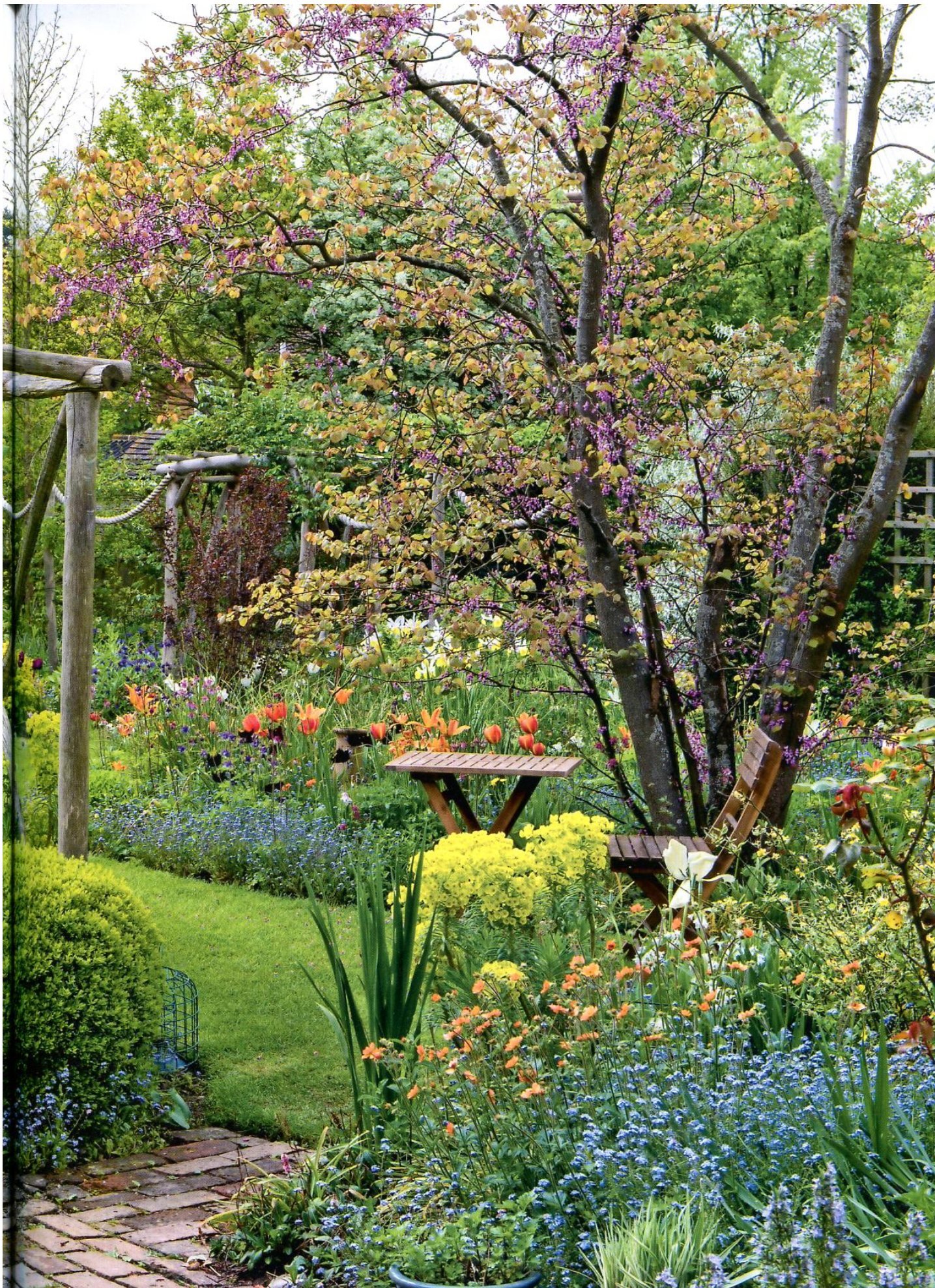


BRIMMING OVER WITH BEAUTY

An informal cottage garden in Kent comes alive with vibrant blooms, enhanced by a long-lasting display of geums



OFF A VILLAGE street deep in the Weald of Kent, a narrow footpath bends between houses. It passes a dense hedge of hawthorn, ash and holly, before finally arriving at a Victorian cottage. A side gate swings open on rusty hinges to reveal a garden brimming over with radiant flowers basking in the spring sunshine. Everywhere the acid green heads of *Euphorbia characias wulfenii* and *Euphorbia polychroma* vie with the golds and oranges of tulips and geums.

