

Formerly an overgrown tangle, this garden is now as neat as a pin, with clipped topiary and a sunken lawn that's as level as a billiard table.

A Labour OF LOVE

Thirty years of planning, planting and waiting have paid off, and while maintaining the now-mature topiary in this Suffolk garden is a relentless task, on a crisp morning John and Jenny Brett feel it's worth the effort

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Scarlet crab apples cling onto a line of pleached *Malus x robusta*, giving the garden a colourfully festive touch.



Vision, optimism, patience and hard work are among the virtues that so many gardeners harness as they create their gardens. In the two-thirds-of-an-acre garden around the former village church that has been their home since 1993, John and Jenny Brett have tested theirs to the limit. When John first drew up the plan for the garden he and Jenny have created, he hadn't really considered the long-term energy and effort it would require.

The couple viewed many properties in rural Suffolk when they decided to move out of London in 1993, but they both remember the excitement of their first glimpse of the derelict and overgrown garden that had thrust itself up around this decommissioned Victorian church. "We just fell in love with it," Jenny recalls. "The garden was full of bramble, nettles, and snowberry. You couldn't walk around the whole building and self-seeded willows were growing out of the foundations. But we saw it in June on a beautiful day when the wild roses were in full flower and we thought it was very romantic."

Somehow, they saw through the weeds and difficulties into a future where a sunken lawn, lines of pleached hornbeam, stately yew hedges and shapely topiary would offer year-round architectural attraction. At first, they spent weekends clearing the ground and working on their living quarters within the church. Soon they realised that if they were to have any impact on the property, they needed to be there full time, and so in December 1998 the weekends became weeks.

"John came up with a scheme to give us structure and something attractive to look at all year," says Jenny. This blueprint detailed individual flower beds bordered with box hedging and box parterres. The pièce de résistance was the lowering of the main part of the garden to create a sunken lawn with a hornbeam walkway on two sides. Yew hedging was added to create vistas, as well as to ensure privacy.

Work began on the garden in earnest in 2008. "A man with a digger dug out the lawn to a depth of one metre. What was taken away was a mixture of clay, rubble from a former school on the site, and pernicious weeds. We didn't attempt to save or recycle any of it," Jenny recalls. At the same time, trenches for the yew hedging were dug out. All Jenny and John had to do was add compost and some soil to the trenches and drop in the yews. However there were hundreds of yews on pallets on the drive, all with huge rootballs – a veritable forest to plant.

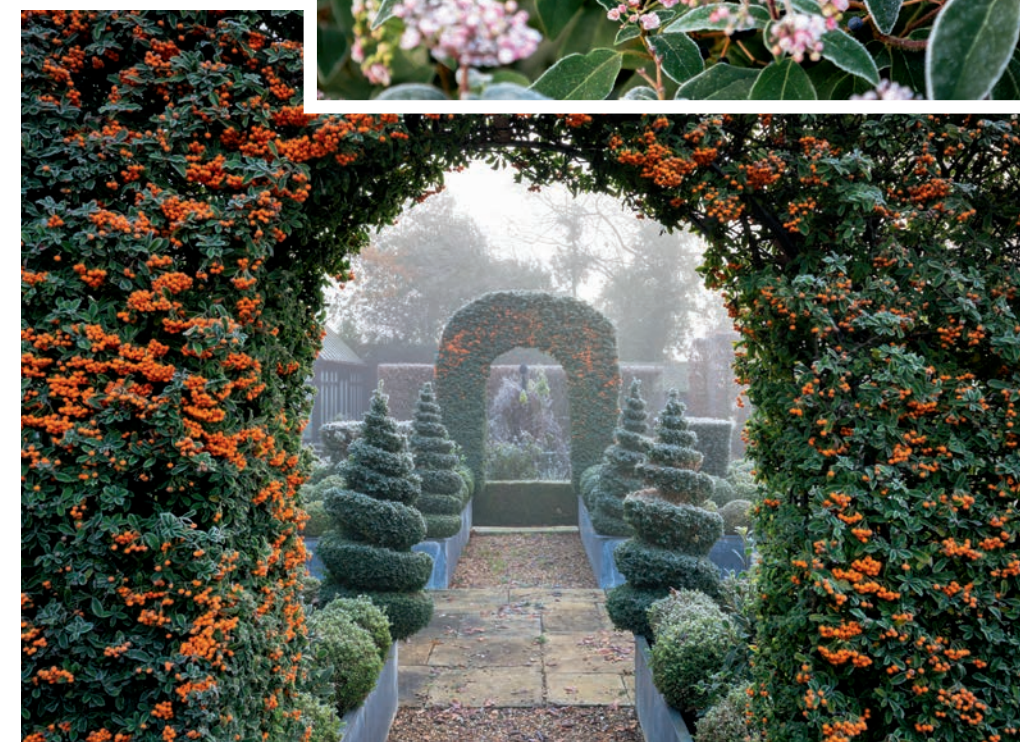
This was the time of the credit crunch, and for a while the couple could only afford to work on the garden bit by bit. "It made our lives difficult because for a long time we couldn't get to the front door because of the mud. And in the first winter it was like a battlefield. There wasn't any grass on the sunken lawn for about five years," Jenny remembers.



