

The early morning sun casts its golden glow over the wide spaces of Marysa Norris's relaxed planting at Church Cottage in Suffolk.

# *BIG SKY THINKING*

After leaving London, Marysa Norris revelled in the space around Church Cottage in Suffolk. Her professed love of disorderly planting has resulted in a garden that encompasses formal borders and a relaxed perennial meadow

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Marysa and Graeme Norris moved from London to Suffolk in 2011. When they began house-hunting, Graeme said he didn't mind where they lived as long as it was not in the flatland of Suffolk! "But what delighted us about Suffolk was the wide-open skies and the light," Marysa recalls. "It was also less crowded and very rural, yet within striking distance of London."

By a stroke of luck they found Church Cottage in the village of Troston and, in the dozen or more years since moving, Marysa has worked her way through the garden she inherited, adapting and changing parts of it, as well as creating new areas. "When we arrived, the garden was a series of small rooms with several internal hedges and small fences that had helped keep the previous owner's hens from causing too much damage," says Marysa. "I wanted to open the garden up to reflect the big Suffolk skies and let in the light." Mostly the changes have been practical, some of them related to her wish to simplify the maintenance, but undoubtedly the most significant change has been Marysa's creation of a new perennial meadow.

**Above** Marysa and Graeme enjoying the peace in their garden. **Right** A plethora of alliums in shades of purple mingle with aquilegia and large clumps of perennials; a sage-grey fence cuts across, bringing order and containment to the riotous planting.

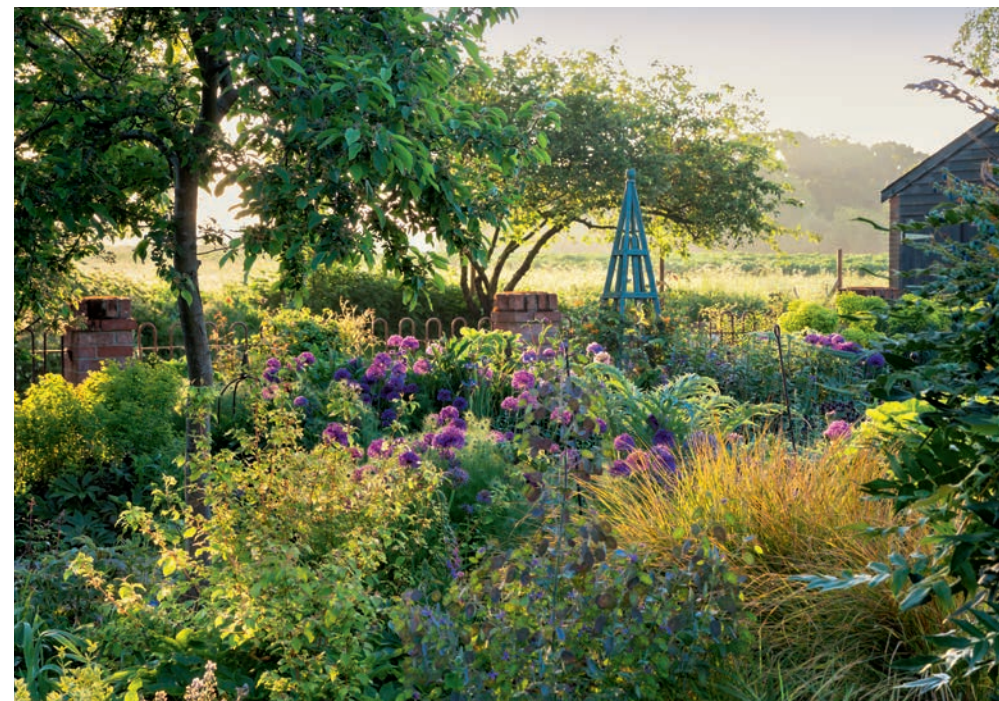
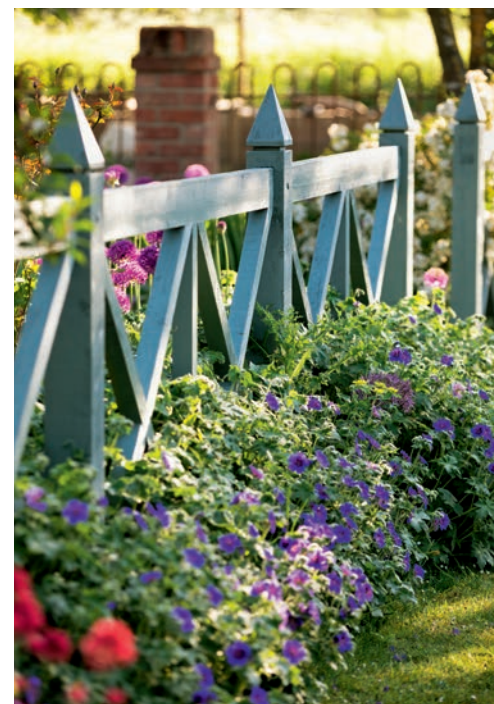
In London, she had a small courtyard garden packed with pots of fruit and veg, as well as ornamentals. At the time of the move she was itching to have her own large garden. Having completed the RHS Diploma at Capel Manor's Regent's Park