This ¼ acre garden at Brickwall Cottage, Frittenden, is sheltered by hedges and neighbouring gardens. Standing on a gentle hill, the village is enclosed by a patchwork of coppices and fields delineated by ancient hedgerows. The soil is heavy, yellow Wealden clay, but in the cottage's garden, it is rich and friable. For decades, it has been regularly fed with manure and lime.

It is nearly 30 years since Sue Martin moved here, won over by the sunny, south-west-facing plot that now brims over with spring flowers. "It's hard to believe that one day you are looking at empty beds, and in a short space of time they are full," she says.

A transformation

Today the garden is a world away from the original plot. Then, with its rows of vegetables and a fruit cage, it looked more like an allotment than a garden. Initially, Sue simply grassed it over while the cottage was renovated. At that time, nothing more than a knee-high, native hedge separated the garden from the footpath. "It was rather like living in a goldfish bowl, until the hedge grew sufficiently tall to give me privacy," she admits.

The transformation started with the creation of a lavender-edged path. This ran from the rear of the cottage to a newly planted, pleached lime screen on the far boundary. "It created a lovely view from my kitchen window," says Sue. When old lavender became woody and was removed, the grass path was replaced with a brick one. Then, above the path, a rustic pergola was installed that, come spring, rises above a kaleidoscope of tulips. "Initially, I colour-themed the tulips, but bulbs from



Sue Martin tends a raised bed planted with some of the glowing red and tangerine blooms in her National Collection of Geum.

previous years kept reappearing and the colours became muddled, so I now just enjoy the mix," she says.

Gradual development

From the outset, there was no master plan, just a gentle guiding hand that allowed the garden to evolve and change gradually. A framework is provided by the salvaged bricks used to build the patio, terrace and paths. With their naturally aged patina, they harmonise with Sue's old cottage, as well as creating a mellow backdrop to an ever-expanding collection of plants. Many of these came from the annual seed exchange organised by the Hardy Plant Society, a great source of unusual plants.

Originally, the borders were formed by laying garden hose on the grass to create the curving edges. However, as Sue has bought more plants, the borders have become increasingly intensively planted, and more lawn has been annexed. "My problem is that I can't resist plants, and keep having to find a home for new arrivals," she says.

Trees were planted, to both screen the plot from neighbours and add structure. Nearest the house, there is an eastern redbud, *Cercis canadensis*. This stunning specimen heralds spring with dainty, purplish flowers and glaucous, heart-shaped leaves in apple green. It stands at the centre of an island bed brimming over with spring bulbs, and an upright clump of a beautiful gold and white Dutch iris, 'Apollo'. Binding the various verticals together is a frothy mat of self-seeding forget-me-nots.

Over the years, the planting has evolved in a style that is composed to fit with the natural rhythm of the seasons. "Others describe my planting style as cottagey or informal. I call it wild," says Sue. Hers is a relaxed design approach, much of it improvised as various self-seeding plants appear. >





A chestnut pergola frames the view of the garden from the kitchen window. Beneath are clumps of acid-green *Euphorbia characias wulfenii*. To the left is the eastern rosebud, *Cercis Canadensis*, presiding over aquilegias, geums and iris 'Apollo', tulips and self-seeded forget-me-nots (above). Below from left: purple tulip 'Curly Sue' with its darker aubergine, claw-edged petals above *Euphorbia polychroma*; Dutch iris 'Apollo', with its sunny yellow and pure white display; tulip 'Flamenco', a stunning, fringed tulip with streaks of red. All flower in April.

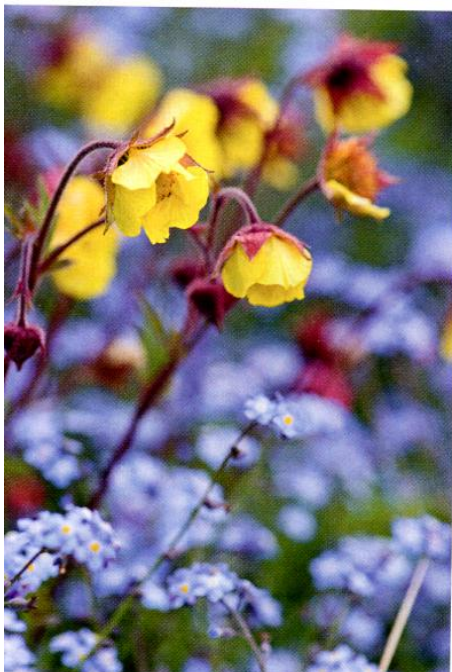




Geum 'Prinses Juliana' is a vivid orange semi-double that will flower from spring into summer.