Above Low box hedging is clipped to form two elegant twisted strands.

Right *Viburnum tinus*, with its glossy evergreen leaves and clusters of pale pink winter flowers.

Below A glimpse of perfect symmetry through the arch, with identical topiary spirals at the parterre's centre.





Around 50 hornbeam whips were planted along two sides of the sunken area where they are now well-established and pleached. “One of the things we love about the sunken garden in winter is the way the light plays on the hornbeam hedges on two of its sides,” says Jenny. “Although it’s technically deciduous, as a hedge the crinkled hornbeam leaves stay on thinly and you get lovely shadows and light effects coming through the trees.”

Four sets of stone steps, framed by low hedges of clipped pyracantha, lead to the sunken lawn, the shaped plants guiding you down the steps like a set of banisters. No longer a muddy battlefield, the

Top Frosted grasses edge a formal pond that’s tucked behind one of the solid yew hedges. **Above** Perfect box balls are a stark contrast to frost-rimmed herbaceous plants that are left to stand over winter.



immaculate lawn is the centrepiece of the garden. There are no borders immediately alongside it or within it; it simply forms a green breathing space framed by the hornbeams and yews that now receive meticulous attention from John to keep their shapes.

There are many different garden areas, all with names, such as the Pink Magnolia Garden and the Tree Peony Garden, which thrive behind the yew and hornbeam hedges and offer colour from seasonal plants, but all-year drama comes from John and Jenny’s use of the crab apple *Malus x robusta*. A double row of espaliers borders a wildflower garden on one side of the main entrance, while a single curving espalier line runs alongside the drive.

“We chose crab apples because they offer so much all year round, and in winter they create this really stark, bright effect. The birds generally don’t take the fruit until around February, so there is a long period of glowing, almost shimmering crab apples. In spring the blossom and the leaves take over. And because we have trained the trees there is a structure to it, albeit a light one that you can see through. During a frosty winter the crab apples gleam like festive decorations.”

Jenny puts together the floral colour of the garden and, among other areas, has planted up the Long Border, which runs alongside the rose-covered main wall of the building on the south side. “I don’t tend to repeat planting schemes through the garden. I



