



Garden designer JINNY BLOM describes how she has been tending and tweaking the third of an acre in front of her barn-conversion home in Oxfordshire for the past few years, before she embarks on a major redesign

putting down roots

PHOTOGRAPHS BRITT WILLOUGHBY DYER



OPPOSITE In the middle of each of the square beds stands an *Amelanchier x grandiflora* 'Ballerina', underplanted with catnip, roses, alliums and geraniums. THIS PAGE A central path leads to an arch festooned with *Rosa* 'Veilchenblau'. The yellow tea rose in the foreground was a birthday gift to the previous owner and provides a supply of cut flowers

We moved out of London quite by accident a few years ago. A chance encounter with the amiable gentleman selling the house spiralled rapidly into a swift, trouble-free transaction. Within a matter of weeks, we were driving up the motorway to a new home that I had never set foot inside. Never

has a good decision been so well made. The house in question is actually a listed barn dating from 1593, built from the soft coral-line stone of which so many of the Oxford colleges are made. Saved from dereliction by Sir Isaiah and Lady Berlin in the early Seventies, it was handed to an inspired academic who engaged Trevor Dannatt's lead architect, John Barrow, to convert it into a modest modernist masterpiece. The garden, a walled barnyard of around a third of an acre, is set out before the barn.

We arrived in an unseasonably warm December. Every morning, I was out at first light poking around the garden to see what was growing. There were plenty of admirable things, as well as a few horrors. Thor's thunderbolt hit first at a revolting *Acer platanoides* 'Crimson King'. Next a *Betula utilis* subsp. *jacquemontii* bit the dust; I loathe them. We are great friends with the previous owner, who now lives just 250 metres away. Standing in the drizzle staring at the spot where the betula had been, I asked if he minded it being felled. 'It was my retirement gift,' he said wistfully.

He brought me two box binders of his late wife's garden notes. She had been a terrific gardener and artist. The design is a light structure of four large beds in a cruciform layout, with rose arches and box balls at each entry point. In high summer, the garden erupts into Impressionistic clouds of colour. Copious handwritten memos and photographs provided an insight into the mind of a fellow plantswoman, with whom I would have had a lot in common, and I suddenly felt a strong urge to tend her garden, rather than destroy it to impose my own ideas – at least for a few seasons. I wanted to get under the skin of what was here and show some respect to what was clearly the result of years of devoted gardening. A garden is a living expression of another person's creative life.

The box had blight from overclipping, so we let it grow out and fed it copiously with seaweed. The roses needed proper pruning – enter Anna Dudziak who helps me two days a month. She is a great collaborator. Under her skilled secateurs, order has been restored. The soil is thin and sandy – after all, we are living on a prehistoric coral reef – and watering is anathema to me, yet the ground guzzles it up like nobody's business. My improvements, all plant based, have been minimal yet veer towards my hardy, drought-tolerant preferences: *Ferula communis* subsp. *glauca* and *Cistus creticus*, as well as unusual rosemary and iris varieties. I also planted a black mulberry, *Morus nigra*, for the love of them.

I planted a semi-mature, native shelterbelt of *Buxus* 'Rotundifolia', hawthorn, quince, crab apple, cherry plum and wild roses, as I wanted to extend the hedge from the adjacent field and invite more small birds in. At its feet is a tiny orchard meadow filled with cowslips, orchids, *Tulipa sprengeri* and snake's head fritillaries. I have added swathes of tulips to all the beds and peppered them full of annuals, which I grow from seed in a tiny, cold greenhouse: principally *Echium vulgare* for the bees, *Papaver somniferum* 'Lauren's Grape' and *Orlaya grandiflora*. My enthusiasm for every kind of salvia needs at least 300 orlaya seedlings every year to bind them together. Imagine my delight at finding *Salvia forsskaalii* lurking under the pleached hornbeam – a rare plant that had been sought out by a clearly committed gardener.

So, for the past couple of years, I have been tending, tweaking



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ABOVE A table in the small orchard, set in long grass with orchids, has a view of the field. OPPOSITE TOP A deep bed runs along the barn facade, punctuated by *Wisteria floribunda* 'Snow Showers', which rise out of myrtle, *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis' and cardoons. OPPOSITE BOTTOM The weeping willow creates shade and a cathedral-like ceiling of flickering pale green

and just enjoying my predecessor's horticultural predilections. My own plant collection sits uncomplainingly in ever-bigger pots – *Genista aetnensis* that I grew from seed, *Merrillioanax alpinus* from Crüg Farm Plants, patiently waiting for freed roots. I have been sitting on my garden-designer hands and resisting the urge to revert to a tabula rasa. It has been very challenging.

However, the modernist interior of the house is crying out for a companion – and, as Picasso said, every act of creation is preceded by an act of destruction. So, this autumn, the village descended armed with barrows, spades and forks to recycle the existing plants away into pastures new. The distant rumble of diggers is becoming louder. Let destruction commence □

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