

STRUCTURAL MOVEMENT

Shape is paramount in Louise Dowding's theatrical garden on the Somerset Levels

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PHOTOGRAPHS BRITT WILLOUGHBY DYER

IN BRIEF

What Well-tended, topiary garden with cottage garden planting.
Where Somerset.
Size A quarter of an acre.
Soil In an area of grade 2 agricultural soil, but over all soil farmland in parts, so very shallow.
Climate Hot, south-facing garden with low rainfall.
Hardiness zone USDA 8.

Strongly shaped perennials such as *Eryngium yuccifolium*, *Cyperus alternifolius* subsp. *flabelliformis*, *Lamium* and *Althaea hortensis* var. *rubra* fill out over the summer and complement the box shapes, with barely a flower in sight. Just a few red dots of *Crocus* × *Lanthe*.

When Louise Dowding and her husband Fergus arrived at Yew Farm in Martock on the Somerset Levels in 1996, the garden was very different. "It had those wiggly 'hosepipe' borders all around the edges, which I'm not so keen on, because if leaves an empty space in the middle where you could have plants." Louise studied garden design at Kingston Maurward College and spent two years working as an assistant to Penelope Hobbouse at Bettiscombe before starting up her own practice, and so she is not short on garden ideas. She knew immediately what she wanted to do, and set

about putting it into place. "I ripped everything out except for an old pear tree and started again," she says. Louise's layout for the garden took almost the opposite approach to her predecessor's: a cross shape of wide borders right down the centre of the garden, borders around the edges with wide, grass paths between them but no stretch of open lawn. It made the most of the strong structure of old walls that surrounded this former farmyard.

This farmyard legacy made itself known almost immediately, when the couple found that a large part of the garden was laid directly over the stone yard, with just a foot of soil covering it. "This is a sunny, hot, south-facing garden anyway, and there was no way

we could take up all that stone. I had to find plants that could cope with shallow soils." This narrowed down her options for the new garden. "Roses don't do well here, though we have sealed in a few at the edges where there are deeper pockets of soil, but Hawthorns do brilliantly, as does *Euphorbia oblongata*, which seeds itself everywhere. Salvias, crocosmias and the Mexican daisy *Eryngium karwinskianum* are all really successful in our hot, dry conditions." Most importantly, box thrives here and quickly became central to the entire layout of the garden. "I knew I wanted to establish a strong structure straight away," says Louise, "so I started planting little, 30cm

To continue here to page 54 ▶



Above Tall and beautifully trimmed yew hedges flank the front path to Yew Farm, drawing the eye towards the entrance and providing the first hint of the architectural elegance that awaits in the garden beyond.

Below The greenish white, spherical flowers of *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle' echo the mounds of the box shapes in the front garden without distracting from them; any flowering plants complement rather than threaten the overall green palette.





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What was once a wide lawn with wavy borders around the edges is now an area of wide borders with generous walkways between them, dominated by hawthorn trees and topiary shapes, and the old pear tree, the sole plant to be retained from the original garden.



Above Louise has had a tall, decorative, oak plinth made up to adorn the ginger coloured hamstone wall. The warm, traditional, local stone, which is quarried in nearby Ham Hill, is the perfect foil for the cream-coloured pedestal.

Below Around the vegetable garden, Fergus also dabbles in some playful topiary of his own, moving away from the original box balls, to create more dynamic shapes in the form of birds and snails along the top of the hedges.





Louise sometimes her green thyme around the terrace, with spots of sword-like *Artemisia* punctuated by dots of red Dublin 'Bishop's Children'.

holding plants all through the borders, with the aim of growing them into box balls – 20 years later and they are nearly finished.” She keeps them healthy by regularly spraying with a seaweed fertiliser. Despite having such strong ideas from the start, Louise did take some missteps. “My original idea was to have the box shapes surrounded by lots of ornamental grasses waving in the breeze, and so I planted them all over, but they were just so disappointing. I knew almost at once that it was a mistake. For five months of the year they didn’t do anything and they didn’t like our conditions.” She dug the lot out just three years later and thought again. “I wanted architectural planting. I’m not really a flower person, it’s shapes I am looking for.” She particularly loves the sword-like leaves of

crocosmia, the airy, filigree uprights of *Cyperus alternifolius* subsp. *fabdiflorus* and the green spikes of *Eryngium agavifolium*. “If you choose perennials with good shapes, it doesn’t matter if they are in flower or not. They provide structure all season long.” There is some colour in the garden, although Louise tends either towards bright but small pinpoints of orange and red – from *Crocosmia ‘Lucifer’* and Dublin ‘Bishop’s Children’, for example – that do not threaten the green overall look, or stormy, grey-blues with the likes of *Salvia chamaedryoides* and *Verbena officinalis* var. *grandiflora* ‘Bampton’. “Blues are quiet,” she says. “They sit there and don’t grab the attention.” Which means that above all they don’t distract from her beautiful box plants, the stars of the show. ▶



Above Although flowers are few and far between in Louise’s garden, she loves misty purples, such as *Verbena officinalis* var. *grandiflora* ‘Bampton’, which, Louise says, are “easy to live with” and don’t fight with her favoured greens.

Below *Euphorbia hypericifolia* Diamond Frost (= ‘Innauphi’), with its tiny, white, gypsophila-like flowers held on a tangle of fine, airy stems, graces one of the many planters that surround Louise’s terrace.



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The vegetable garden is built over deeper soil than the rest of the garden and is surrounded by box hedges and topiary, and by a pleached apple tree underplanted with *Eriogonum fasciculatum*.

▷ The box shapes themselves have undergone a transformation as they have reached maturity, and are far more complex than the originally envisaged them. "They were box balls, and one day Fergus was looking out at them and said, "They're so boring, and they were. They were too big and too heavy for the rest of the planting." She set about cutting them into different shapes, some into spirals and others with strong, horizontal segments, while Fergus's vegetable garden – the only part of the garden not built over the stone yard – boasts a wavy hedge topped with a parade of topiary hens and snails. "They look so much better now. The light plays on the horizontals and verticals so much more than it did when they were balls," says Louise. It is in the late summer evenings that she appreciates them the

most. "All of the hand work with the box takes place in early summer. It is manic around early June, trying to get around it all. But by late summer the box is looking good and everything has filled out around it. At dusk the shapes seem to double in size and they look almost animated. They have a massive presence. I love them." ◀

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address News Farm, East Street, Martock, Somerset TA12 6NF.
Tel 01935 822202.

Open 12 September, 2-5pm, for National Garden Scheme (ngs.org.uk), otherwise group visits for 20 or more people by arrangement (email fergus.dowling@btinternet.com).



Above The dwarf rose *Rosa 'The Fairy'* comes into flower for later than many others, but once it starts, it flowers continuously through to November. Louise uses it to front the rose walk, where it doesn't dominate the planting, and weaves its blooms through adjacent plants.

Below A *Crataegus x laevis* 'Carriensii' provides shade for the terrace. It's a hard-working tree. As well as offering glossy, oval leaves that turn red in late autumn and fall late, its spring blossom is loved by the bees, and followed by flame-coloured berries that cling until February.



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