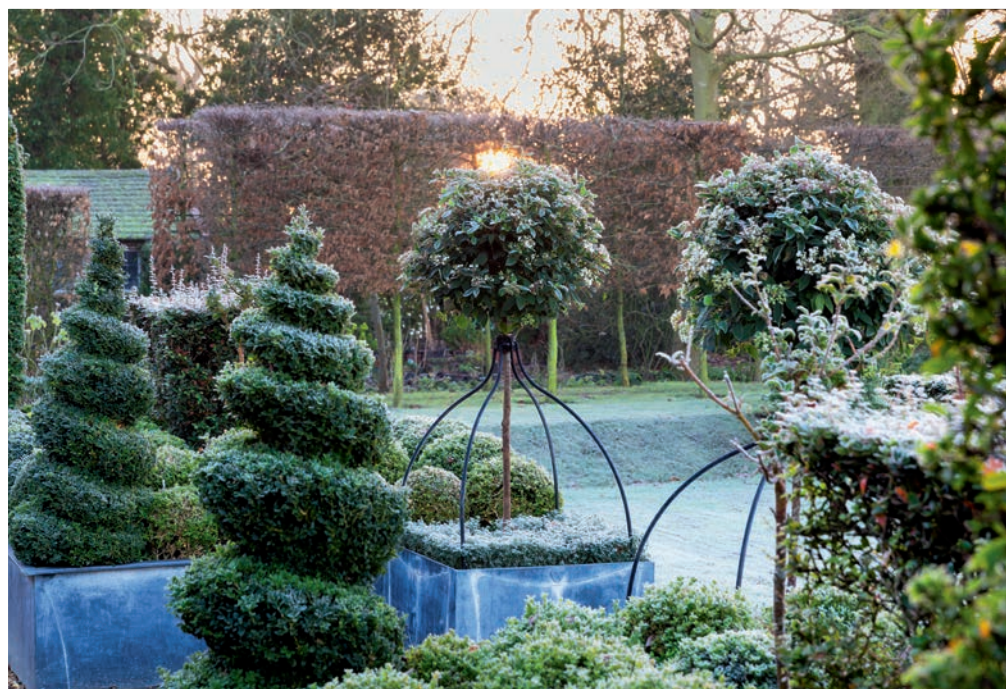
Picture-perfect frosted winter symmetry is the reward for the years of patience while this garden grew into itself.



try to make each area work in its own right and of course the planting changes. After the dry summer of 2022 I had to take stock of which plants didn't do so well. I don't like to clump things; I prefer a mosaic effect. And I like complementary colours without too much clashing," says Jenny.

John and Jenny enjoy the symmetry, simplicity and formality of the Arts & Crafts movement and the interior of their home in the converted church is styled in this way. In the garden this simplicity and symmetry comes into play in John's topiary work. On the south side of the church, he has created a set of four symmetrical parterres framed by two arches of *Pyracantha* 'Teton', which is slow-growing and offers abundant berries. Supported by metal arches, this slow grower took seven years to reach the required height and shape. The parterres are made from steel boxes covered with lead sheeting that blends well with the flint-grey old church walls.

Box, *Viburnum tinus*, teucrium and *Berberis darwinii* are among the plants he has used to create the various balls, cubes and spirals, with viburnum and box providing the best results. John warns that *Berberis darwinii* is definitely not a suitable plant for topiary because it grows so fast that he has to cut it weekly. In fact, there is so much to keep in check that maintaining the topiary and hedges is a full-time summer job for John. "I have got quicker and I now use electric shears as well as hand shears," he says.



Top A place to rest, neatly slotted into a pillared alcove of yew.

Above *Viburnum tinus* standards mark the entrance to the sunken lawn; winter's low sun filters through the pleached hornbeam that edges it on two sides.

Like many gardeners who have seen their plans come to fruition over time, John and Jenny are now appraising how best to manage their garden. For a start they've realised that it is difficult to get in and out of the box-lined borders to pick up clippings and maintain what's within them. "We've taken some of the box hedging out and made entrances, so we can get among the plants more easily," Jenny explains.

Even though maintaining it is hard work, the hedging remains the backbone of the garden. Not only does it provide an essential green backdrop to the perennials and roses that line the walls and offer summer colour, it is also what gives this garden its magical winter charm. ■