



## IN BRIEF

**What** Family garden designed to maximise fun and enjoyment.

**Where** Surrey.

**Size** Around three acres including woodland and walled garden.

**Soil** Sandy and acidic.

**Climate** Temperate.

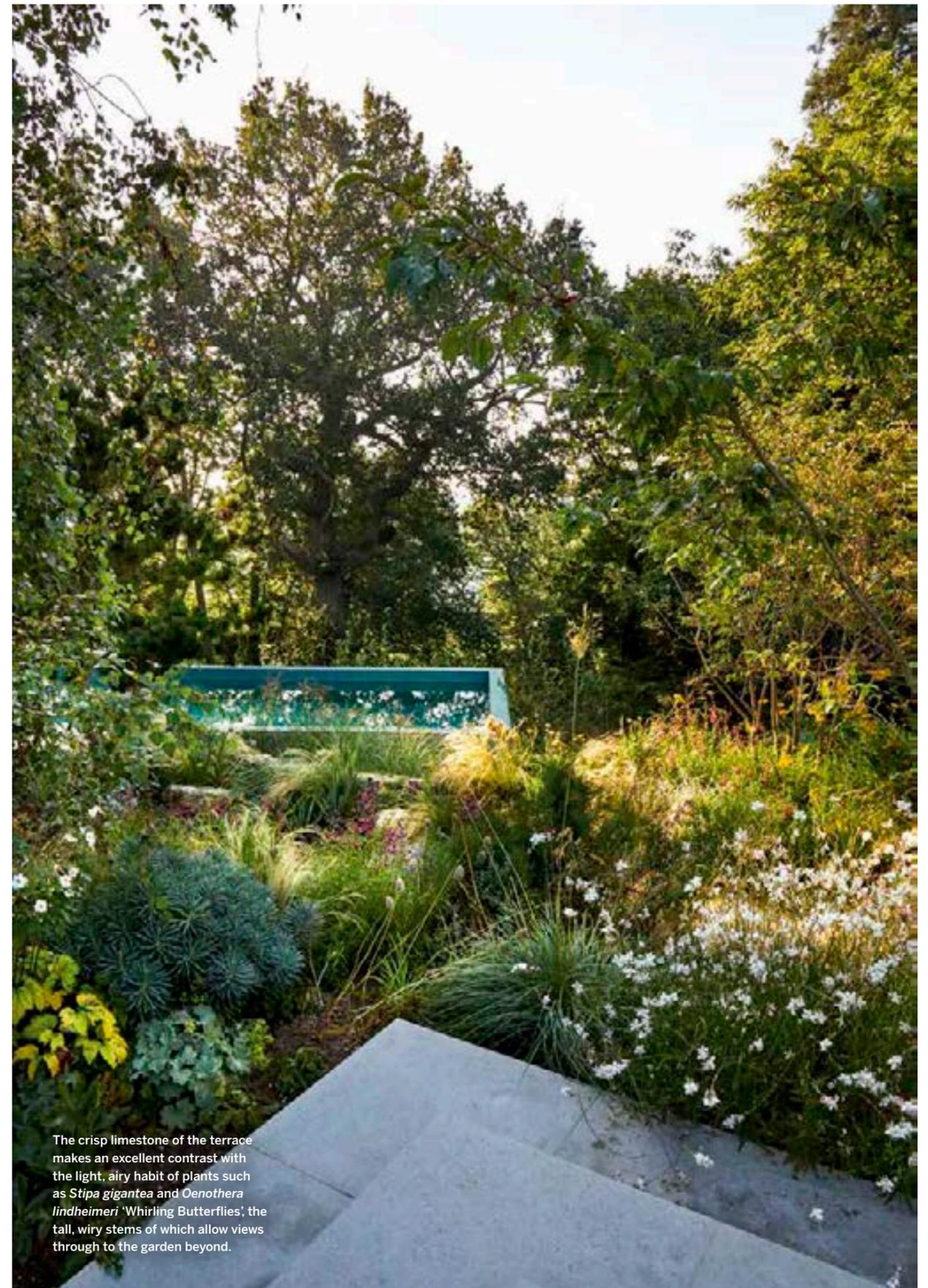
**Hardiness zone** USDA 9.

