

# FITTING THE PRESENT

Horkesley Hall in Essex may be grand, but it is the setting for an informal family garden that suits its owner's relaxed approach to gardening

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Swathes of fragrant *Narcissus* 'Pheasant's Eye' bring the turf below cherries and other mature trees to life.

ROUNDING THE DRIVE TO HORKESLEY HALL, you could be forgiven for thinking that you are dressed for the wrong century and indeed in the wrong sort of carriage. The 1820s Grade II\* listed property, set in eight acres of woodland, complete with giant Doric portico and traditional stables (with ponies), is straight out of the pages of a Jane Austen novel.

The allusions to an earlier time are soon swept aside. House and garden, although visually grand, are the setting for a lively family life. Polly and Johnny Eddis took over the house and garden in Essex from Johnny's parents in 2002. Since he bought the house in 1989, Richard Eddis, a great tree planter, added his collections of *Malus*, *Prunus*, *Acer* and *Eucalyptus* to a setting that already held large park trees including an *Acacia* bursting out of its metal bands, London planes, oaks and what is thought to be the largest ginkgo outside RBG Kew, all from earlier plantings.

"The trees and the lakes are among the big 'wow' features here, in all seasons. They speak for themselves, but we can enhance them with new plants and new plantings, such as the *Gaura lindheimeri* seedlings that now offer a delicate and dancing butterfly effect on the south bank of the Upper Lake," says Polly.

"We might have remade the garden but we relish the overlays from the immediate and more distant past. Instead we have altered and re-organised parts of the garden to reflect our family interests and activities.

"You can make a garden yours by adapting and adding to what is already there... essentially this is a family garden, where our children play, celebrate and look after their ponies."

Goal posts and pony jumps in various corners of the garden confirm this sense of the garden as a place where children can make up great stories and run riot. Polly's daughters, Lucy and Susie, and their younger brother, Algy, enjoy successive birthday celebrations in



‘the birthday house’ – a small summerhouse built into the outside corner of the swimming pool wall. Here birthday and other cakes appear out of nowhere.

Lucy and Susie are skilled equestrians and much of the property is used for pasture. Indeed, during their early years Polly kept the garden ticking over gently, but always planned for the longer term when she would have more time to spend on it.

A garden visit usually moves through the stable block, towards the kitchen garden, a delightful shed the height of a child, and the *Pyrus* ‘Chanticleer’ avenue, then past the *Acer* collection and the south-facing, wall-backed border before sweeping past the house towards the lakes and stream. Finally, take in the circular tulip and dahlia bed and collection of box balls to the east of the house.

In spring the garden bursts into colour. First come snowdrops and aconites, once in small clumps but now making large swathes as they drift near the two lakes and the stream on the south side of the house, or under the mature trees. Near the drive and one of the entrances to the garden is a lime, underplanted with *Narcissus* ‘Winston Churchill’. “The combined scent is so wonderful, like a Jo Malone cocktail,” says Polly.

**Top** Sweeping lawns lead from the house to the Upper Lake.

**Right** *Tulipa* ‘Ballerina’ and bergénias add a pretty splash of spring colour.



Scillas snake their ways through various parts of the garden and the willows that weep into the Upper Lake start to shoot with their spiky green foliage. The Lake is set for a spectacular year, having been dredged in 2015. The silt trap from the stream that feeds the two lakes was also cleaned, giving this area a good fresh start.

The south side of the house is dignified and formal; a view across mown stripes of the lawn is softened by collections of spring-flowering *Malus* and *Prunus*, as well as a young specimen of *Amelanchier x grandiflora* ‘Ballerina’. A cedar that lost its head in the great storm of 1987 is a favourite haunt for woodpeckers, and is a

**Top** Cherry blossom contrasts with the cedar that lost its head in the storm of 1987.

**Middle** The vegetable garden is sited alongside the unheated lean-to glasshouse.

**Bottom** The branches of *Amelanchier* are clothed in fresh white blossom.



## POLLY'S ADVICE

■ If in doubt, phone a friend. I do this regularly, meeting up with and taking advice from my garden consultant and friend, Cherry Sandford ([www.cherry-designs.co.uk](http://www.cherry-designs.co.uk)). Cherry sees the garden with a more detached eye and offers ideas and feedback. Whoever you ring needs to be on the same wave-length and to have a good eye.

■ Treasure self-sown seedlings and plant them up. They will be the least expensive and most rewarding means of bulking up your plants.

■ Enjoy the garden more and worry less. The garden used to keep me awake at night, but now I find pleasure in what there is and what I can do to enhance it.

■ Cherry's advice is to think ahead for next season, next year. We take photographs, write notes and work out what is missing from the picture in terms of colour, fragrance, form and texture. Through the images you can see how to perfect it.

■ April is the month for splitting, moving and replanting to get the garden to a desirable point for summer. It is surprising how established it can look in just a month or two. It also helps to keep costs down.

# HORKESLEY HALL NOTEBOOK

Constant renewal keeps this garden fresh



## BOX SPHERES

This double border in a raised bed with box balls of varying sizes gives pleasure in the garden and from the kitchen window. Like many features in the garden, this collection, given to Polly for a birthday present, marries formality with a relaxed natural style. The round box plants are underplanted with the frothy daisy, *Erigeron karvinskianus*.



