

Summer flowers tumble down the banks of a pond at Wood Farm to create a wonderfully romantic setting for the home.



A MEADOW TO MOW

Enchanting wildflower meadows and beautiful cottage garden planting create the perfect, romantic setting for this old Suffolk farmhouse

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IN EARLY SUMMER AT WOOD FARM NEAR Gipping, Suffolk, two distinct but well-matched gardens make their play for supremacy, as they unfurl their floral colours and vie with each other to provide a rising tide of colour and shape.

In 1995 when Emily and Rob Shelley bought Wood Farm, the 500-year-old farmhouse was half its current size and in need of extensive renovation. In around 2000 the pair asked local architect Rodney Black to design an extension and undertake a complete restoration of the existing house. Later, in 2012, Black designed the formal layout in the front garden.

To achieve the extension, the pair enlarged one of the ancient ponds behind the existing farmhouse. Now the house floats even more emphatically above the larger, more moat-like pond. The bank was pulled back and ox-eye daisies tumble down its face, rimming the water like a froth of Champagne bubbles. The far bank of that pond is topped with *Ligularia* and water irises.

Emily says: “The ponds may have held fish or they were dug for clay lump: we managed to use some of the diggings to level uneven areas of the property.”

The new part of the house now juts out with a wrap-around deck for entry to the extension. A woven hazel hurdle fence separates the front garden from the new entrance and the field beyond.

“When we arrived here there was no garden to speak of: just some random trees, a rose and, behind the house, a ploughed field – at that stage it was not ours – which had been under arable crops for decades,” recalls Emily.

“I knew that so many meadows had disappeared and I was passionate about wildlife. I had always wanted a romantic meadow filled with wild flowers. In 1999 we had the chance to purchase that adjacent field, all eight acres of it, and I knew that my romantic meadow space had arrived.”

The soil is heavy clay, so Emily and Rob chose the meadow mixture for clay soils from the Bristol-based wildflower and wild grass seed growers, Emorsgate Seeds. It includes yarrow, bird’s foot trefoil, lady’s bedstraw, ox-eye daisy, yellow rattle, selfheal, meadow buttercup, red clover and common sorrel. There are grasses, too. Among the 12 species in the mix are quaking

grass, meadow foxtail and meadow barley.

Emily says ruefully that when she started this project she was young and probably the source of much mirth in the local farming community. The meadow mix seed was sown mechanically, drilled into the clay soil.

“In the first year thistle seeds thrived and I weeded them by hand. I spent hours and hours doing this. The local farmers thought it was hilarious,” she says.

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Now, though, one farmer in particular reaps the benefit of Emily's meadow as he cuts it each year for hay when it is dry in late June, as a crop for his cattle. "We keep an eye on the weather and usually give him a week's notice to come and cut it."

The meadow has taken at least 15 years to establish properly. Four years ago it began to look as Emily hoped it would and her initial hard manual labour started to pay off: "Our house walls are a distinctive mustard-yellow and the colours of the meadow flowers and grasses complement and enhance it," she says.

For six weeks from the end of April, the meadow flowers and grasses rise and fall in their turn, making ripples of colour and texture in a soft sea of stems, leaves and flowers, that laps against the

Above Paths curve through the front garden, creating large spaces for informal planting.

Right Lupins, *Diascia* and opium poppies offer colour, backed by fennel, bright green box and silver *Stachys byzantina*.

Below A mown path around the edge of the meadow provides a corridor for wildlife.



house and buzzes with insect activity. In spring the dominant colour is the vibrant green of the grasses. Later the white and yellow of the ox-eye daisies, with the yellow of bird's foot trefoil and veitch take over, and, later still, the russet foliage of sorrel seems more prominent. But all these changing shades work well with the house in the landscape.

"When we make our first mow of the season in the rest of the garden, we also decide on the shape and position of the mown paths in the meadow. We always have a walking path or margin around the entire meadow between it and the hedgerow. This is good for us to walk along and it also makes a brilliant wildlife corridor."

"I love walking in the meadow with our dogs along the paths around the edge and those we cut through it. I regularly see a barn owl that works the field edges, and there are swallows that swish and dive for insects."

The field hedge holds particular resonance for Emily and Rob. The original hedge had long since been taken out. To enclose and frame the meadow they decided on a millennium project to replant the missing boundary. Fittingly, Emily and Rob planted some 2,000 young hedgerow plants along the field edge in 2000. It was another labour of plant love:

WOOD FARM NOTEBOOK

An effortless mix of formal and relaxed styles



INSECT MAGNETS

When the meadow and the cottage garden are in full flower in summer, you can literally see the insect population in motion, flitting from bloom to bloom. Umbellifers, such as fennel as well as ox-eye daisies and alliums, seem to be the main insect magnets, providing bountiful pollen and nectar.



PUB GRUB

The vegetable garden is divided into small formal beds. "Since we bought the local pub, The Crown, which was in danger of closure, we have been sending rhubarb, asparagus, herbs and beans, and all that we can from the kitchen garden, to add a homegrown twist to our menus," Emily says.



INFORMAL BOX

"I love the box trees when they look a little relaxed and uncut," says Emily. "An old gardener said I should never shape or cut them before [Epsom] Derby Day in June, so that is my date for keeping them trim. Eventually I hope to shape them into animals and birds, but for now they are mounds and cones."