The terrace gives several access points into the garden, stepping down to the pond, the 'prairie path', and the path leading to the pool below.

# THE PLACE TO BE

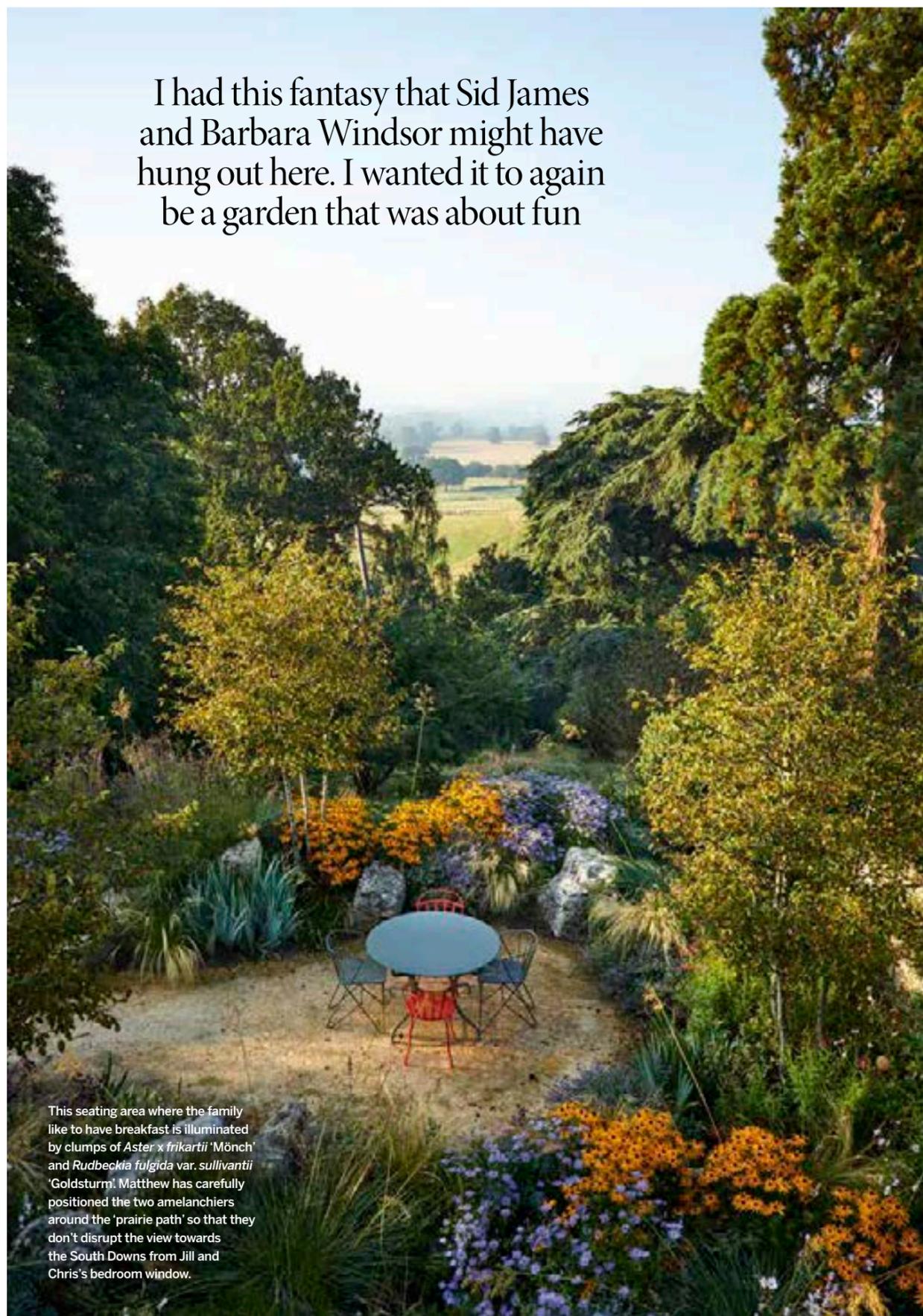
High on a hill just outside Reigate, Surrey, Matthew Childs has created a contemporary pleasure garden that all the family can enjoy

