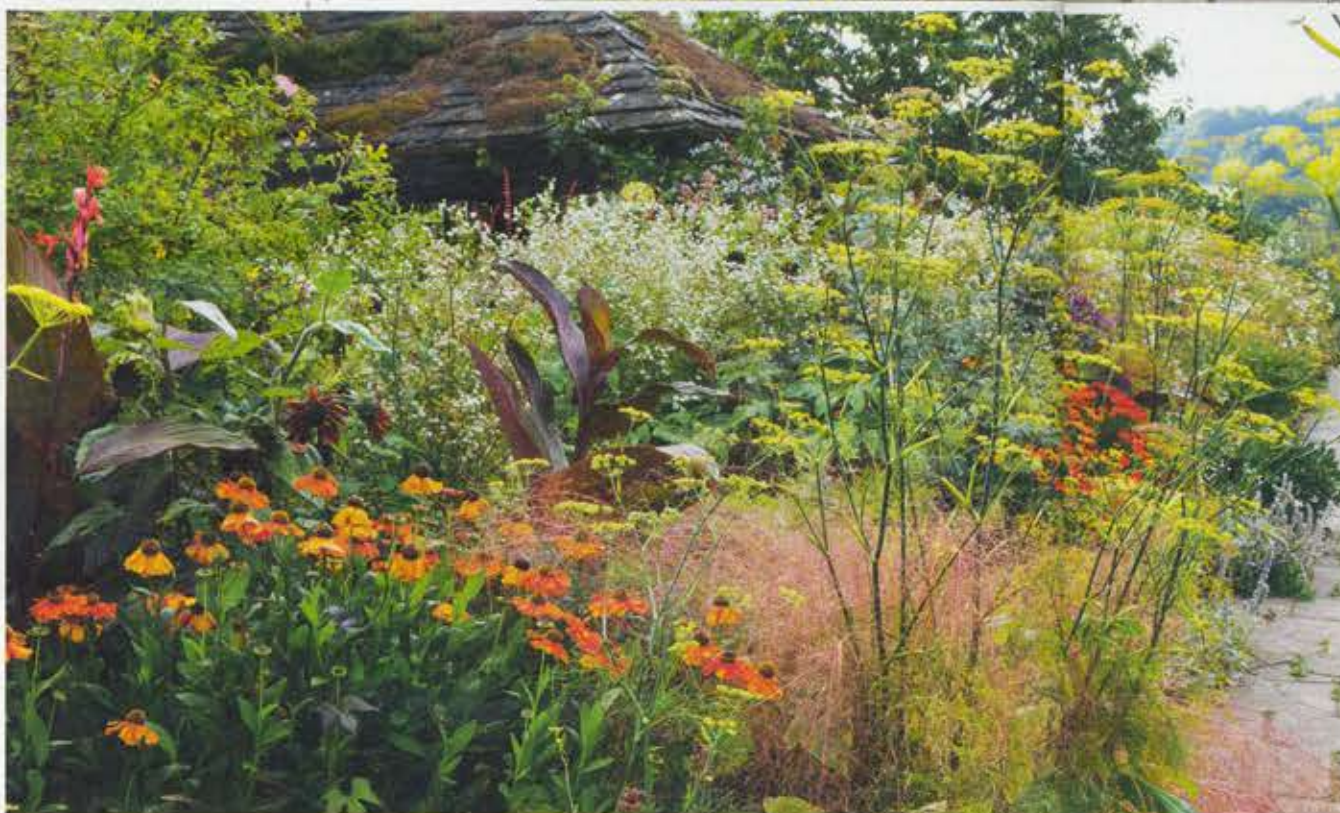
'The history of the garden gives us the style in which we garden it,

'He wanted his plants to be able to express themselves, to have a certain freedom.'

Planting with Robinson's ethos

The flagstone paths at Gravetye are softened by exuberant planting (right), providing a show that William Robinson would have appreciated. While plants here are certainly not UK natives, the carefree or 'wild' style with which they are combined creates a relaxed atmosphere far removed from the Victorian fashion for carpet bedding that Robinson detested.

