

Tom plants a double border with Benton irises, chosen for their muted, complementary tones and simultaneous flowering.

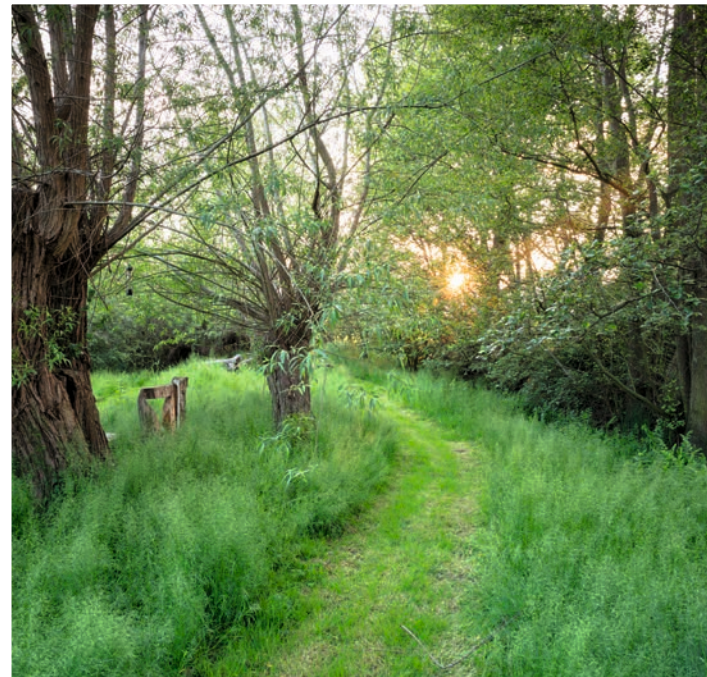
THE PLANT LAB

Working scientifically to adapt new planting to the very precise conditions of his own garden at Mansard House in Suffolk, designer Tom Hoblyn has painstakingly built up an in-depth knowledge of what works where, which he applies to his clients' briefs.

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



Above left In the kitchen garden, gourds scramble over a rusted metal arch that leads the way to a dahlia-backed bench.
Above right A pretty greenhouse sits within the walled garden.
Below The kitchen garden is a more formal space, divided into neat rectangular beds and edged with low box hedges – thankfully free from pests and disease.



Above Reclaimed wooden chicken coops add character to a wild area of longer grass.
Left Willows and alder trees in the area of the garden Tom is rewilding.
Below right White wisteria flowers drip through metal arches.
Below left This rustic, wooden version of a Monet-style bridge is Tom's own creation.

"I don't really have a designed garden. It is a garden that evolves with conversations"

Tom Hoblyn and his wife Mary moved to Mansard House in Suffolk some 20 years ago. They had fallen under the spell of an ivy-clad crinkle-crankle wall and an alder that Tom still describes as "The tree I fell in love with."

Their two-acre garden, in which Tom's design studio is based, is his "working laboratory" where he experiments and mixes plant palettes to ensure he can offer his clients fool-proof planting schemes. "I have about 17 different peonies growing here," he says. "I want to know everything about them – from how pink they are to whether they need support. Peony 'Florence Nicholls' is a favourite, and of the tree peonies, *P. rockii* is the best."

A further 11 acres have been commandeered and are now managed by Tom. The neighbour who owns it mows paths through it, and Tom calls himself a 'guerrilla tree planter'. Additionally, there is a meadow on which the Hoblyns used to graze sheep but which Tom is now gently rewilding. "I don't really have a designed garden," he explains. "It is a garden that evolves with conversations that begin 'Let's see how a grass garden would work here, or a gravel border over there.'"

The most recent example of Tom's let's-see-what-this-would-be-like approach is the creation of a gravel garden near the house. It's based on advice from Olivier Filippi, whose own dry Mediterranean nursery in South West France is a source of inspiration for those seeking drought-tolerant solutions to their own gardens.

Tom's design career took off following his graduation from the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew. Now he works around the country, employing seven permanent members of staff and several freelancers. As a landscape designer and horticulturist he has garnered many awards for his show gardens, including a Gold Medal at RHS Chelsea in 2022.