WORDS NATASHA GOODFELLOW PHOTOGRAPHS ALISTER THORPE



The crisp limestone of the terrace makes an excellent contrast with the light, airy habit of plants such as *Stipa gigantea* and *Oenothera lindheimeri* 'Whirling Butterflies', the tall, wiry stems of which allow views through to the garden beyond.

I had this fantasy that Sid James and Barbara Windsor might have hung out here. I wanted it to again be a garden that was about fun



This seating area where the family like to have breakfast is illuminated by clumps of *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch' and *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm'. Matthew has carefully positioned the two amelanchiers around the 'prairie path' so that they don't disrupt the view towards the South Downs from Jill and Chris's bedroom window.

Designer Matthew Childs has long been inspired by the Californian landscape architect Thomas Church, and his maxim that 'gardens are for people', so a brief to create a garden where the whole family would enjoy spending time was for him like nectar to a honeybee. "If you can get people excited by their gardens, and give them a space that fits their needs, they'll want to spend time there," he says. "If they do that, they'll nurture the garden, and as a result the environment benefits, wildlife benefits and so do they."

The garden surrounds the bungalow of Jill and Chris Brady – originally the pool house on an estate once owned by film producer J Arthur Rank. After Jill left her job, she realised that the garden, then a series of scrubby lawns, dried-up ponds and, everywhere, the remnants of a sizeable rockery, had once been beautiful. "We hadn't paid it any attention whatsoever," she says, "and it just felt wrong." To remedy the situation, the couple asked garden designer Matthew Childs to channel their dreams into a cohesive whole. Alongside the practical requests for a swimming pool, pool house and a low-maintenance garden, there was one key emotional requirement, too. "I wanted my children to want to be here," says Jill. "And when they leave home, I want them to want to come back here."

Matthew's first step in designing the garden was to think about its history and how its previous owner might have used it. "Rank made all the *Carry On* films and I had this fantasy that perhaps Sid



The 'prairie path' is the hottest, driest part of the garden and has been planted accordingly with a drought-tolerant mix of herbs, grasses and perennials that includes *Origanum laevigatum* 'Herrenhausen', *Stipa lessingiana*, *Achillea filipendulina* 'Gold Plate' and *Penstemon* 'Andenken an Friedrich Hahn'.

▷ James and Barbara Windsor might have hung out here,” says Matthew. “You can just imagine the laughs they’d have had. I wanted it to become that kind of garden again, a garden that was about fun.”

