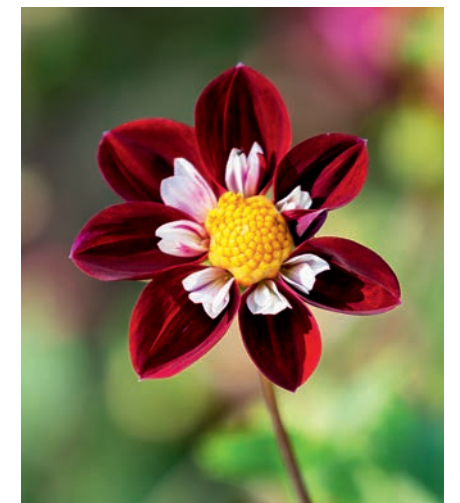


# AFTER PARTY

At Norfolk's East Ruston Old Vicarage, the show doesn't stop when summer ends. Every autumn, Alan Gray and his husband Graham Robeson coax from it a colourfully ebullient last hurrah

WORDS **BARBARA SEGALL**  
PHOTOGRAPHS **RICHARD BLOOM**



**I**n 2023 it will be 50 years since a garden on the far side of North Norfolk began to exert its magnetic pull on domestic and foreign garden lovers alike. When Alan Gray and Graham Robeson took on the garden at East Ruston Old Vicarage, it covered just over two acres. Now it extends to 32 acres and is testament to their combined skills of plantsmanship and architectural design. They discuss the garden and their plans in a way that the late Christopher Lloyd described as 'bat and ball' – a regular to and fro of ideas.

Gardeners face challenges wherever their gardens are located, but at East Ruston there is a set of particular conditions that adds a touch more jeopardy to the situation. The water table is 19-25 feet below ground level, which seems improbable given the garden's proximity to the North Sea and the Norfolk Broads. The soil, meanwhile, is a light, free-draining, sandy loam, that goes down to sand.

**This image** Bronze fennel and anthesis edge a path in the Mediterranean Garden.  
**Opposite** Cheery collerette *Dahlia* 'Chimborazo'.





**Above** The Autumn Border lives up to its name, packed with colourful cotinus, rudbeckia, eucomis and banana, *Ensete ventricosum* 'Maurelii'. **Right** *Erythrina crista-galli* is a deciduous tree bearing showy flowers, hardy only in the UK's mild and coastal areas.

Alan's view is that plants don't want to die – their natural impetus is to survive, so whatever you can do to aid that is going to be a bonus. He has a sneaking regard for the self-seeders and the bird-sown plants such as a paulownia, which he now stools each year, and a beautiful white rugosa rose, that came his way from bird droppings. It is all proof to him that if you provide plants that attract the wildlife, you will be amply rewarded for your efforts.

The most challenging part of gardening here is keeping the show going beyond the usual rose and perennial peak of June and July. To maintain colour and drama in a garden that is regularly open to the public, Alan has a trug full of ways to achieve a glowing autumn standing ovation.

Naturally, the Autumn Border leads the charge with its blocks of strong foliage plants, hot-coloured dahlias and sparkling torches of pineapple lily, *Eucomis pallidiflora* subsp. *pole-evansii*. In other



**Above** Flamboyant *Salvia involucrata* 'Boutin' with its fuzzy-felt magenta flowers. **Below** *Trachycarpus wagnerianus* is a slow-growing palm that captures the spirit of the Mediterranean here with *Phormium tenax*.

*"If I have 40 plants I take 40 cuttings, so I have extra when the first plantings are becoming less showy"*

parts of the garden hydrangeas are among the plants that prolong the show despite the fact that the water table is so deep. "I feel sure their survival is due to the sea influence and lack of frost," says Alan.

One that Alan favours is the mophead *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Madame Emile Mouillère', bred in France more than a century ago. His first plants came to him via Christopher Lloyd, who championed this variety. White flowers appear in July, continue through August, then age in situ with pink tints, so Alan can pick them right up to Christmas: "If they are in deep shade they are more lime-green than pink as they fade, making them even more dramatic on the plant and in the festive vase."

Among the other hydrangeas that thrive here are a collection of Dutch-bred *H. macrophylla* hybrids that flower on both old and new wood, giving a long season of flowers. Some of their stems, being black and shiny, are as dramatic as the flowers. Others start flowering at the end of June and age on the stem, fading to red and green, going through to the garden's closing time in October and beyond. *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Ayesha' is another of Alan's choices, its domed flowerheads holding individual cup-like flowers that give an overall appearance more akin to that of a lilac.

Dahlias are stars of this season, too. In spring Alan starts tubers into growth, then takes cuttings from them: "I pot the tubers up and then when there are shoots up to four inches long, I wriggle them off between my thumb and forefinger and plant them in small pots. They go onto a misting bench, and when they are established I nip out their tops and grow them on until they are needed."

Sometimes he plants them out into the garden as late as September and October to add to the late show. 'Chimborazo', a collerette type with deep crimson outer petals and mottled yellow inner ones, is a dahlia he likes to have ready to pop into late border plantings. This year he had more than 30 coming on in two- and three-litre pots.