COLOUR CONTRAST

The mustard-yellow walls of the house are a strong colour for a floral backdrop. Fortunately the white and yellow ox-eye daisies in the meadow, and the blue and purple flowers in the front garden, match its strength. "I love purples and white together, especially against the house walls."



EMILY'S GARDEN INSIGHTS

■ From spring through to June, I check the meadow thoroughly for ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*). Since the meadow is going to be cut for hay, the smallest piece of ragwort could be dangerous for animals to whom the hay is given. I dig it out and burn it.

■ In spring I check to see if there are any gaps in the border plantings. I move plants from places where there are great blocks or clumps and I am fortunate that my two gardening inspirations, my mother and mother-in-law, give me wonderful plants from their own gardens.

■ The yew hedge in the front garden is not quite tall enough yet, but once it gets to about two metres I will trim it. I don't want to shade the front garden, but I do want to give it some protection and a formal edging.

Emily pushed her elder son Charlie out every day in his large Silver Cross pram and, while he slept, she planted dogwood, blackthorn, hawthorn, field maple and oak along with dog roses. Rob worked hard by moonlight putting on the hedge guards because Emily was so convinced that the rabbits would eat the hedging overnight before it had a chance to establish.

Emily's garden inspiration and knowledge comes from two gardening women in her family: her mother and her mother-in-law. They always said to her that if you can put in place a solid path, you would have at least two bonuses. One is that you wouldn't have to mow or weed the path, and the second is that you could shape and curve the path to create beds and borders to fill with plants and add style and substance to the overall plan.

In the front garden, with these hard surfaces in place, Emily could create a garden within the spaces they enclosed. "Within the formality I could plant a seemingly informal garden," she said.

Emily knew that her romantic meadow would be splendid for its summer season but that she needed to have another garden focus for the front



Top Ox-eye daisies are a light foil for chunkier lupin spires and columns of fastigate yew.

Above right Viciously spiny *Onopordum*.

Left Sweet peas are a cottage garden classic.

of the house. This space was also a blank canvas in waiting. In 2012 their architect laid out the paths and Emily and her gardener, Guru Sharma, set about improving the soil and filling the meandering beds with formal and informal plantings.

"I am very fortunate that I have Guru Sharma to help me in the garden. He is from Nepal, where he worked as a mountaineer guide. When he came to live in Suffolk he wanted to work outdoors, so trained in horticulture at Otley College," she explains.



Emily wanted a cottage garden style, with bee- and butterfly-attracting plants dominating the planting palette. She also wanted to create a garden that wasn't formal in its style but wasn't too messy, either. She wanted the planting to look as if it was unplanned and relaxed, so has used formally clipped box plants to punctuate the softer elements.

The front garden is hedged with yew that softly curves to enclose and act as a formal backdrop for the effervescent planting. Everlasting sweet peas tumble along supports to make a light floral hedge, while mounds of lavender trespass over the edge of the borders onto the paths, and the soft silver foliage

of *Stachys byzantina* sneaks out of its confines. For height, fennel, poppies, lupins, irises and alliums rise in the centre of the beds. Fastigate yew shoot upwards offering an emphatic height to the mainly low-level planting.

From some angles you could be forgiven for thinking that there are no paths, so softly does this free-flowing tide of colour and shape flow through the garden, unbounded in its exuberance. Then you see it from one of the curving, snaking paths and realise that there is a formal shape, a framework that holds the excitement of the plants in place.

Spires of blue catmint, bright blue cornflowers and spheres of white and purple alliums brush the air with a light touch, using both the green of the box and yew, as well as the walls of the house as a contrasting backdrop.

Emily and Rob own The Crown in Stowupland and provide the pub kitchen with rhubarb, asparagus and herbs from their vegetable garden, where they are turned into chutneys, sauces and salads. In all other areas of Wood Farm, wildlife is welcomed; here it is not, hence the fencing to keep out deer, rabbits and hares. ■

Wood Farm is open to the public for the National Garden Scheme on Sunday 5 June, from -5pm. Back Lane, Gipping, Stowmarket, Suffolk IP14 4RN. For more information, visit www.ngs.org.uk

ALSO IN THE AREA

Perfect Perennials

Earl Stonham, Stowmarket IP14 5HY. Tel: 01449 711320; www.perfectperennials.co.uk

The Place for Plants

East Bergholt CO7 6UP. Tel: 01206 299224; www.placeforplants.co.uk

Mickfield Hostas

Mickfield, Stowmarket IP14 5LH. Tel: 01449 711576. www.mickfieldhostas.co.uk

Swann's Nurseries

Eyke Rd, Woodbridge IP12 2PN. Tel: 01394 460127; www.swannsnursery.co.uk

The Crown

Church Road, Stowupland IP14 4BQ. Tel: 01449 490490; www.thecrownstowupland.co.uk

Columbine Hall

Stowupland, Stowmarket, Suffolk IP14 4AT. Tel: 01449 612219; www.columbinehall.co.uk



Above A fitting front garden to welcome visitors to this beautiful old house.

Left Annual cornflowers (*Centaurea cyanus*) provide a shot of bright blue colour to the meadow.