

# *The Artist's* PALETTE

Designer Sophie Conran is renowned for producing homeware adorned with exquisite floral motifs, so it's little wonder that her abundant Wiltshire garden is such a true reflection of her talents

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A series of rectangular beds behind Sophie Conran's smart Georgian home feature a stylish combination of late-spring performers.





*Roses cover the house's mellow, neoclassical facade, and steps are flanked by terracotta pots*



**Clockwise from top** Alliums and bearded iris with ferny fennel; huge windows look out onto the terrace; the sweeping driveway; euphorbia with 'King Canute' lupins.

Anyone who is familiar with Sophie Conran's range of homeware knows that the designer has a deep love of nature. Floral motifs blossom across linen napkins and twine their way around candle holders. There are abundant vases, in different shapes and sizes, designed to hold everything from a couple of delicate stems to an armful of abundant branches. Even her most well-known line – the long-running tableware collection for Portmeirion – sees a simple white dinner service elevated by a nod to the outdoors, its organic, concentric pattern evoking the ripple of water in a pond or the circles in a tree stump.

It comes as no surprise, then, to discover the care and attention that Sophie has put into her own garden, set in the heart of the Wiltshire countryside. You approach it via a long, winding drive, past cherry trees laden with frothy white blossom and underplanted with masses of bulbs, the early snowdrops giving way to wood anemones and fritillaries as spring progresses towards summer.

By the time you reach the front of the house – a Georgian manor in honey-coloured Bath stone – you can tell that Sophie is passionate about gardening. Climbing roses cover the mellow, neoclassical facade, and the steps up to the front door are flanked

by an array of terracotta pots, planted each season with an ever-changing display of blooms.

Sophie bought the property in 2013 and, over the past eight years, she has been restoring and adding to the original



On the lawn, a set of furniture is perfectly positioned to take in the meadow views and a lovely specimen Judas tree, *Cercis siliquastrum*.





The beds next to the house brim with alliums, lupins and euphorbia, with large box balls for a sense of solidity.

planting scheme. “The garden had been quite neglected – there hadn’t been much done to it for about 25 years,” she says. “So we’ve been piecing it back together again, bit by bit, as well as adding some new features.”

The sheer scale of the project might have felt daunting to some: aside from the gardens that surround the house, there is a separate vegetable garden, a fern garden, a pond, a meadow, and some 30 acres of woodland. However, Sophie, the daughter of famed designer and restaurateur Terence Conran, grew up watching her parents embark on a very similar journey of their own.

“When I was younger my family moved to a house in Berkshire not all that far from here,” she recalls. “There were falling-down greenhouses and dilapidated walled gardens filled with Christmas trees. I saw it as my playground and watched my parents as they slowly rebuilt everything, from the vegetable garden to the fruit cages. It gave me a blueprint of what I could do here.”

Having completed several courses in horticulture and honed her eye at her previous gardens in West Sussex and Dorset, Sophie was well-placed to begin the transformation at her new home, although she has allowed it to evolve gradually rather than making a rigid plan. “This place talks to me – it

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tells me what to do,” she maintains. “I suppose it’s a mixture of instinct and a sympathetic view of the house and its surroundings. I want to create a feeling, so I’m really trying to make everything as alive as possible – filled with flowers and buzzing with bees, butterflies and birds. It’s a place to enjoy, and to be immersed in nature.”

One of the first things she did was to put in a new set of beds at the back of the house, which, in May, brim with a sea of alliums. Their pom-pom heads, in hues of pink, purple and white, add a playful and colourful note, especially when set alongside velvety irises, purple lupins, and frilly masses of hesperis. The rounded shapes of the alliums are echoed in the clipped box balls and euphorbia, which add year-round shape and structure to the borders.

Traditionally, 18th-century manors like this one would have been surrounded by acres of parkland with the gardens kept well away from the house. By introducing planting immediately around the property, Sophie has created the maximum possible impact when looking out from the huge, floor-to-



**Above** *Rosa* ‘Madame Alfred Carrière’ grows on the wall of the house. **Left** The late-spring blossom of *Cercis siliquastrum* is first borne on bare branches, until the season’s new foliage begins to burst its buds. **Below** The swelling heads of violet globe artichokes in Sophie’s vegetable garden.