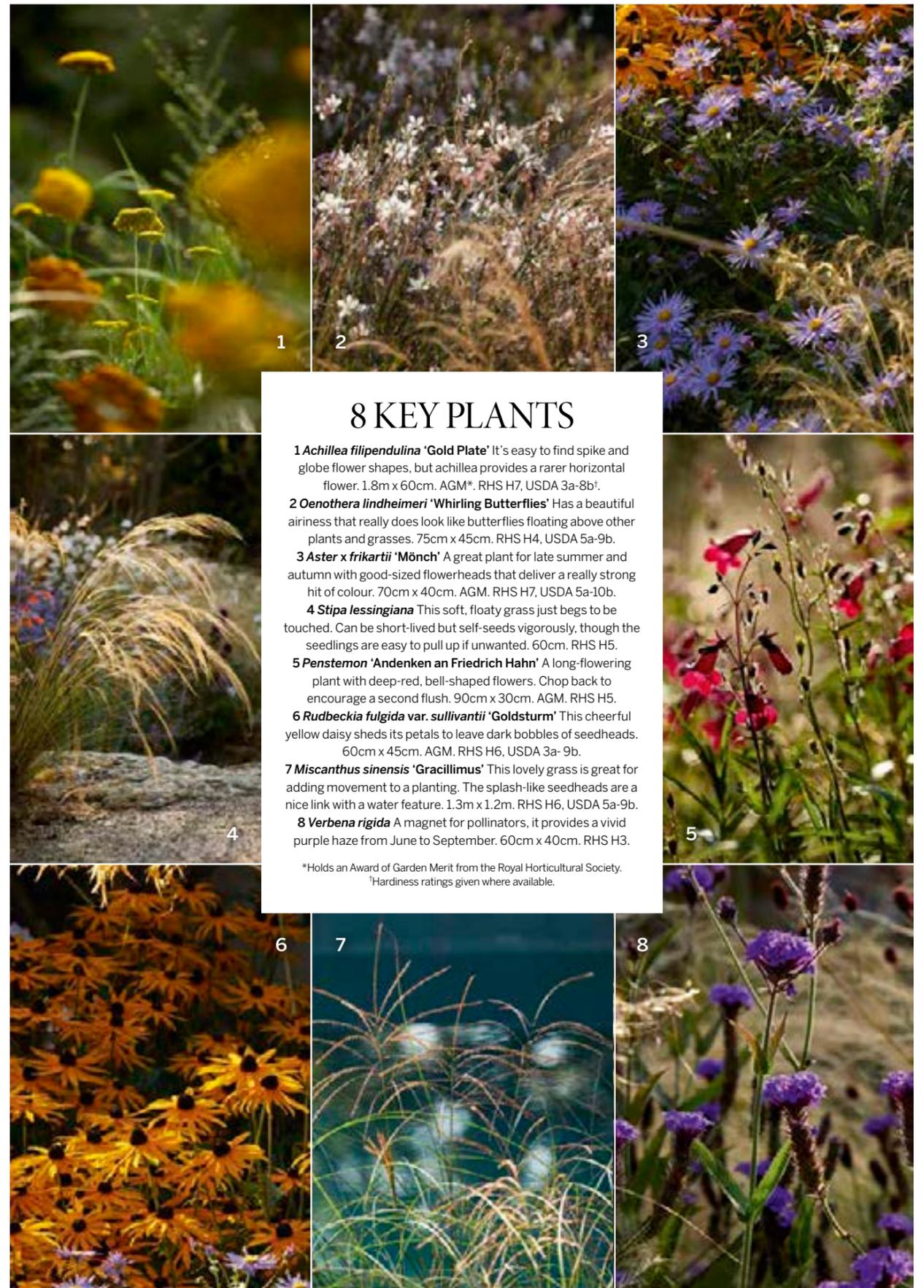
Inspired by the garden’s original design, Matthew has incorporated not only the desired pool and pool house, but an extensive natural pondscape, a large dining terrace, a contemporary firepit area and several other more secluded seating areas. With the help of contractor Belderbos Landscapes, the Westmoreland stone that had littered the space was dismantled, laid out and then painstakingly placed, rock by rock, to build the garden. “It was like having a gold mine on site,” says Matthew.

The stone is now the most prominent hard-landscaping material, along with similarly calcareous limestone on the terrace. To balance the environmental footprint of the concrete, used in the pool and its striking cabana, designed by architectural practice Surman Weston, Matthew tried to be as sustainable as possible in other aspects. “As well as reusing all the stone, we incorporated the existing hard landscaping into the sub base of the pool and the terrace to minimise the amount of waste sent off site,” he says. Planting has played a key part too, with woodlanders enjoying the shade of the trees, and Mediterranean, drought-tolerant plants thriving on the ‘prairie path’ alongside the south-facing terrace.

Though Jill had never really gardened before, she had started experimenting with growing cut flowers since she left her job and found herself becoming more and more enthused as the ▷



In the walled garden, Matthew has designed an attractive cutting garden with a pergola at its centre, flanked by beds for dahlias and annuals. Strips of wildflowers and lavender encourage pollinators and provide extra blooms, while an orchard area is filled with apple, pear, quince and plum trees.



