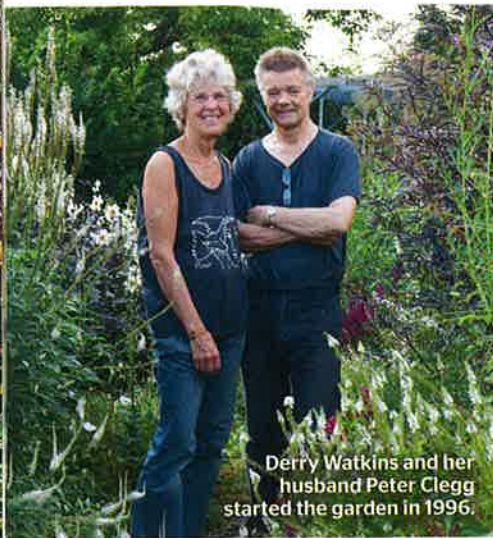


Over the borderline

In her Cotswolds hillside garden, nurserywoman Derry Watkins and her husband Peter Clegg have evolved the ethos of the mixed border using unusual plantings in a design that flows gracefully through the landscape

Author: Noel Kingsbury, gardener, designer and lecturer.
Photography: Rebecca Bernstein

Countryside views and clipped yews provide year-round interest in Derry Watkins' garden about 7 miles north of Bath. Even in autumn her borders are filled with appeal: *Thalictrum*, *Agastache*, choice *Dahlia* and various dark-leaved plants are all great favourites here.



Derry Watkins and her husband Peter Clegg started the garden in 1996.

Rarely do garden owners have the clarity of purpose, vision and direction of nursery-woman Derry Watkins.

'My purpose in life is to have a stunningly beautiful garden,' she says. 'I will go to any lengths to do that. I want it to be as beautiful as it can possibly be.' Her garden is indeed beautiful, all the more so for being situated in a wonderful location, facing south and high above one of the valleys outside Bath where the Cotswold limestone drops down in a series of undulating swoops of fields and hedgerows.

Keen gardeners in the west of England know Derry's nursery, Special Plants (see *The Garden*, Oct 2011, pp66-69) as simply one of the best sources for unusual, high-performance and good-looking new plants. She has been running it for nearly 30 years, 18 of them from this site. Her focus was initially tender plants, such as *Argyranthemum* and *Pelargonium*, but her sales are now around three-quarters hardy perennials. She also has a seed list, of mostly annuals and short-lived perennials. Derry's garden provides seed and propagating material for the nursery, as well as an opportunity to see how the plants perform.

A challenge shared

The garden is a joint project, between Derry and her architect husband, Peter Clegg. Their roles are clear and



absolute: 'Peter designed the garden; I didn't know where to begin,' she says. 'I was completely flummoxed by the idea of a derelict field, at a steep angle. He immediately set about designing it; he has no interest in the plants I put in, but he made the stone walls, and dug it. He just makes the beds and hands them over to me.' It was Peter's design eye that worked out how to 'borrow' the local landscape and create places where it can either be seen as a grand view or in more focused 'windows'. He also

Providing a seasonal finale

Late in the season the surrounding landscape increasingly is seen through a veil of tall-stemmed plants.

Key plants include:

- 1 *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphrophylla* 'Eva': impressive coppiced shrub with superb dark foliage.
- 2 Looking through the fading flower stems of earlier *Thalictrum* 'Elin' to purple clouds of *Thalictrum* 'Splendide'; both are tall perennials.
- 3 *Agastache* 'Blackadder': upright perennial with long-lasting mauve flower spikes.
- 4 *Tithonia rotundifolia* 'Torch': orange-flowered, half-hardy plant usually grown as an annual for spectacular late-season colour lasting until the frosts.
- 5 *Dryopteris felix-mas* (male fern): wild species that spontaneously appears in many places.



designed, and maintains, a series of clipped box, and yew and purple beech blocks, which act as a foreground for the view, helping separate it from Derry's colourful and exuberant planting as well as echoing the shapes of the landscape.

'There are many different habitats here,' says Derry. 'We have a gravel garden, an area of rich, heavy clay with springs underneath, then there is a strip of woodland, an area of dry shade underneath the horse chestnut tree where I cannot really grow anything, as well as a swamp and a pond, fed by various springs.'

Interesting late-season perennials

Dahlias feature among Derry's plantings, such as superb white-flowered, dark-leaved *Dahlia* 'Twining's After Eight' (above left). Fiery *Crocosmia* grow on the gravelled terraces; this fine pinkish selection is *C. Limpopo* (above centre). Confusingly named *Erigeron annuus* (it is perennial) produces sprays of white daisy flowers but set in front is *Sanguisorba officinalis* 'Red Thunder'. *Sanguisorba* flourish on Derry's wet ground - and are becoming widely grown, particularly for their pinnate foliage and, in some cases, branching flower stems (above right).