"I surround myself with as many plants as possible to see how they perform, but I have a checklist to ensure they thrive," notes Tom. He advises a full soil analysis along with knowledge of the local climate and rainfall. Soil analysis for his own garden revealed a high pH of 7.8 and a serious manganese deficiency. In most cases this would be remedied with applications of Vitax Q4, but in a low-intervention garden such as Tom's it is a case of adapting to the lack and working out which plants will thrive and which won't. Here, roses, willow and alder are oblivious to the deficiency, which is more apparent in late summer into autumn. Thin-leaved, sappy trees such as acers and amelanchier, however, merely linger rather than thriving.



Another item on Tom's checklist was the close observation of the trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants already in the garden and surrounding woodland. Then he turned to the Natural Vegetation Classification (NVC), an online field guide to different habitats produced by the Joint Nature Conservancy Committee. Once he had established that plants in his garden were on the W6 list, he could build up a list of wild plants whose ornamental relatives would do just as well. For example, if *Viburnum opulus* was on the list for his habitat, then he knew he could draft in other viburnums. Similarly, *Eupatorium cannabinum* thrived in the woodland so Tom has introduced *E. purpureum* 'Album'. Both out-compete the rampant nettles that need to be kept in check.

The crinkle-crinkle wall Tom and Mary uncovered on their first visit, now helps enclose a no-dig kitchen garden bursting with fruit and vegetables. For Tom, having a productive kitchen garden is paramount. He comes from a horticultural family and loves working with the seasons to produce food plants from seed or, in the case of fruit, from trees he has trained against walls or metal supports. His grandfather was deputy chairman of the renowned East Malling Research Station and received an OBE for his work on producing the dwarfing rootstock for fruit trees we all use today.

The kitchen garden has been divided into several long box-lined rectangular beds with a central series of metal arches that support prolific espaliered fruit trees as well as a highly fragrant, white-flowered *Wisteria sinensis* var. *sinensis* f. 'Alba'. Tom

also grows a range of annual climbers, including *Ipomoea lobata*, also known as Spanish flag, morning glory, gourds and beans over the arches. Tom and Mary grew the box hedges from cuttings and are now taking every precaution to avoid infestations of caterpillar and blight.

Sitting within the kitchen garden is a greenhouse and a formal border of aster, agapanthus and catananche. Below the kitchen garden is a small polytunnel – a powerhouse where tomatoes, aubergines, cucumbers, lettuce, melons and industrial quantities of basil jostle and thrive.

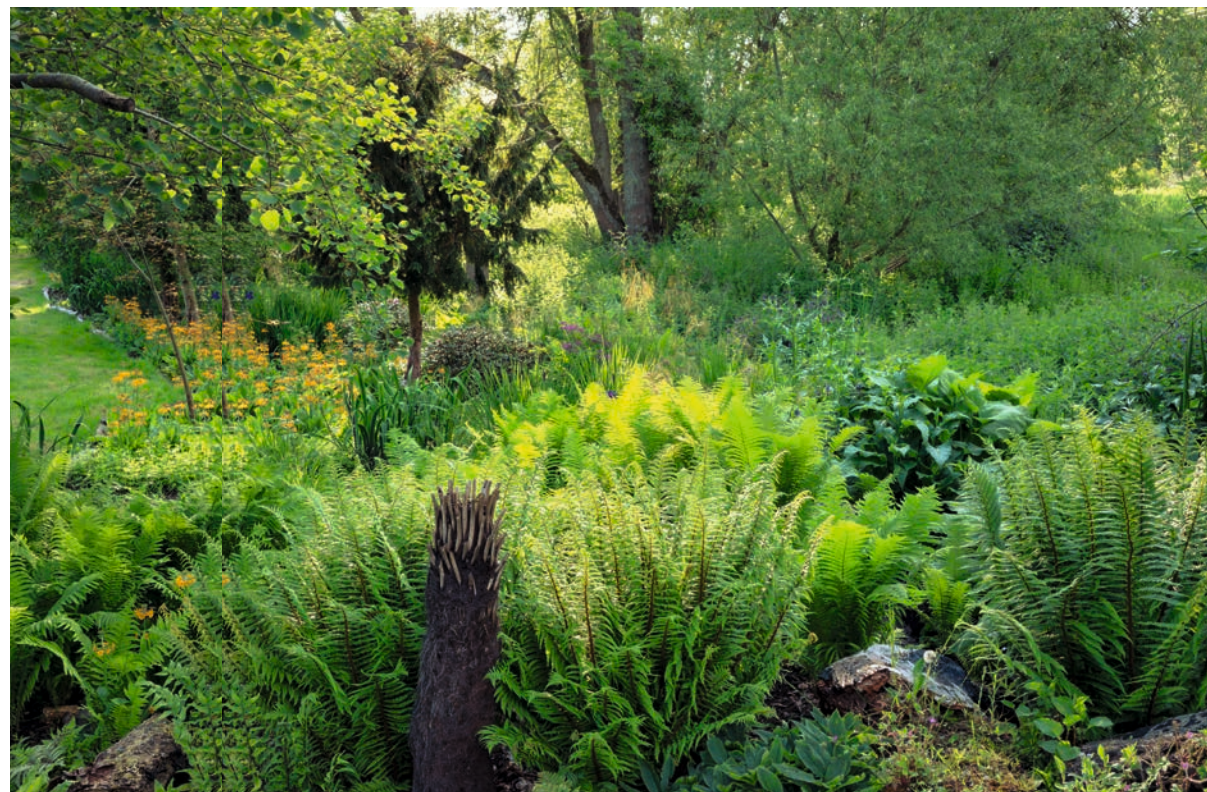
Taking centre stage in a terraced setting with a descending ha-ha, is a dark reflective pool. "At the start it was a natural swimming pond, but the amount of energy needed to keep it clear and clean was so prohibitive that I converted it into a mineral pool," Tom explains. "It has a black liner so it's more reflective." Rows of pleached hornbeams