In Marysa's New Perennial area, alliums reappear, but here with bold perennials such as silver-leaved *Achillea* 'Coronation Gold'.



campus and gardened in small London plots, she knew she just had to have more space.

Here in Suffolk, a garden of about two-thirds of an acre opens out from the house and is raised up a few steps above a paved terrace. It spreads wide across the house and is divided by a double row of yews, formally clipped and shaped, running at right-angles to the building. The yew arms lead to the garden's edge at the neighbouring field and offer a grassed green breathing space – a corridor – between two intensely gardened areas. A kitchen garden and a small woodland garden lie to the right of the yews, while on the left a sunken gravel garden, just outside the back door, leads towards the garden gate, the main formal borders, the new perennial meadow and the wildlife pond.

In Church Cottage's kitchen garden, there were originally five large beds more than 5m long and 2m wide, which Marysa realised were too large for her to work comfortably. She divided each of them into three raised beds, with bark chippings laid in between. "Now, although I have more beds, individually they are more workable," she says. From them, Marysa harvests kale, soft fruit, rhubarb,

*"Although I like traditional herbaceous borders, I've grown to prefer a more modern approach"*

salad leaves and seasonal vegetables. There are also two greenhouses where she grows tomatoes, peppers, aubergines and lots of chillies. Coldframes and a potting shed help her to stock the garden with plants grown from seed and cuttings.

Marysa's new perennial meadow, her latest addition to the garden, was inspired by a Learning with Experts course she took some years ago. The tutor was Amsterdam-based Professor Michael King, a proponent of the New Perennial Movement, which had evolved in many European public and domestic gardens. "Although I like traditional herbaceous borders and formal styles, I've grown to prefer a more modern approach, as in the

**Top** Yews lead to the garden's edge at a neighbouring field.

**Middle left** The decorative fence is underplanted with *Geranium x magnificum*.

**Middle right** Alliums with cherry-red aquilegia, or granny's bonnets.

**Left** Anemanthele, lunaria, cardoons and more alliums.

naturalistic, relaxed plantings advocated by Noel Kingsbury and Piet Oudolf. They seem to me more suited to this rural garden," Marysa points out. The New Perennial approach involves planting a number of key perennials across



the planting area to give season-round interest. Then smaller numbers of complementary plants are added to enhance the effect. “The result is not like borders where you walk around the edges; instead you get fully immersed and walk among the plants,” explains Marysa. “What I love most about it is that you can get up close to the plants and create a plant community that is based on your particular choices, the light and the kind of soil you have. It relies mainly on plant texture, shape and colour for its long season of interest.”

