

Embellished by nature

At Rustling End in Hertfordshire, wild flowers mingle happily with cultivated plants, creating a delightfully relaxed atmosphere. **Matthew Biggs** meets Julie Wise, a former air stewardess who created the garden as a retreat from the high life. Photography by Neil Hepworth



NATURAL HISTORY HAS BEEN a passion for Julie Wise since childhood, when she would walk the Hertfordshire lanes identifying and picking wild flowers, her knowledge winning first prize for the most species in a posy at the local flower show. Rather than picking, Julie now plants. Over the past 15 years she has created a garden approximately 1.6ha (4 acres) in size – of which 1.4ha (3.5 acres) is wild flower meadow – at the cottage she shares with husband Tim, near Codicote, Hertfordshire; native plants blurring boundaries between countryside and garden. Hedges are shaped to echo the landscape, while wild flowers such as red campion and ox-eye daisies (blown into the garden or introduced by animals) are used as ornamentals, contrasting with garden plants such as grass *Anemanthele lessoniana* or peachy-pink poker, *Kniphofia* ‘Timothy’. The garden is more than a hobby Julie enthuses, ‘it was an antidote to my working life, as cabin crew, spending hours in an aircraft’.

Starting out

Julie’s early experiments with rampant roses and lavenders growing in clay were rapidly rejected. ‘As I was away eight months of a year, my garden had to be self-managing; my whole philosophy had to be re-assessed,’ she explains. The site is divided into several ‘rooms’, bounded by hornbeam and yew hedges radiating out from the cottage, creating a series of microclimates from shady borders to bogs and parched sunny areas.

Although Julie’s job meant she was often unable to maintain the garden regularly, nature took up the task; self-seeded *Verbascum thapsus* (mullein) and patches of red campion soon appeared while she was not around to weed them out, and helped to shape her gardening ethos: ‘I realised their beauty as garden ornamentals; where serendipity forms a pleasing combination, they are simply left to grow’. Wandering the meandering paths or from room to room, you find unexpected associations – bulbous buttercup with *Ligularia dentata* ‘Desdemona’; cow parsley posing elegantly beside emerging foliage of *Crocsmia* ‘Lucifer’; and the delicate features of common valerian highlighted by *Lysimachia ciliata* ‘Firecracker’.

Contrasting conditions

Yew hedges emanate from the lines of the cottage, creating a vista along double borders planted with robust, late-flowering herbaceous plants and grasses. One border is ►

SPRING BLUE

In spring, drifts of blue *Camassia* create a bold display (below), rising through young growth of perennials such as *Rodgersia* (right)



'WHERE SERENDIPITY FORMS A PLEASING COMBINATION, [THE PLANTS] ARE SIMPLY LEFT TO GROW'

dry, the other wet. 'I wanted to use the colour and texture of emerging foliage as a feature, particularly in spring; a stellar blue haze of *Camassia leichtlinii* subsp. *sucksdorfii* bursts above for a few weeks in May before foliage returns to the fore. There has been much experimentation and results are impossible to predict.

For example, *Digitalis ferruginea* was expected to cope in the dry border but failed, whereas October flowering *Aster lateriflorus* 'Lady in Black', with its purple-pink flowers and mildew-resistant dark foliage, has been a success. Julie takes advantage of the natural vigour of *Eupatorium purpureum*, growing it in the dry border, where conditions are not entirely to its liking; the location prevents it from becoming invasive, growing to only half its usual height, but it proves self-supporting and remains statuesque.

The double borders are weeded just once in the growing season (early April) and cut back in late January. Stems are shredded and material from the moist side is put onto the dry side, where the soil benefits from additional organic matter. Other areas are cut back earlier and debris thrown to the chickens who pick it over, adding their high nitrogen manure; composting is speeded up to about three weeks.

Welcoming all

In the pretty kitchen garden where raised beds are filled with healthy looking vegetables, not all joints in the brick path are mortared. In some, pot marigolds, nasturtiums and *Chenopodium bonus-henricus* (good king Henry) self-seed to great effect. Elsewhere, below embracing boughs of a giant oak, an area that was constantly waterlogged proved to be the site of a woodland pond after it was found on an old map. The pond was re-dug and is now alive with newts, toads and frogs as well as the calls of young moorhens in spring. Around it, robust natives such as *Caltha palustris* (marsh marigold), *Iris pseudacorus* 'Variegata' (variegated flag iris) and *Osmunda regalis* (royal fern, thought extinct in the county as a wild plant) revel in moist shade. Nearby a giant laurel, with twisted stems and a crown raised by nibbling muntjac deer, provides an umbrella against winter wet. The area in its shadow has been topped with gravel to aid winter drainage, and is planted with dry loving plants such as *Phlomis russeliana*, *Origanum laevigatum* 'Hopleys' and self-seeded *Agrostemma githago* (corncockle).

One surprising element to this garden is a formally-styled area, with a rectangular pond surrounded by lawn,



VARIED APPEAL

A pond edged with *Caltha palustris* (marsh marigold) provides a wildlife habitat (below). A paved area is softened with voluptuous planting (below left), including grasses and yellow flowered *Phlomis russeliana*



SUMMER'S PROFUSION

The palette of plants changes over the year at Rustling End: in summer the twin borders are filled with *Verbascum*, *Papaver* and *Filipendula* (above). The kitchen garden includes a small glasshouse (left)



yew cones and two tiers of clipped hornbeam hedges. It is a place of structured calm, whose green shades contrast with the billowing ebullience of the late summer garden. It has also become a valuable wildlife habitat. Frogs inhabit the pool and since the cutting height of the mower has been raised to 3in (7.5cm), *Prunella vulgaris* (self-heal) and daisies have colonised the lawn. Birds, including long-tailed tits, nest in the hedges.

'Throughout my career the garden was a saviour; it brought me back to reality, away from hotel rooms and airports to the wild flowers and countryside of my childhood. I'd often arrive home at dawn on a summers day, exhausted from a long flight, put on my wellingtons and walk round the garden, still in my uniform – there's nothing more special than that,' Julie smiles. ■

Matthew Biggs is a garden broadcaster and writer

i Rustling End is open under the National Gardens Scheme: Sun 25 & Weds 28 Apr, 2–6pm, and Fri 30 Apr, 4–8pm. **Visit:** www.ngs.org.uk and www.rustlingend.com

WILD FLOWERS TO TRY

Julie Wise's garden includes a wide range of wild flowers. The following are easy to grow and integrate well with existing ornamental planting:

- **Primroses** are a nectar source for early insects and grow happily in dappled shade.
- **Cowslips** will carpet shady spots but die back in summer, allowing other plants to take their place.
- **Foxgloves** provide the perfect vertical accent in a native border and are loved by bees.
- **Greater knapweed** has attractive seedheads; it self seeds prolifically, but is easy to remove.
- **Pink campion**, with its pink flowers, grows happily in shade; it can be invasive but is easy to control.
- **Ox-eye daisies** will flower again if cut back – a good choice for heavier soils.