

RHS
Partner
Garden
RHS members can
visit for free on
Wednesdays.
See p97.

.A river runs through it

As Fullers Mill Garden in Suffolk wells into
life, Barbara Segall explores the sparkling
wonders of this tranquil waterside space

Photography: Richard Bloom

Shades of green and
pops of orange glow on
a misty early morning,
where trees, euphorbias,
colchicums and bamboo
Phyllostachys aurea line
the Culford Stream



In the Low Garden, Mill Pond glistens below the pink house (above), while pheasant-eye daffodils, fritillaries and muscari add to the pastel palette

The grove of *Betula pendula* subsp. *pendula* 'Silver Grace' in the Top Garden (left)

Carpets of the parasitic purple toothwort *Lathraea clandestina* (right), grow beneath some of the trees in the Low Garden



Fullers Mill Garden is a year-round gem of a waterside and woodland garden, but in early spring this sparkling space is truly packed full of exciting sights extending from ground to sky. After the latest snowdrops fade, epimediums and hellebores move the interest along, before blooms of *Prunus* and tree heather, *Magnolia* and *Ribes* bring more colour as the season progresses.

Birch trunks, emerging fern fronds and the elegant foliage of *Ilex aquifolium* 'Myrtifolia' also provide shapely ornament in spring.

The garden was created by Bernard Tickner, who bought the seven-acre property in West Stow, Suffolk, in 1958. It became a joint enterprise with his wife Bess, who he married in 1966. Later it was gifted to Perennial, the charity dedicated to helping professional horticulturists, and the new Garden Manager, Rory McDonnell, joined the team late in 2023. Rory sees the garden, albeit decades on, from a similar angle that Bernard did – very much as a plant lover's plot.

"When I applied for the post, I read up about the garden, and in particular Bernard's own writings about it," Rory says. "Bernard's key influences – Beth Chatto and Christopher Lloyd, and their fantastic gardens – have been similarly important in my life. And Bernard and I both love structural plants and foliage in gardens, sometimes finding them even more important than flowers."

Following Bernard's death in 2017, the garden moved into the full-time stewardship of Perennial. However, many of the current garden team and volunteers worked for Bernard, so there's an extensive bank of knowledge linking the past to the present, upon which Rory can draw. He says what makes the difference is that: "Bernard had a blank canvas while I have inherited an established garden filled with an eclectic range of plants that the team have carefully curated over many years".

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Meet the Garden Manager

Name: Rory McDonnell.

Size of garden: 7 acres.

Age of garden: Bought in 1958 by Bernard Tickner, promised to Perennial in 2013.

Location: Fullers Mill, West Stow, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk P28 6HD.

Maintenance: Rory is helped by two full-time gardeners and a part-time one, two trainees and about 30 volunteers. In spring, borders are weeded, but any desirable self-sowers, such as poppies and foxgloves, are left in place. *Pittosporum* and other evergreen

shrubs are clipped in summer, so shapes remain tight into autumn and winter. Planting is the key task in autumn, which allows plants to establish before any warm and dry weather arises. In winter all the beds are mulched with organic matter to suppress weeds and conserve moisture.

Rory's top 10 spring plants: *Arum creticum*, *Betula pendula* subsp. *pendula* 'Silver Grace', *Cornus mas*, *Darmara peltata* AGM, *Erica arborea* var. *alpina* AGM, *Eryngium venustum*, *Ilex aquifolium* 'Myrtifolia', *Magnolia* × *loebneri* 'Leonard Messel' AGM, *Picea glauca* var. *albertiana* 'Conica' AGM and *Ribes* × *beatonii*.

Visiting: Open 3 April to 30 October, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays; RHS members go free on Wednesdays. Open for NGS 1 October. Events: lily day 12 July; colchicum days 13 and 20 September. For opening times see: perennial.org.uk





On the Alpine Terrace (left) *Iberis sempervirens* and *Narcissus* flower
Euphorbia characias subsp. *wulfenii* (right) adds limey tones on Birch Bank
On a hazy morning in the Low Garden (below), silver and green foliage shines in the sunlight, surrounded by stark silhouettes



“It’s filled with an eclectic range of plants, curated over many years”

Water is a key element in the garden, with the River Lark and the Culford Stream running through it – challenging the gardeners with slippery bankside maintenance. And at the heart of the garden lies the tranquil Mill Pond. The prominent pink cottage and the higher-lying Top Garden are on the north side of the river. The Low Garden, the Mill Pond and the Quandaries (an area of the garden named by Bernard, who was at a loss to find a more appropriate name), are island-like, lying between the river and the stream.

In the months since Rory’s arrival some parts of the garden have flooded. Long-standing gardeners and volunteers working with him have observed this becoming a more regular occurrence during autumn, winter and sometimes spring. He says: “We may need to consider introducing plants that will cope better with summer drought followed by winter submersion. Something else that arose at my interview, which I will take forward, is the need to reduce additional irrigation in drier times. We’re starting with the application of organic mulches that will trap what moisture there is in the soil.”

He’s also planting more densely where possible, so that less soil is exposed. But above all, Rory is guided by Beth Chatto’s principle of ‘right plant, right place’. Beth’s garden was a great source of inspiration for Bernard too, and her planting approach remains a crucial influence on Fullers Mill. To the east of the stream is a relatively newly planted area, known as the Strip. Here a gravel garden uses those water-saving techniques and pays homage to Bernard’s connection with Beth and the exchange of plants that went on between these two friends.