Making a garden

Somewhat ironically, given how wet much of the land is, it was the gravel garden that was developed first. 'When we arrived,' says Derry, 'I was crazy about Mediterranean plants. I wanted south-facing, which is what I got, and well-drained, which it isn't. After I stuck my spade in and discovered the clay, I decided to have a gravel garden.' Derry sought inspiration at Beth Chatto's famed gravel garden in Essex, but that has 5cm (2in) of gravel over free-draining soil. However, plantsman John d'Arcy (owner of a fine garden in Wiltshire) encouraged Derry to scrape away the rich topsoil and pour 20cm (8in) of gravel over the sticky yellow subsoil; as she reports, 'the plants loved it'.

Today, Derry's passion for plants from seasonally dry habitats and slightly tender species is given free rein on a series of gravelly terraces immediately below the house. Beyond this there is a lawn and below that a pond and the largest border she has. There has been little attempt to change soil conditions; everything here has to love damp and heavy soil. Shrubs are combined

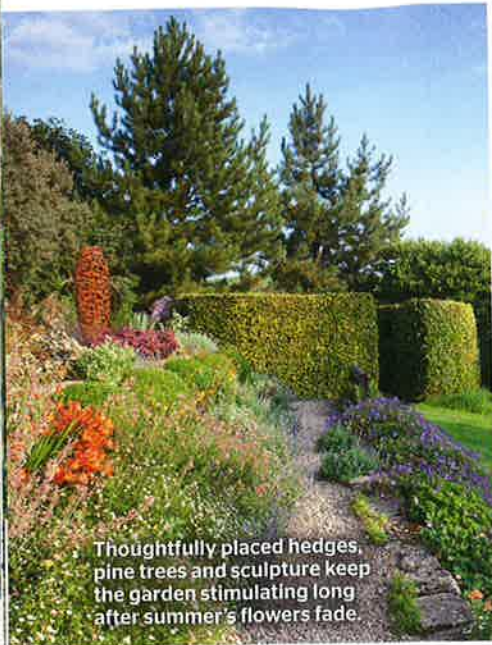
with perennials and short-lived, self-seeding species in conventional, mixed-border fashion - except that much of what is planted here is anything but conventional. 'I want a garden full of interesting plants,' says Derry. 'There are some things I could grow that would do the job but which bore me. I have no interest in growing roses, clematis or other mainstays of the English garden.' Most of what Derry grows are wild species or cultivars selected from them, so the light, wispy, sometimes ungainly habit of wild plants is kept. The occasional dahlia makes an exception to this rule, but these fit well into the main period of interest - late summer and early autumn.

Colour fanatic

At other times, Derry says, she relies on 'the view and the yew and box bits to keep the garden looking crisp. I am not a winter gardener. There is not much to see here in spring so most of the garden work is done in March and April. I attack the garden then, as I'm not good at doing an autumn tidy.' Late summer offers a more exotic colour range than other times of >>>



Sunny, gravel terraces below the house allow Derry to grow more tender plants.



Thoughtfully placed hedges, pine trees and sculpture keep the garden stimulating long after summer's flowers fade.

the year, which Derry fully exploits.

'In 1999,' she says, 'I did a black and white exhibit at RHS Chelsea Flower Show. I then filled a huge border, but it has morphed – it's now black, white, purple and silver. I am crazy about dark-leaved plants and dark flowers, I'm nuts about them. But then I'm also crazy about brilliant reds and oranges.'

With its bold colour schemes, and equally bold use of many vigorously self-sowing plants, this is a garden which challenges cautious colour scheming and reliance on predictable 'stay-in-one-place' plants. In its focus on late summer though, it revisits the classic period of the British herbaceous border and perhaps re-invents it for our time. In many ways, this is one of the most inspiring gardens around. ●



Derry Watkins

Address: Greenway Lane, Cold Ashton, Chippenham, Wiltshire SN14 8LA; 01225 891686; www.specialplants.net

Size: about 4,000sq m (1 acre) with outlying fields.

Soil / aspect: heavy alkaline clay, south facing.

Age of garden: 18 years.

Key season of interest: late summer.

Open: every Tuesday mid-April to mid-October, and every Wednesday in July, August and September.

Nursery open: 10am–5pm, March to October. Phone for winter visiting.



NICOLE HEIDARIPOUR

Monochrome marvel

The dark and silver look is one of Derry's favourite themes, in this border backed by silvery willow.

Key plants include:

6 *Clematis* 'Romantika': climbs a pillar, producing rich purple flowers; the other pillar is home to tender *Lablab purpureus* 'Ruby Moon', with white-flowered *C. 'Huldine'* beyond.

7 *Gomphrostigma virgatum*: the silvery stems of this buddleia relative echo the willow behind.

8 *Dahlia* 'Karma Choc': this fine dahlia has dark leaves matched by its dark flowers.