

GARDEN INSPIRATION

COLOURFUL COLLECTION

Geums and spring bulbs, including tulips, irises and bluebells, rise above a froth of forget-me-nots amid box bushes and euphorbia in this small, village garden





Perfect HARMONY

A fascination for one particular plant grew as this gorgeous country garden took shape

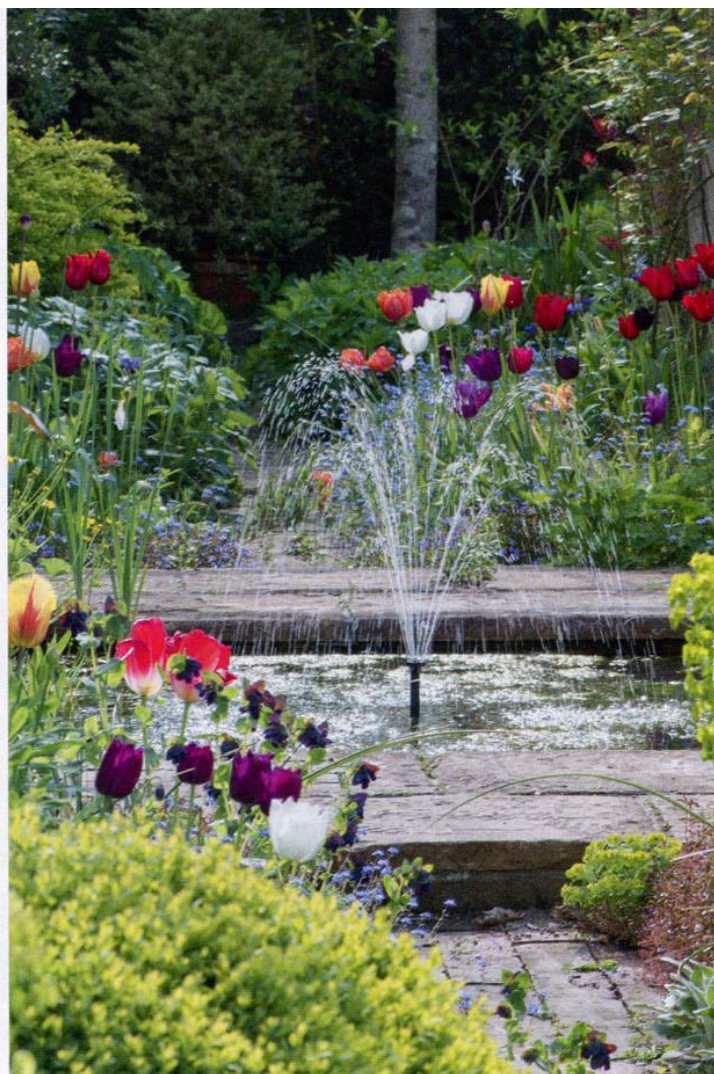
WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY NICOLA STOCKEN

Turning a practical vegetable plot into a flourishing cottage garden filled with cherished plants and birdsong has led Sue Martin to turn a passion into a business. Today Sue, who's a cellist, balances her love of music with tending the quarter-of-an-acre garden of Wealden clay at her home in Frittenden, Kent, and running a specialist nursery for her favourite species, the geum. 'They're fantastic plants - I've collected about 100 varieties that grow throughout the garden,' she says. Here Sue tells the story of how she created this idyllic space.

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VIBRANT MIX
Red *Geum* 'Rubin' mingles
with purple columbine



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

When I moved here in 1988, the outdoor space was more like an allotment than a garden. I wanted a lovely view from my kitchen window, so I grassed over the vegetable beds and formed a path edged in lavender to run from the terrace to a pleached lime screen on the far boundary.

I've never drawn a plan, preferring to let the garden evolve and change gradually. Now the path is brick, with a small raised pool and a fountain in the centre. Across it is a chestnut-pole pergola with roses growing up it that don't smother it or rob the beds below of light. The old lavender was ousted by box balls and a sea of forget-me-nots and tulips that appear in spring. Initially I colour-themed the tulips, but bulbs from previous years kept reappearing and the colours became muddled, so now I just enjoy the mix.

ADDING STRUCTURE

At first I was attracted by the fact that the garden is southwest-facing, but it was so open it was like living in a goldfish bowl until the dense mixed hedge of holly, ash and hawthorn grew sufficiently tall. I also planted a number of trees to provide structure and privacy from neighbours. There's a sweet gum and hawthorn – both with rich autumn colours – plus silver birches, whitebeam and crab apple.

Near the house stands an Eastern redbud, a deciduous tree indigenous to North America, which has purplish flowers in spring and pale greyish and blue-green heart-shaped leaves. Only one original tree remains, an old 'Beauty of Bath' apple tree that a friend pollarded to form a leafy canopy above a table and chairs. The tree has kept its shape – but the apples taste revolting!

EXCHANGING IDEAS

The borders were originally formed by laying garden hose on the grass to create an outline of the curving edges. As I've bought more plants, more lawn has disappeared and the borders increased, and they're now intensively planted. My problem is that I can't resist plants. I'm a member of the Hardy Plant Society in Kent, and have gained a huge amount of knowledge from other members.

