

NATURAL CHARM

Sue Martin has created a colourful, cottage-style garden that includes a National Collection of vibrant geums

FEATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY LEIGH CLAPP



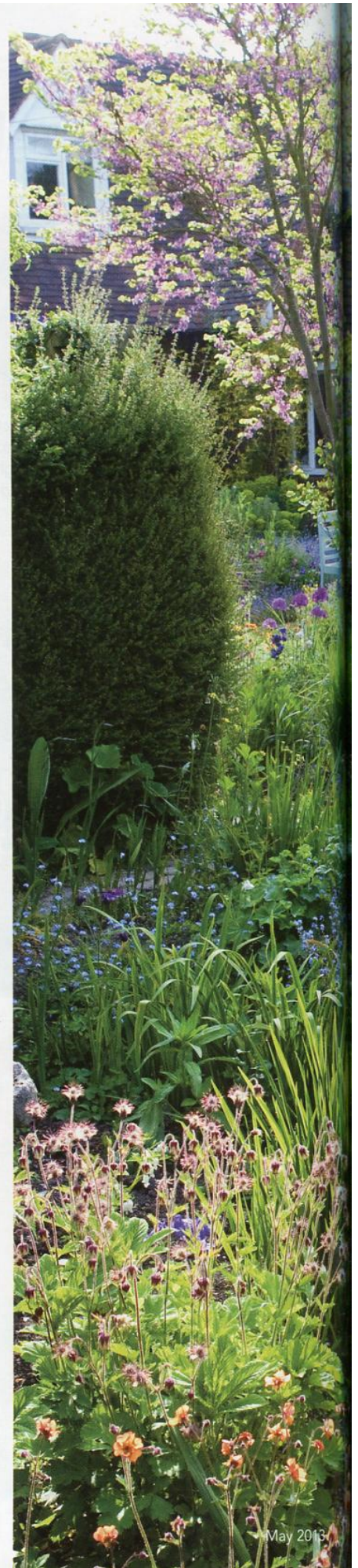
The beautiful, billowing garden behind Sue Martin's terraced cottage in the little village of Frittenden, Kent, has taken her more than 25 years to create. At the start, it consisted almost entirely of vegetable plots, but once cleared, became a blank canvas for her to transform. The previous owners, whose family had lived there since

World War I, had improved the heavy, yellow clay soil by adding farmyard manure and lime. As a result, there is now a good layer of crumbly, fertile soil. 'Once plants have their roots down in it, they grow extremely well,' says Sue.

The garden has evolved organically over the years with no set plan, only a love of gardening since childhood learned from her mother and grandmother, and a thought that her cottage would suit an informal style full of plants. Initially, Sue put in a lawn, much of which later became curvaceous flowerbeds, and built a path for access. 'I tended to collect lots of plants and then I'd gradually make beds for them – it was a bit hit and miss, really,' she admits.

PLANT INSPIRATION

Further direction came after reading Beth Chatto's *Garden Notebook*, which sparked a passion for plants. 'I was inspired to create a yellow border and bought a deep yellow *Geum montanum* from Washfield Nursery in Hawkhurst – a source of so many plants over the years. It seemed perfect, but not knowing much about geums then, I didn't realise it's an alpine plant and it didn't like sitting in the heavy, Wealden clay – it soon disappeared. Then I saw *Geum* 'Prinses Juliana' and although I didn't think I liked orange, it has been wonderful as it flowers and flowers and was much more successful. I gradually found other geums, and whenever I saw one on a stall, I'd buy it, mostly from the Hardy Plant Society's plant sales. I'd joined the local group in the 1980s when I became fascinated by perennials. There aren't





GARDENING

3 essential plants



AQUILEGIA

Hardy perennial. Dainty nodding flowers in late spring and early summer. Sun or part shade in moist soil. 1 ltr pot, £3.99, www.plantsforshade.co.uk.

GEUM

Perennial with long flowering season. Grow in sun to part shade in fertile soil. Divide in autumn or early spring. 1 ltr pot, £4.50, www.geumcollection.co.uk.