Geum 'Totally Tangerine', a peachy-orange, long-flowering cultivar, lasts from late spring into early autumn. It reaches a height of 35½in (90cm).



Geum 'Farmer John Cross' shows its nodding buttercup-coloured heads from May to September.

Collecting geums

From the island bed, forget-me-nots have spread to a neighbouring herbaceous border edging the path running parallel to the cottage. This is filled with clumps of red, tangerine and orange-coloured geums. All are part of a National Collection that Sue has established in the garden.

"Ironically, the first geum I ever planted died," she recalls. "It didn't like sitting in heavy clay." Undeterred, she tried again with the lovely, orange-flowered 'Prinses Juliana'. "I wasn't that keen on orange, but this was such a wonderful plant, flowering vigorously throughout the garden," she notes. After that, she bought every geum she saw.

Discoveries included gems such as the beautiful 'Red Wings', apricot-coloured 'Marmalade', which is one of the first to flower and incredibly reliable, and 'Totally Tangerine'. The latter is tough and just keeps on flowering. The pivotal moment came when she visited the then-holder of the National Collection. "I spent a weekend with her, and she eventually asked me to take over her collection."

There are now more than 100 different geums at Brickwall Cottage. They are grown both in a dedicated nursery area and spilling over in beds and borders. There, they jostle for space with euphorbias, tulips, aquilegias, bluebells, forget-me-nots, centaurea and alliums. "Geums are fantastic, combining well with other plants," says Sue. Attractive partners include chives, lemon-coloured achillea 'Moonshine' and orange-tinted *Libertia peregrinans*. To add blue tinges, 'Crater Blue Lake' veronica is ideal. Hardy geraniums also blend well, with the early flowering *Geranium sylvaticum* 'Mayflower' a favourite.

The spring-flowering *Geum rivale* is a British native. It is the parent of cultivars such as 'Snowflake', which does well in partial shade. "However, if you leave the seedheads on the flowers, they are also very promiscuous. If they cross pollinate, the result can be many sub-standard plants," says Sue. Just two chance seedlings in her garden have turned out well. She has named these 'Olympic Flame' and the soft yellow, frilled 'Dawn'. The latter, rising on maroon stalks, high above handsome, lobed leaves, flowers almost continuously for six months.

Sue's spring planting relies on a lot of self-seeding plants that add great spontaneity. "But they need controlling," she adds. "I regularly thin out seedlings, otherwise the beds become congested." Among her favourite self-seeders are large spurges with iridescent, acid green-turning-lime-yellow flower



Geranium sylvaticum 'Mayflower', or wood cranesbill has violet-blue flower heads up to 1in (2.5cm) in width. It reaches 27½in (70cm) in height.

Geum 'Roger's Rebellion' has raspberry flowers with cream undertones.



Geum 'Dawn', with its frilled, soft yellow, semi-double flowers and contrasting dark red stems and buds.



The lolling heads of delicate geum 'Strawberries and Cream' rise above their dense evergreen leaves, creating a light and airy feel to a spring bed.

heads. All are babies from one original plant. It is a similar story with purple-flowered honeywort, *Cerintho major* 'Purpurascens'. "Once you have one, you have it for life."

Aquilegias interbred from just four original named varieties. However, these have recently fallen victim to downy mildew, a devastating virus. "I've had to dig up and destroy all aquilegias, and am now growing a new batch from seed to replace them," says Sue.

Fortunately, forget-me-nots are unaffected, and continue to spread everywhere. "I have to ruthlessly rip out tatty clumps to create space for summer's perennials, but they always come back next spring." A recent experiment with love-in-the-mist did not work. "It grew too tall, and smothered the geums beneath."

Enjoying the view

Skirting the informal borders, the brick path continues past a porch to a small patio within sight of the cottage. Here, there is space for a table and chairs. This is enclosed by evergreen holly and camellias, with a wooden arbour to one side providing support for roses. It is a tranquil spot, assuaged by familiar sounds drifting through the fresh spring air. Children chatter in a nearby school playground, and the bells ring out from St Mary's Church on Sunday mornings. >

GROWING GEUMS

Geums are evergreen, or semi-evergreen hardy perennials. They come in a wide range of colours and shapes, some suiting full sun and others coping in shade. However, these are perennials that need regular care.

- They form clumps which need dividing regularly, after flowering. This prevents them from becoming woody and deteriorating.
- If planted amidst rampant self-seeders, such as forget-me-nots, a cleared circle round the base of the geum plant prevents it from being stifled.
- Some spread more than others. *G. rivale* cultivars spread, whereas *G. chiloense* stay in neat, tight clumps.
- They grow in acidic or limey moisture-retentive soil that is annually mulched with compost.
- The amount of sun or shade is taken into consideration. *G. rivale* cultivars thrive in shade and moist soil, *G. chiloense* are sun lovers, while *G. coccineum* enjoy partial shade, scorching in full sun.
- There is no clear evidence that dead-heading prolongs the flowering season. Attractive seedheads can be left on the plant but will cross-pollinate.