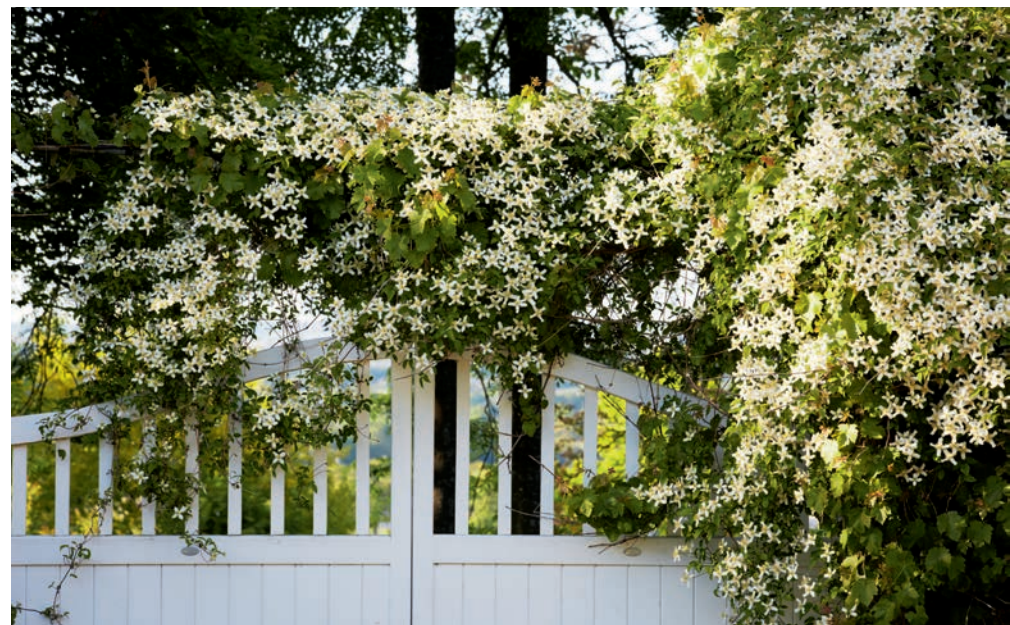


**Above** Peonies rub shoulders with sweet rocket and foxgloves. **Top right** Self-seeded plants in stonework and a relaxed clipping regime give the garden a wonderfully laid-back air. **Right** White camassias with red campion. **Below** *Clematis montana* var. *wilsonii* in full bloom.

ceiling windows on the ground floor, as well as integrating her home with the garden.

This is particularly in evidence when you step out of the drawing room and onto the long stone terrace that runs along the back of the house. From there you can look out across the borders to the fields beyond, while Sophie has made a virtue of the slightly dilapidated nature of the terrace itself. “The terrace is made from bits of old stone floors – great big slabs that are completely falling to pieces – so I’ve interplanted it with erigeron, creeping thyme, and aquilegias,” she explains. There’s even some hollyhocks and *Verbena bonariensis* dotted among the paving stones, while ‘Madame Alfred Carrière’ roses spread across the walls, adding to the sense that the place is literally blooming with life.

To the right of the house the land sweeps up a hill that is covered in woodland, consisting mostly of old beeches. Every May, this delightful area is carpeted with drifts of wild garlic, which scents the air with its distinctive tang. Sophie – who is a keen cook and has written several cookery books – picks and uses it in the kitchen, using it to make pesto and garlic butter and to flavour everything from soups to sautéed mushrooms. She also obtains an



abundance of produce from her vegetable garden, which is another ongoing project. “We’ve just had a fantastic new greenhouse reinstated on the site of an old one, using the existing foundations,” she says. “It was made by Woodpecker Joinery, and we’re thrilled with it.” Raised beds contain rows of brassicas, root vegetables and globe artichokes, and close by are two tunnels made from coppiced hazel, one of which is covered in sweet peas, the other with different varieties of beans and gourds.

Yet despite all this activity, Sophie has more plans afoot, working alongside the two full-time gardeners who keep the grounds running smoothly. The fern garden, long neglected, is being replanted, as are the borders at the front of the house. Existing plants are being catalogued throughout the garden and new ones are constantly added – she’s just put in an order for three paulownias, commonly known as foxglove trees, because of their clusters of spectacular lilac blooms.

“I get very excited about plants – I want all of them,” she says, laughing. “I’ve just planted masses more white alliums, including ‘Mount Everest’, and I love *Nepeta* ‘Six Hills Giant’, which just goes on flowering for months on end. One of my absolute favourites is a peony called ‘Coral Charm’

**Above** The land around Sophie’s Wiltshire home includes a pond and meadow, as well as 30 acres of woodland.

**Right** ‘Mount Everest’ alliums bring a cool freshness to late-spring planting schemes; add clusters of their bulbs in autumn for a display of stylish globes.



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– it’s particularly beautiful because it starts out a wonderful coral colour before fading to pink and then ends up turning almost white.”

Alongside the careful planting are plenty of self-seeders, including red campion and linaria, which have been given the freedom to romp through the garden, filling in gaps and creating a cheerful abundance of flowers that feels both romantic and quintessentially English. It’s the sort of place that you never want to leave – and, for now, Sophie certainly isn’t planning to. “I really love living here,” she concludes. “It keeps me fantastically busy – there’s always so much to do!” ■