## 8 KEY PLANTS

- 1 *Achillea filipendulina* 'Gold Plate'** It's easy to find spike and globe flower shapes, but achillea provides a rarer horizontal flower. 1.8m x 60cm. AGM\*. RHS H7, USDA 3a-8b<sup>†</sup>.
- 2 *Oenothera lindheimeri* 'Whirling Butterflies'** Has a beautiful airiness that really does look like butterflies floating above other plants and grasses. 75cm x 45cm. RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b.
- 3 *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch'** A great plant for late summer and autumn with good-sized flowerheads that deliver a really strong hit of colour. 70cm x 40cm. AGM. RHS H7, USDA 5a-10b.
- 4 *Stipa lessingiana*** This soft, floaty grass just begs to be touched. Can be short-lived but self-seeds vigorously, though the seedlings are easy to pull up if unwanted. 60cm. RHS H5.
- 5 *Penstemon* 'Andenken an Friedrich Hahn'** A long-flowering plant with deep-red, bell-shaped flowers. Chop back to encourage a second flush. 90cm x 30cm. AGM. RHS H5.
- 6 *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm'** This cheerful yellow daisy sheds its petals to leave dark bobbles of seedheads. 60cm x 45cm. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 3a-9b.
- 7 *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus'** This lovely grass is great for adding movement to a planting. The splash-like seedheads are a nice link with a water feature. 1.3m x 1.2m. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.
- 8 *Verbena rigida*** A magnet for pollinators, it provides a vivid purple haze from June to September. 60cm x 40cm. RHS H3.

\*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.  
<sup>†</sup>Hardiness ratings given where available.



To help the garden blend with the wooded landscape around, and to add evergreen interest and structure, Matthew has added a number of conifers including a large *Pinus nigra* to help balance the pool house and several small *Pinus sylvestris* 'Watereri'.

▷ garden project progressed. "Before long, I'd asked Matthew to design a cutting garden in our walled garden too," she says. It is here, among the raised beds chock-full of dahlias, lavender, cosmos and other annuals, that Jill now spends most of her time, growing and picking plants for her new business, Heathside Flower Garden. "It gives me goosebumps to think that this process has inspired a whole new lifestyle," says Matthew.

The main garden has had a similar effect. The firepit has been a huge hit with the couple's daughters who enjoy being out there even in winter. Chris now regularly walks around the garden in the evenings, finding it calms him and helps him to make the transition from work to home. And Jill swims in the chemical-free pool whenever she can, drinking in the scent of the jasmine planted all around. "I have to pinch myself," she says. "I still can't believe that this is our garden." □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

For more information on Matthew's work visit [matthewchildsdesign.co.uk](http://matthewchildsdesign.co.uk)



## POND LIFE

Matthew's favourite pond plants

"It's easy to lump pond plants together when really, we should think of them just as we do other plants in the garden, considering their foliage, scent, flowers and the attributes they bring to a space," says Matthew. "For flowers, I love the purple spikes of *Lythrum salicaria* which is versatile, long-flowering, and brilliant for pollinators. Other favourites are *Nymphaea* 'Colorado', a beautiful peachy-coloured water lily, the flower of which sits proud of the water on a short stem, and *Myosotis scorpioides*, the water forget-me-not. *Mentha aquatica* has an interesting fluffy-looking flower but I love it mainly for its clump-forming habit and scented foliage.

"If you want to keep the water in your pond clear, you'll need plants that can oxygenate and filter the water. The aquatic weed *Ceratophyllum demersum* has a light, airy form, while the root systems of marginals, such as *Butomus umbellatus* and *Cyperus longus*, help take excess nitrates out of the water. *Cyperus longus* has something of the look of papyrus about it and produces lovely seedheads, while the butomus is very much in fashion at the moment with its sprays of mauve flowers on delicate, wiry stems.

"Whatever you choose, be sure to use plants that are appropriate to the size of your pond – *Typha angustifolia* and *Iris pseudacorus* can be very vigorous."