ALLIUM

Hardy bulb. Full sun in fertile, well-drained soil. Wear gloves when handling bulbs as can irritate the skin. 10 bulbs, £6.50, www.hayloft-plants.co.uk.

Geum 'Lady Stratheden' is a lovely golden yellow colour that adds sunshine to the garden.

many cultivars available in garden centres, so I visited Alison Mallet, who held a National Collection of geums in Devon. When she decided she could no longer cope, she asked me to take over. After applying to hold the collection, I took it on and now have around 100 different cultivars.'

DOUBLE THE DELIGHT

The garden leads out from the back of the house and then goes around a corner, giving it a sense of having two sections. To provide privacy and structure, Sue put in some trees and shrubs, including hawthorn and holly hedges, a row of pleached *Tilia platyphyllos* 'Rubra' (limes) on the side and a lovely *Cercis canadensis* (eastern redbud) on the lawn, which is draped in pink blossom in May. Originally, she also planted callicarpa and clerodendrums, which, unfortunately, didn't like the clay soil conditions and failed.

To link the two areas together, a pergola arch was put in, with deep curving beds around it, in tones of soft blue from clumps of *Iris sibirica*, and silver-foliaged screening shrubs such as the scented *Elaeagnus* 'Quicksilver', making a pretty entrance to the second part of the garden and allowing glimpses of what lies beyond. There had been a pond where the *Elaeagnus* bed is now, but when the grandchildren came along, it was deemed safer to make it a planting area. The old pond liner was never removed so the resulting soil stays moist, making it ideal for geums.

Early on, it was decided to divide one large area of the second section of the garden into quarters with curving low box hedging and infill with herbs, but instead it was filled with geums and flowering plants, such as irises, aquilegias, blue *Centaurea montana* and geraniums. 'I thought the box hedge would add a touch of formality.' Here, also, is a lovely old gnarled apple tree 'Beauty of Bath', the only tree that was on the land, which is perfect to sit under for a bit of shade in summer. It is backed with clusters of cascading blooms from the beauty bush, *Kolkwitzia amabilis* 'Pink Cloud'.

The rest of the garden is made up of vegetables and geums in raised beds, along with a working area consisting of a greenhouse, polytunnel and a small nursery of young geums, neatly laid out ready for sale on open days with the National Gardens Scheme and Plant Heritage groups. 'I had intended just to grow vegetables in the raised beds, but I've filled one with *Geum chiloense* cultivars that are a stunning sight in late spring and summer. In another raised bed, I planted a mix of lower growing *Geum coccineum* and *rivale* cultivars, which weren't so successful as it's too hot and dry there and the plants would be better in a shady position.'

PRETTY PICTURES

The latest addition to the garden is a small formal pond near the house with chestnut pergolas each side, echoing the arch and lending a sense of intimacy to the scene. It adds linear perspective to the informality of the garden beds and creates lovely views looking along it to the house. Cascading plants soften the poles to complete the effect. 'I like to grow climbers but choose ones that won't cover the pergolas >>>

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Box hedging adds a touch of formality, enclosing billowing geums, Iris 'Apollo' and *Centaurea Montana*.