## PEAR AVENUE

The 'Chanticleer' pear avenue makes a good display all through the year, but as with many of the plantings made in recent years, Polly has had to make harsh decisions and take out several trees. "In this case, the roots travelled down to the tennis court, breaking up its surface. It is awful felling a tree but they had been planted too densely," she says.



## BENCH IN A NICHE

Soon after opening the garden for the first time in 2003, much of the statuary was stolen and this plinth was all that was left of a particularly lovely piece. It has become an ad hoc table for the Lutyens-style bench. *Osmanthus delavayi* provides the scent in spring and Polly is considering planting more of it to bulk up the hedge.



## STREAM BRIDGE

Between the bridge and the stream is the silt trap that, along with the Upper Lake, was drained and cleaned in 2015. Camellias add glossy formality to the bridge itself, in contrast to the swathes of snowdrops, cow parsley and bluebells that thrive on the banks in spring and early summer. Later in the year, hydrangeas fill the space.

much-loved feature here among the spring blossom.

The east side of the garden, backed by a tidily kept hedge of the conifer x *Cuprocyparis leylandii*, holds a celebratory birthday garden of box balls of varying sizes. Their shapely formality is kicked into touch by a frothy underplanting of *Erigeron karvinskianus*, which cascades and trails in and around the box plants. *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides* also provides a softening effect with blue flowers in spring.

In a circular bed, dahlias are the high-summer sizzle, while in spring *Tulipa* 'Black Hero', forget-me-nots, drumstick alliums and *Euphorbia oblongata* provide the colour. Heydays have come and gone for many of these perennial favourites, but Polly is happy with them. "We didn't want a makeover, we wanted the garden to look lived in and fat, old-fashioned flowers make it seem as if we have been here forever."

Under and alongside the *Acer* collection are perennial wallflowers and *Narcissus* 'Thalia'. In autumn the acers provide their own fireworks in foliage colour, competing with the buttery yellow of the ginkgo near the house.

"As some of my father-in-law's *Acer* collection matures, you can see they were planted too closely, so we will keep an eye on them and may have to remove some to give the others more space," says Polly. "He always said that he knew they and other collections were planted too closely... but he said that would be our problem to solve."

In winter, the avenue of *Pyrus* 'Chanticleer' stands out starkly against snow on the ground, but when spring arrives, it is as if the snow lies on the branches, thickly clad as the dark stems are with small white flowers. "Looking up through these bare branches on a sunny day in winter or through the flowers in spring, they seem to frame and blue up the sky even more," says Polly.

The framework of trees throughout the garden, new and old, provides seasonal interest with bark, foliage and flower buds, and later, in autumn, with wonderful leaf colour. This forms the backdrop for the formal elements of the garden, as well as for some of the more relaxed features, such as the drifts of cow parsley, that Polly welcomes as part of her natural approach.

Although the overarching garden ethos is relaxed, Polly tries to add to, alter or insert features annually to increase the garden's appeal to visitors. In these endeavours she has two great collaborators: Cherry Sandford, her garden consultant and friend, offers ideas and advice, and helps with plant supply and implementation, while estate manager Glenn Deering is the man who mows, provides wooden structures, digs, divides and prunes, and brings the ideas to fruition.

This year many new features are planned. Polly, Cherry and Glenn have regular 'breakfast board meetings' at a local gastro pub, where they decide which ideas will make the cut. To celebrate the 90th birthday of Queen Elizabeth II in June, a border once known as the Birds & Bees Garden is to become a Royal Garden. Some 200 'Carnaval de Nice' tulips, 'Ice Folly' daffodils,



alliums by the score, pink roses and *Philadelphus* will bulk up spring colour and scent in the border, while lengths of bunting strung in the hedging behind will add to the jollity of the moment.

The south-facing border at the base of the walled garden (home to the swimming pool), is also due for changes. "It always looks wonderful around Chelsea, but later it can look messy. The plan is to give it more structure, height and form," explains Polly.

Metal obelisks are the key to this and they will hold early-flowering clematis, such as 'Early Sensation' and *Clematis* x *cartmanii* 'Joe' as well as later-flowering clematis from the Viticella and Texensis Groups.

Polly is also planning to add her own collection of magnolias to the garden, and she hopes to increase her collection of hydrangeas, which line the stream.

*Horkesley Hall, Little Horkesley, Colchester, Essex CO6 4DB opens for the NGS on Thursday 9 June (10.30am-4pm), admission £6, children free. Visitors by arrangement from March to October.*

*For a donation to the NGS, visitors can also bring a trailer behind their car for Horkesley Hall's compost – fully rotted crumbly horse manure mixed with Hempcore – or it can be bagged up. Chisholm's is a self-contained two bedroom cottage at Horkesley Hall, a perfect place for a gardener on holiday, visit [www.airbnb.co.uk](http://www.airbnb.co.uk) for information. ■*

**Top** The lakes promise to sparkle this summer.

**Middle** Self-sown euphorbias spill over the steps to the house.

**Bottom** *Tulipa* 'White Triumphator' and *Narcissus* 'Thalia' highlight deeper floral tones.