Right Airy pleached hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) border the mineral pool, with its reflective black liner.

Bottom right These experimental woodland borders are a joyous mix of stumps, ferns and candelabra primulas.

Bottom left *Primula bulleyana* is known for its cheerful tiered whorls of satsuma-orange flowers.

Taking centre stage in a terraced setting, with a descending ha-ha, is a dark reflective pool



create a more airy, open enclosure rather than a complete barrier. They work as a backbone to the upper part of the garden and provide a structural element, especially in winter.

Leading down from the swimming pool garden is a double border filled with Benton End irises. "I love the connection with Suffolk and with Cedric Morris, who lived at Benton End near Hadleigh and bred them, plus they're smaller and more dainty than modern irises," says Tom. He chooses them for their smudgy, muted colours and because they flower at the same time: "If a combination I have put together flowers out of sync, it drives me mad!" *Iris* 'Benton Olive' and *I.* 'Benton Lorna' are among the flower duos he has added along a boardwalk that leads to the lower garden.

"The garden slopes down from the house," says Tom. "Once you are beyond the ha-ha of the pool,



you are in wetland. Although, admittedly, in the summer of 2022 it felt more like a desert.” This area is the site of one of Tom’s ponds, which is connected to the house and filled by rainwater collected from its roof. Here he has created what he calls a “mini-Monet pond”, complete with *Nymphaea pygmaea* ‘Rubra’ waterlilies. At its edge are *Phragmites australis*, *Schoenoplectus lacustris*, *Viburnum opulus* and the river birch *Betula nigra*.

Below the pond and meandering through the wooded area of the garden are Tom’s large experimental woodland borders, in which he combines tree ferns with large perennials such as inula and *Cephalaria gigantea*. *Primula bulleyana*, with its bright orange flowers, creates a river of colour at the border’s edge, self-seeding and spreading over time. Ferns such as *Athyrium filix-femina* and *Matteuccia struthiopteris* have romped away – so happy in the setting that they are spilling out from their borders, much to Tom’s delight.

In the woodland, roses including *Rosa* ‘Félicité-Perpétue’, *R.* ‘Madame Alfred Carrière’ and *R.* ‘Blush Rambler’ climb up nearly every tree. “It’s my rambling rose textbook and I can tell clients exactly when they flower and how high they will reach,” says Tom. “I have tried ‘Kiftsgate’, a rose most would select for this situation, but it is prone to mildew here, so I can advise that ‘Bobbie James’ offers a similar effect but is a healthier choice.” ■

Thomas Hoblyn Garden Design. Tel: 01359 252 056;
thomashoblyn.com



Top Laden with flowers, *Viburnum plicatum* makes a beautiful backdrop to a pond.

Above right Unfurling fern fronds.

Above left Purple and white blooms of *Iris* ‘Benton Lorna’, bred by Cedric Morris.

Right Rambling rose ‘Félicité-Perpétue’ cascading from a tree in the woodland.