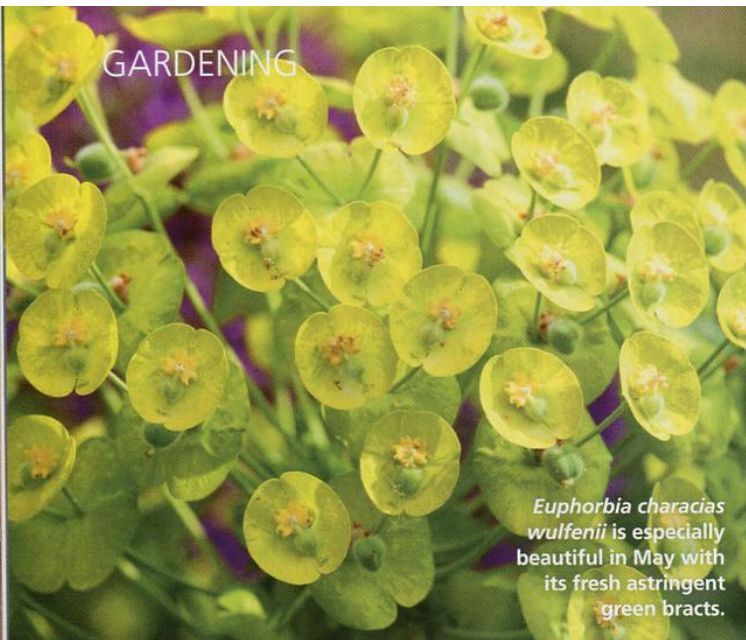


Colourful irises pop up through the planting.



An old apple tree 'Beauty of Bath', shades a favourite spot to sit in the garden, bordered by a cascade of *Kolkwitzia amabilis* (beauty bush).

GARDENING



Euphorbia characias wulfenii is especially beautiful in May with its fresh astringent green bracts.



The chestnut pergola and pond make a lovely design feature by the house, with *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' and tulips lending bright accents.



Ceanothus (California lilac) is a great choice for a sunny sheltered spot.

too much,' explains Sue. A bench painted in a soft blue positioned to the side of the pergola makes a lovely vantage point to sit and take in the delightful scene.

It's the planting across the garden that's so enchanting. Sue mixes masses of spring bulbs, such as *Allium* 'Purple Sensation', tulips and irises on a cloud of forget-me-nots, along with aquilegias that have happily self-seeded and crossed so many times the names are now unknown, with further vertical accents from grass-like *Libertia grandiflora*, set against a foil of lime green euphorbias. 'I did have several named aquilegia, including 'Port Wine', 'William Guinness' and 'Nora Barlow', but these have all interbred over the years.'

TINY GEMS

Dotted throughout the garden and in the dedicated raised beds by the vegetables, the brilliant jewel-like geums add splashes of sunshine and draw the eye. Reds, oranges and golds together in one bed or red geums against purple aquilegia in another, or with yellow and white Iris 'Apollo' above massed forget-me-nots – the effect is quite delightful. Some of the stunning geums Sue grows include 'Red Wings' with its semi-double scarlet flowers, peach-toned 'Deep Rose', the aptly named tangerine 'Mandarin' and golden 'Lady Stratheden'. Specimens of each cultivar are given different conditions, some prefer shade, some semi-shade and others can grow in full sun. 'All geums require moisture-retentive fertile soil,' explains Sue. 'If they dry out, they will die and strong hot sun will scorch their leaves.'

Although Sue does like colour to blend and harmonise, some of these brighter combinations are particularly cheerful and you can see why she came under the spell of these dainty little flowers. 'The thing I love most about geums is the surprise of their bright colourful displays.'

Overall, the garden has great charm with its informal, eclectic palette, and it will continue to evolve in a natural way, with new geums and other interesting finds being welcomed into the fold. 'Plants are what inspire me,' says Sue. 'I do visit other gardens when I have the time and enjoy going away with the Hardy Plants Society on trips to gardens, which is fantastic. I also read the gardening books by Christopher Lloyd, Helen Dillon and Rosemary Verey, but it's really the plants that I like to focus on.'

NATIONAL COLLECTION

If you've been inspired to have a National Collection of your favourite plant, here's Sue's advice on what is involved: 'The plant collections are overseen by the charity Plant Heritage and in order to qualify, the applicant has to have 75% of the plants listed in the *RHS Plant Finder* of that genus. These need to be well established in the ground, and there should be three of each. Collection Holders also need to submit an annual report. You need to be passionate and willing to give a lot of your time.' 🌱

Sue's garden at 1 Brickwall Cottages, Frittenden, Kent, is part of the National Gardens Scheme, open Sundays and Mondays: 28-29 April; 5-6, 12-13, 26-27 May (2-5.30pm). Admission £3.50. www.ngs.org.uk.



A pale blue bench harmonizes with the prolific candy pink pea-flowers of *Cercis canadensis* and clouds of forget-me-nots.

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