The pergola spanning the brick path creates a frame for the square pool with a fountain in the centre. Shots of acid green and radiant colour pervade from box balls, euphorbia, *Cerinth major* 'Purpurascens' and tulips above a froth of forget-me-nots.



DESIGNING A PERGOLA

A pergola is a major garden feature that adds height, and provides support to a succession of climbers. A good design blends with its surroundings, is of sound construction, and improves as climbing plants become established. Sue's suggestions include:

- Taking care the structure is in proportion with the overall space. A small pergola, constructed from mean-looking timbers, will disappoint, whereas too large a one risks being overwhelming.
- Making sure the overhead poles are spaced sufficiently apart so climbers do not smother the pergola. If this happens, it can create a dark tunnel, robbing the beds below of light.
- Choosing a wood such as coppiced chestnut. This hardwood is a less expensive alternative to oak. Strong and durable, it needs no preservative and, if left untreated, weathers to a pleasing silvery grey that blends beautifully into a natural setting.
- Providing support for climbers by enclosing the bottom 3ft (90cm) of an upright with plastic netting.
- Creating year-round structure by planting box balls at key points along the length of the pergola.



The patio overlooks the pergola walk, its entrance punctuated by two large box balls. The pergola is carefully positioned so that, when viewed out of the kitchen window, it frames a lovely view. "It is constructed from locally-sourced, coppiced chestnut poles that are stripped of their bark," says Sue. The overhead poles are notched to slot onto the framework of upright poles. These are immersed in the borders stretching beneath, forming a backdrop to spring bulbs. The pergola straddles a path that runs until about halfway along its length. Here, it arrives at a small, square, raised pool with a fountain playing in the middle.

Beyond the pond, the brick path continues beneath the pergola, before arriving at another herbaceous border peppered with tulips. A visual link between the different areas of the garden is created by the ever-present forget-me-nots and geums.

This broad border stretches from the native hedge to a pole-and-rope swag that separates the cottage's immediate garden from an additional strip of land. This was acquired after the death of Sue's mother, who had originally lived next door. "After her cottage was sold, I kept part of her garden at the bottom of my L-shaped plot. I use it to house a



An old apple tree creates a natural canopy over a table and chairs in this tranquil corner. Surrounding it are allium, tulips, geums, euphorbia, centaurea and forget-me-nots. This area sits behind the rope swag.



The raised beds in the nursery garden were originally intended for vegetables but two have been taken over by geums.



Tomato red geum 'Rubin' takes two to five years to reach its final height of between 6-18in (15-45cm).

polytunnel for the geums and nursery area," she explains.

Beyond the swag, there is a grassy area with a table and chairs set out. The spot is shaded by the canopy of a gnarled 'Beauty of Bath' apple tree. "The apples taste revolting, but the tree has kept its shape," says Sue. It is the only tree that remains from the original garden. Beautifully pollarded, it forms a quiet, shady place to sit in summer.

Enjoying the view

Trees are an essential element of the garden's structure. Over the years, additions have included silver birches, whitebeam and crab apple, as well as a liquidambar and *Crataegus prunifolia*, a small compact member of the hawthorn family.

Beyond the apple tree lies a small parterre. The four beds are contained by hedges of low-growing box and the evergreen shrub teucrium. As spring advances, the beds become increasingly blurred by alliums and tulips, centaurea, aquilegia and euphorbia. The parterre replaces a square vegetable plot that had become too much work. "It's divided by gravel paths into four triangular beds, chunks that I can cope with a bit at a time," says Sue.

From the parterre, a gravel path leads to a greenhouse

overlooking four raised beds in which she intended to grow vegetables. "Two have already been taken over by geums because I keep adding to the collection," says Sue. She never ceases to be amazed by the long flowering season. For example, scarlet geum 'Rubin' flowers over a five-month period, starting in spring.

"Geums are such wonderful plants, flowering profusely," she says. "The ground-hugging rivale varieties appear in March, while taller chiloense cultivars can bloom from April well into the autumn."

They all join to ensure that, once the geums have taken centre stage, the lovely garden at Brickwall Cottage is filled with colour all spring and summer long. ■

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Tel 01580 852425. Open during 2017 in aid of the National Gardens Scheme on 10, 21, 31 May and 4 June (2-5pm).