Any bedding plants that have passed their best by September are removed. Alan replaces them with late-sown annuals or even perennials that he has grown from cuttings. For example, the annual blue pimpernel, *Anagallis monelli*, which he buys in, is pressed into service. "If I have 40 plants I take 40 cuttings, so I have extra coming along when the first plantings are becoming less showy," he says.

Another plant grown from cuttings that Alan splashes into borders is the African hemp, *Sparmannia africana*, more often used as an indoor plant. "I used to see it in offices when I worked in





*The Desert Wash has filled out and matured. Now you walk through it rather than looking down onto it*





“Any plant that is fast-maturing that I can use to prolong the season and therefore the late show, is called into action”

**Above** The Exotic Garden, with its Giles Rayner water sculpture and lush foliage planting including tetrapanax and *Arundo donax*. **Right** A collection of succulents and potted cacti enjoy a dramatic backdrop of glaucous, toothed leaves, courtesy of *Melianthus major*.

London. Then I started to use it as a bedding plant for the late show, because its large, pale green leaves with jagged edges offer great presence and style.”

Alan also makes regular late sowings in June of annuals such as cosmos, cleome, tithonia and zinnia, the last of which he describes as an excellent “catch crop” that you can sow again and often and still get results. “Any plant that is fast-maturing that I can use to prolong the season and therefore the late show, is called into action. To give them the best chance I refresh the soil before planting them out right up to the middle of September,” he says.

The Desert Wash, designed to resemble parts of dry Arizona, is Graham’s creation. In recent years it has filled out and matured, and now you walk through it rather than looking down onto it. The dramatic desert exotics here will tolerate the cold provided their roots stay dry in winter, but their main show is from mid-May to mid-July. After that, Alan relies on ribbons of bright annuals such as the Californian poppy, *Eschscholzia californica*, to provide radiant colour. “We can get three or four crops of flowers as the latest of these prolific self-seeders bloom in September. *Verbena bonariensis* is another much appreciated self-seeder, which also gives us vertical accents, and the golden-yellow candles of giant verbascum are perfect.”



**Top** The elaborate fruit cage is as beautiful as it is practical, surrounded by the jostling flowers of vibrant dahlias, salvias and bronze fennel. **Above** With its symmetrical yew pyramids, the King’s Walk offers an area of calm repose.

Grace, stature and flowering plumes are the elegant offerings of green New Zealand toe-toe grass, *Cortaderia richardii*, another of the Desert Wash plants that do their bit to keep the show going. *Haloragis erecta* ‘Wellington Bronze’, with its ragged edges, rusty-coloured leaves and small red autumn flowers, makes another strong accent and perfectly complements the rusty sculpture that is arranged across the Desert Wash.

Foliage is also key to keeping the show going at East Ruston. As Alan explains: “Whatever the level of colour and however many flowers you may have in the garden, it is foliage that is so important in every season. It goes on for much longer than the colourful flowers and works its magic over a long period.”

Variegated as well as green holly, yew and other shaped conifers, including *Thuja plicata*, are among the plants that provide a solid backdrop of interesting hedges and strong architectural features throughout the garden. Foliage also offers a calming, cooling element, counterbalancing the high-octane colours of some of the late-summer flowers.

In the Exotic Garden, foliage plants include the banana, *Musa basjoo*, which is regenerated from root stock after severe winters. The star of the Exotic Garden, though, is the crimson glory vine, *Vitis coignetiae*, grown over a large pergola to create a waterfall of glowing red foliage from late summer into autumn. “I first saw this vine growing at Powis Castle in Wales and knew I had to create a similar effect here at East Ruston,” says Alan.

For Alan and Graham this plant perfectly sums up the way they extend the drama of the season in their garden: ending with a finale of fiery fireworks. ■

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East Ruston Old Vicarage, East Ruston, Norwich, Norfolk NR12 9HN. Opens Wednesday to Sunday and Bank Holidays, 12-5.30pm until 30 October. Tel: 01692 650432; [eastrustonoldvicarage.co.uk](http://eastrustonoldvicarage.co.uk)

## Containers and Collections

Among Alan’s many late-season container plantings are plants grown from cuttings of fragrant heliotrope and ivy-leaf pelargoniums taken earlier in the year. One of his favourite central plants for a show-stopping container display is silver-leaved, *Centaurea cineraria* (also known as Dusty Miller), which produces fountain-like effect. A stalwart combination he uses in containers is *Fuchsia triphylla* ‘Thalia’ with a frothy blue rim of *Lobelia erinus*.

Container collections of specific plant groups, such as nerines and amarines, pelargoniums and succulents, are another means to provide an extra late lift to the garden. Alan says he is always inspired by the wonderful plant collections created at Great Dixter in various places, but particularly

at the front porch of the house. A good succulent display will offer variety in leaf colour and shape, as well as flowers later in the summer. Aeoniums and echeveria are particularly useful.

Experiment with plants you might have thought would not be hardy. One such for Alan is *Albizia julibrissin* f. *rosea*, which is quite hardy in the south of the country, but not so in Norfolk until recently. He has been growing four specimens in containers for several years and next year plans to plant them out now he has established their hardiness here. Other examples are the white trumpet-flowered Chilean jasmine, *Mandevilla laxa*, and the cup-and-saucer vine, *Cobaea scandens*, which both now grow as perennials at East Ruston.