The New Perennial meadow at Church Cottage is a large, open, rectangular area that used to be laid to lawn. At this time of year it is filled with Marysa’s key spring plants, including purple alliums, mainly ‘Purple Sensation’ and the later-flowering *A. atropurpureum*. Marysa has learned from experience that ‘Purple Sensation’ is an allium that tends to dominate and self-seed rampantly, so she edits out clumps of over-enthusiastic seedlings and suggests trying sterile or less profligate cultivars such

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as ‘Gladiator’, ‘Globemaster’ and ‘Mount Everest’. The alliums march through this planting in a stately manner and across the six beds in the formal area, creating a unified look in early summer.

Another important plant in the grid is *Achillea* ‘Coronation Gold’. Early in the season, the mounds of silvery fern-like foliage complement the mass of spring bulbs planted in the matrix. Later in summer, the bright yellow, dinner plate flowerheads contrast with willowy foliage of ornamental grasses and the flower spikes of *Veronicastrum virginicum* ‘Fascination’. But this achillea is not as upright a form as Marysa had hoped for, since it seems to raise itself out of the ground, then mounds up and sprawls. “I have started to try alternatives such as *Achillea* ‘Gold Plate’, which offer similar effects but with better behaviour,” she explains.

Grasses are an important component of the planting and Marysa includes pheasant grass, *Anemanthele lessoniana*, which over-generously self-seeds; *Calamagrostis x acutifolia* ‘Karl Foerster’ with tall upright inflorescences that last

**Top left** The striking fronds of *Asplenium scolopendrium*.

**Top right** The small woodland garden with a tree peony, aquilegias, ferns and hellebores.

**Right** Tucked behind the hedge, a busy working area with a greenhouse and shed and plants being propagated.







well into winter; and *Molinia caerulea* 'Transparent' whose fine shimmering stems of rice-like seeds create a lovely gauzy effect.

Weaving its way through the grasses is *Geranium* 'Patricia' with its dark-eyed deep magenta flowers. The whole area is underplanted with snowdrops, crocus and narcissus for early spring interest, with foxtail lily (*Eremurus x isabellinus* 'Cleopatra') and magenta *Gladiolus communis* subsp. *byzantinus* following in mid-summer.

Running across this side of the garden towards the yew hedges, providing a break between the formal borders and the more relaxed feel of the perennial meadow and wildlife pond, is a stylish wooden fence. Its soft sage grey-blue lines are echoed by wooden obelisks in the formal garden and emphasised by the *Geranium x magnificum* at its base, whose prolific single flush of deep blue-violet flowers is followed by mounds of soft downy leaves.

The line of the fence is one of the garden's features that pleases Graeme: he likes straight lines and symmetry. Marysa notes that her preference for a little riot and a bit of disorderly planting is lightly confined by Graeme's more geometric approach. "He keeps my chaos in order," she observes.

The sunken gravel garden that runs from gate to house is walled, offering a chance to grow climbers such as a kiwi and wall-trained shrubs. Trailing rosemary contrasts with the sword-like foliage of irises, including Suffolk-bred Cedric Morris irises 'Benton Nigel' and 'Benton Old Madrid', which bake here in spring and summer. The wooden sleeper path makes passage to and from the house so much clearer, as well as cleaner. "I wish there were more paths in the garden," admits Marysa. "At this stage, tripping across lawns or wheeling barrows of compost and mulch across the grass is not ideal."

When you take on an established garden, change is inevitable, but it is always good if there are constants and one that Marysa greatly appreciates is working with gardener Sharon Markell. "Sharon knew the garden before I took it on and has always been supportive of changes I've made. She is very knowledgeable and has become a valued friend. I can chat about plants all day with her, in a way that would drive Graeme mad!" Sharon's husband Evan Markell made the fences, potting shed and other garden features.

"I feel that while I will always want to add and replace plants, the overall shape of the garden is going to stay as it is now," Marysa reflects. "I hope to spend the next few years enjoying the garden with my family." ■

**Top** The shepherd's hut, next to a wildlife pond, which is fringed by irises.

**Left** Two clipped bay trees make a handsome pair, standing guard beside the fence.

**Far left** A beautifully toned Cedric Morris bearded iris, 'Benton Old Madrid', thrives in the gravel garden.