The hand of a modern-day plantsman is evident in Gravetye's borders (below). Flat yellow heads of fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) spread over vigorous white fleabane (*Erigeron annuus*) that surrounds tawny *Helenium* 'Sahin's Early Flowerer'. To the right, the saturated colour is echoed in flowers of a French marigold (*Tagetes 'Cinnabar'*) and feathery plumes of pheasant's tail grass (*Anemantele lessoniana*). Plantings are dense, and self-seeding is encouraged.



West Sussex garden

Long border profusion

By September, Gravetye's long border reaches a crescendo. Dahlias, the ever-present *Persicaria orientalis*, purple verbenas, soft pink sedum and white clouds of *Erigeron annuus* form a cascade of long-lasting colour. The linear foliage of a tall *Miscanthus* grass at the back of a border makes an effective foil for many flowers; at the front, a haze of blue catmint and clumps of *Sisyrinchium* soften the edge of a gravel path that runs the length of the border.

to the formal, beautifully kept croquet lawn. At this point you are almost on a level with the dormer windows of the house, which you see through waving wands of *Datisca cannabina* and purple *Verbena bonariensis*.

But the ground continues to rise beyond the croquet lawn, through a quintessential piece of Robinsonian wild planting. Shrubs and trees, including *Parrotia* and the Corsican pines that Robinson so loved, cover the wild grassy slopes, with the path snaking through to a handsome gate set between stone pillars.

Beyond that is the kitchen garden, the last piece of the Gravetye jigsaw to be put in place. On a stone tablet now overhung by an old mulberry tree, Robinson's initials mark the date it was finished – 1898. The kitchen garden, a beautiful oval rather than the more usual rectangle, was built by three Irish labourers who took three years to put in place the huge buttressed walls of dressed stone. They enclose 6,000sq m (1½ acres) of prodigious productivity: forests of asparagus, rivers of cornflowers, regiments of crinkled black kale, squashes and pumpkins on the rampage beside stands of sweet corn, and stepover apples lining the paths. From here there are views over the pastures and woodlands of the estate, the flower garden hidden by trees.

'Few things in England can show a greater wealth of bloom than the wide flowery terrace immediately beneath the grey gabled house,' wrote American novelist Henry James after staying at Gravetye. Under Tom Coward and his team, that wealth will surely increase. Robinson's legacy is in expert hands. ●

but we're not in any way constrained by the Robinson legacy,' he says. 'He liked lush, exuberant plantings. So do we. He wanted his plants to be able to express themselves, to have a certain freedom. So do we.' Tom's employers sensibly allow him to take all the decisions that matter and support the garden with a budget that has recently underwritten the repair of the superb range of cold frames and greenhouses in which the gardeners raise nearly all the plants they need.

The formal flower garden, with its lawns and borders, lies to the west of

the house on land that was levelled by labourers. Since the whole site slopes to the south, an enormous buttressed wall supports this level space, dropping to the long border below. It now jostles with *Romneya* and *Arundo donax*, fine *Eryngium pandanifolium* and pale blue-flowered *Berkheya*.

From the long lily pool that draws a line along the boundary of the flower garden, the land rises in a series of terraces, by way of a wide, flagstone path. This brings you up through huge, old, lichen-encrusted azaleas underplanted with heathers,

Gravetye Manor

Address: Vowels Lane, West Hoathly, nr East Grinstead, West Sussex RH19 4LJ; 01342 810567; www.gravetyemanor.co.uk

Size / aspect: 10ha (25 acre) south-facing hillside.

Soil: acidic clay in wild garden, greensand in flower garden, superb loam in kitchen garden.

Age of garden: developed 1884 onwards.

Key season of interest: gardens need to look good all year round; May for the famous azalea bank; flower garden peaks in August.

Open: daily for hotel and restaurant guests. 15 Aug. 2-5pm, for the NGS; booking essential (www.ngs.org.uk). William Robinson Festival in July. Group tours (max 20) by appointment.