Each year there's a seed exchange, which is a great source of unusual plants. Last December there were 11 of us sitting around my kitchen table, counting the various seeds into little white envelopes to send out to fellow members. Plants do well here as, even though the soil is heavy yellow clay, it's rich and crumbly, known as friable, because the previous owners had regularly applied manure and lime.

WILD THING

Other people often describe my planting style as cottagey or informal: I call it wild. There are a lot of self-seeding plants that add spontaneity, but they need controlling – I regularly thin out seedlings, otherwise the beds become congested.

Among my self-seeders are large spurges (*Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, or Mediterranean spurge) with iridescent lime-yellow flowerheads, all babies from one original plant. It's a similar story with the purple-flowered honeywort (*Cerinthe major* 'Purpurascens'): once you have one, you have it for life. The aquilegia plants have interbred from just four original named varieties, while forget-me-nots manage to get everywhere – I have to ruthlessly rip out tatty clumps to create space for summer's perennials, but they always come back next spring.'

NATURAL BEAUTY

A small fountain plays beneath a pergola that spans a brick path edged with box balls, euphorbia, geums and tulips

SUNNY LOOKS

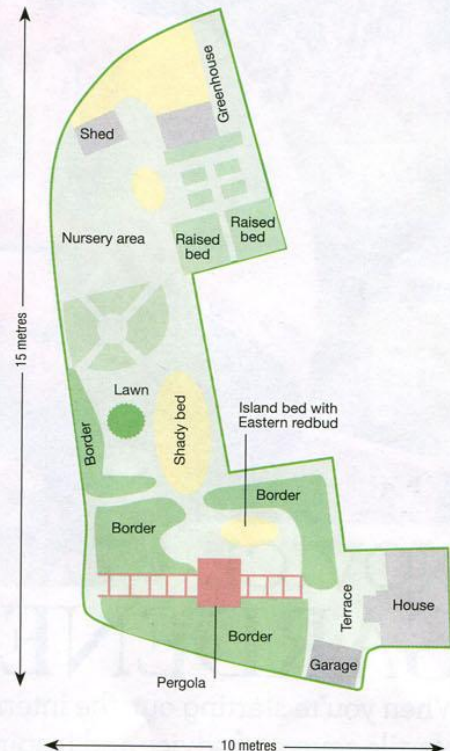
With bright yellow blooms, *Geum* 'Primrose', brightens up the garden

LONG LASTING

Geum 'Prinses Juliana' flowers all summer

The layout

Vibrant borders and a pergola are visible from the house, while the greenhouse and shed are hidden away at the end of the long plot




A PASSION FOR GEUMS

I absolutely love geums, a herbaceous plant that belongs to the rose family. My mother lived next door, and after she died and her cottage was sold, I kept part of her garden at the bottom of my plot to house a polytunnel and nursery for the plants.

Four raised beds were intended for vegetables, but two have been taken over by geums now that I've established a National Collection. Ironically, the first geum I ever planted died, but I tried again with the beautiful orange-flowered 'Prinses Juliana' which has self-seeded throughout the garden. They come in a lovely range of colours and shapes, with some suiting full sun and others coping well in shade.

Adjacent to the work area is a small parterre edged in low-growing box and teucrium hedges, which replaced a square vegetable plot that had become too much work. It's divided by gravel paths into four triangular beds – manageable chunks that I can cope with a bit at a time. By spring its hedges become increasingly blurred by plants such as alliums and tulips, centaurea, aquilegia and euphorbia. Beyond stands the gnarled apple tree that offers a peaceful shady place to sit in summer and links the parterre and work area with the main back garden.

When I think back to what the original garden was like, I'm so pleased with the way it's turned out. There's hardly a day when I don't go out there – even in winter! 

● Sue's garden at Brickwall Cottages, Frittenden in Kent, opens during 2015 in aid of the National Gardens Scheme on 26 and 27 April; 3 and 4 May (2-5pm). For more information, visit ngs.org.uk

Growing geums

Here are Sue's tips for enjoying these sunny perennials all summer long; the rivale varieties appear in March, while chiloense cultivars can bloom from April-September.

- ✱ Geums are evergreen or semi-evergreen, growing year on year and forming dense clumps that must be divided regularly, in autumn or spring, to prevent them from deteriorating and growing woody
- ✱ Different varieties need different growing conditions: ground-hugging *G. rivale* cultivars thrive in shade, taller *G. chiloense* are sun lovers and *G. coccineum* enjoy partial shade because they scorch in full sun.
- ✱ They'll grow in acidic or limey soil, but prefer moisture-retentive soil that's mulched annually with compost.
- ✱ If planted amid rampant self-seeders such as forget-me-nots, clear a circle round the base of the geum plant to prevent it being stifled.
- ✱ Some spread more than others – rivale cultivars spread, whereas chiloense stay in neat, tight clumps.
- ✱ Geums' lovely seedheads can be left on the plant.
- ✱ They're very promiscuous and if they cross-pollinate the result can be many sub-standard plants.
- ✱ For a full list of geums grown in Sue's garden, see geumcollection.co.uk.

