

BIG SHOES

TO FILL

Respect for the past is influencing
one Cotswold garden's future

WORDS AND PHOTOS: Mandy Bradshaw

Taking over an established garden, especially one that was once owned by noted horticulturalists, can pose difficult decisions. How much do you respect the work of the original creators and how far do you go to establish your own style?

It's a dilemma that Nick Mahony fully understands. Three years ago, he and his wife, Jacky, bought The Garden House at Condicote, once the retirement project of former Sissinghurst head gardeners Pamela Schwerdt and Sibylle Kreutzberger.

The pair, who worked first with Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, became the National Trust's first female head gardeners when the charity took over the iconic Kent garden in 1967.

Widely respected in the horticultural world, they transformed the third of an acre Condicote plot from little more than a field into a garden stuffed with unusual and interesting plants, occasionally opening it to the public.

"If you get a garden like that and it's had 28 years input from two of the foremost gardeners in the country, you don't treat it lightly," says Nick.

A professional gardener himself, who often works a six-day week, he admits friends were surprised that he took on what can only be described as a high maintenance space.

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity which I felt I could not turn down," he says simply.

'It's like a kaleidoscopic patchwork quilt that literally covers the ground'

What he and Jacky inherited is a garden that has been carefully planned in terms of design and the plants used.

"It's a garden where a great deal of thought has gone into it," says Nick. "Into the texture and colours."

Like many Cotswold gardens, the plot is not a regular shape but this has been cleverly disguised.

The lawn is set across the widest point to emphasise the width and then tapers gradually down the garden to give the illusion of greater length. It's also asymmetrical: one side is much smaller, something that's hidden from the house by planting.

"The lawn's been designed to make the garden look longer and wider than it actually is."

Likewise, the main path – the garden is used as the primary entrance from the village – is deliberately angled to again increase the feeling of space. It's not just the shape of the plot that has dictated the design, original trees also had an influence.

Spring borders are typically put near to the house so that they can be enjoyed regardless of the weather. At The Garden House, they are at the far end of the garden, thanks to the shade produced by a large beech, which made this area perfect for early bulbs and spring flowers.

The season starts with drifts of hellebores in pink and white, clumps of snowdrops – there are 30 different varieties – sky blue scilla, cyclamen and dainty *Iris reticulata*, all set off by the stems of cornus and the pale trunks of *Betula ermanii* 'Grayswood Hill'.

Later, there are masses of snake's-head fritillaries, blue and white wood anemones and pale yellow primroses mingling with blue *Muscari* 'Valerie Finnis' and scillas. There are delicate narcissi – so different from the often-grown large varieties, *Erythronium* 'Pagoda', deep purple trillium and white muscari.

"It's like a kaleidoscopic patchwork quilt that literally covers the ground."

In autumn, this display is replaced by autumn crocus, colchicums and the foliage of ferns and hostas, while *Euonymus alatus* var *apterus*, which is easily overlooked for most of the year, sheds its non-descript image in favour of a vibrant show of scarlet leaves and berries.

The main summer borders are near the house and are filled with perennials, including geraniums, oriental poppies and lots of dahlias and asters.

It's a planting style that needs constant attention be it staking, dead-heading or cutting back in autumn.

"Not a lot of people would grow this number of perennials in a garden," says Nick. "They would have more climbers and more shrubs."

"This is the garden of two plantswomen and they were able in their retirement to spend eight hours a day, 364 days a year on it."

That said, there are no perennial weeds thanks to the care Sibylle and Pamela took when starting the garden, spending two years clearing it and adding tons of manure before planting, and the meticulous way they then maintained it.

"They were 'old school' and did things once and did them properly. There was no quick fix."

Paving protects the lawn from over-spilling planting and cones of clipped box at intervals give a formal contrast and year-round structure, while using a mix of paving, some slabs, some bricks in a herringbone pattern, reinforces the country garden feel.

More structure comes from a large, Moghul-inspired pergola that is used to support a purple-leaved vine and cordon-trained apple and pear trees. The fruit trees were put in by Nick, one of the few things he's changed, and replace large-flowered clematis. Less vigorous clematis that won't compete with the trees are now used.



The original clematis have been moved to grow against the Cotswold stone walls that enclose the garden. Here there is a mix of shrubs and climbers, including the unusual *Ribes laurifolium* 'Mrs Amy Doncaster' with its pale green flowers, *Carpenteria californica* and *Rosa* 'Graham Thomas', one of the few touches of yellow in the garden as it was not a colour Pamela or Sibylle liked.

Against the house, there's campsis, the Mexican trumpet vine, and a Banksia rose. Alongside, *Erigeron karvinskianus* is gradually colonising the patio.

As any experienced gardener will tell you, it pays to move slowly when you take on an established garden and Nick and Jacky did just that, waiting a full season to see exactly what was in there; the garden is well-labelled and Sibylle gave them a list of plants but it's only by seeing things growing that you can fully appreciate them.

Now, into his third season at Condicote, Nick's beginning to make changes. An ailing apple tree had to be removed, snow damage meant the euonymus is now mushroom-shaped and he took out some box balls, feeling they were too formal.

Despite annual mulching with leaf

mould and top soil, the Cotswold brash isn't good enough for vegetables so they are put in two raised beds, which along with a greenhouse, enable the couple to grow some crops.

Nick's also added plants that he "could not be without": *Daphne tangutica*, *Prunus x subhirtella* 'Autumnalis', *Cercis canadensis* and *Oenothera biennis*, the common evening primrose.

More 'tweaking' of the borders is still to come but any changes will be informed by the deep sense of responsibility he feels towards the garden.

"I don't know where the garden's going," he says. "There's a tension between it continuing on as a show garden and it becoming a domestic garden."

"I have such a respect for the previous people and such a respect for the garden itself, I'm at great pains not to change the spirit of it." ♦

The Garden House, Condicote opens to local garden groups by arrangement and periodically for the National Garden Scheme.

**Twitter: @ChattyGardener
Facebook: The Chatty Gardener**



ABOVE:
Tulipa 'Orange Emperor' adds some warmth to the spring display

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Muscari 'Valerie Finnis'; a pot made by artist Jacky against a backdrop of mahonia; topiary brings a touch of formality to the country garden