Unusually, Fullers Mill is a garden with no hard landscaping or formal evergreen dividing hedges. The many paths that weave through the garden are either grass or bark, lined with ash logs, or made from short runs of brick. Instead of architectural evergreen hedging to give it shape, it’s the individual plant structures, textures and flowers that take this role. Bernard was averse to statues of any sort, preferring the sculptural quality of plants to provide focal points. In the Top Garden, for example, he paired a pollarded *Salix babylonica* var. *pekinensis* ‘Tortuosa’ with a large, round-shaped box plant, clearly demonstrating his preference of form and shape over flowers.


Because of the absence of architectural structure there has always been a reliance on herbaceous plants that hold their form in winter and fade gracefully, such as *Veronicastrum virginicum* and *Eupatorium*. Rory also wants to explore using more self-seeding plants, to produce the free, naturalistic look that Bernard preferred. This will mean less hoeing and reduced use of bark mulches as weed-suppressants as they also take out self-seeders such as *Silene coronaria* AGM and *Digitalis ferruginea* AGM.

In autumn Rory and the team moved some of the more spectacular foliage plants to other locations to boost existing plantings. Rory says: “We took a young *Parrotia persica* Persian Spire from the Top Garden to the Low Garden to shine next to existing *Ginkgo biloba* and sunny stems of *Cornus sanguinea* ‘Anny’s Winter Orange’ AGM.”

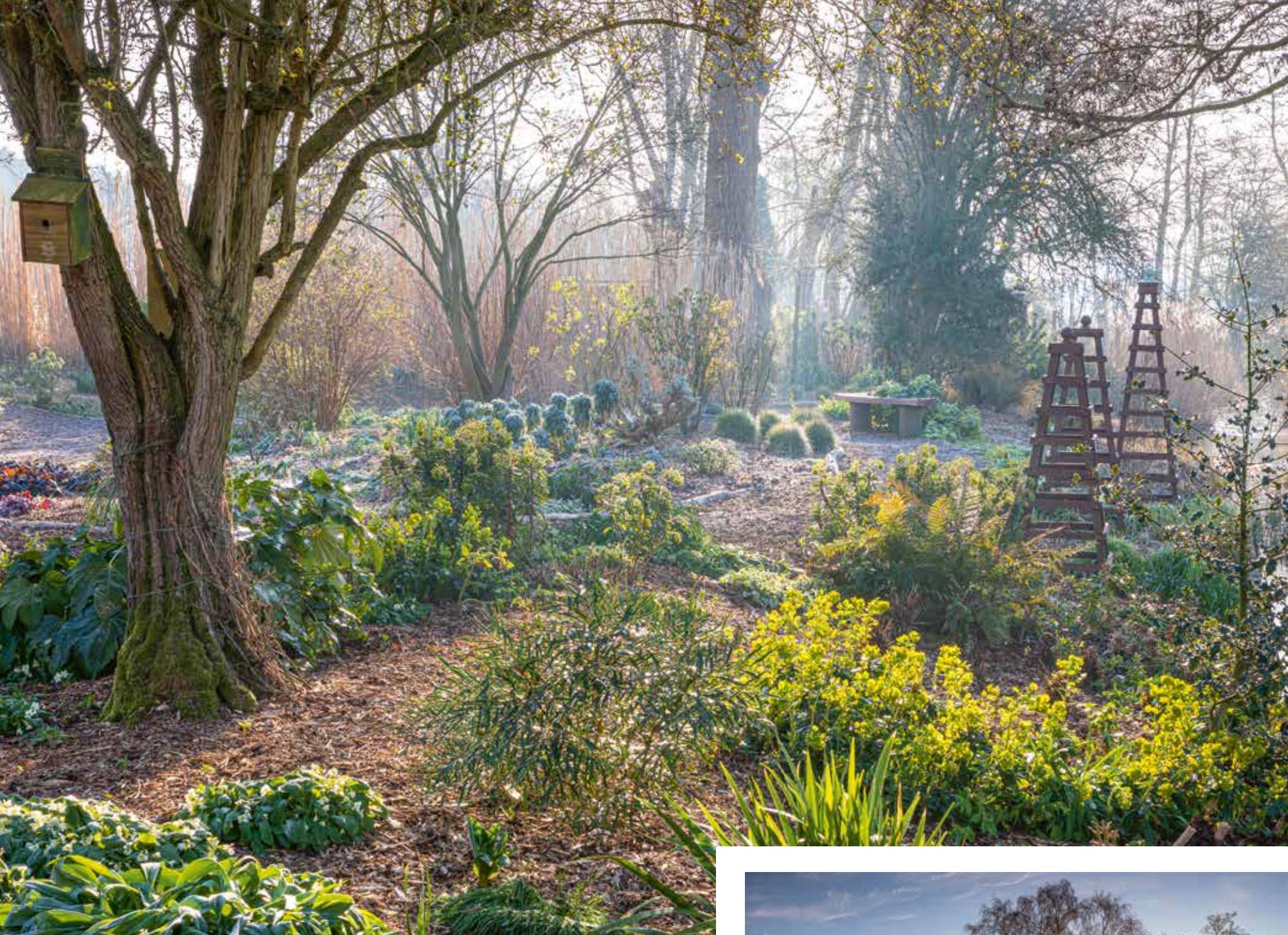
“Unusually, Fullers Mill has no hard landscaping or formal evergreen dividing hedges”

Rory was charmed by the garden long before he took on the role. He remembers seeing the brick-red flowers of *Tulipa kurdica* growing alongside the lime-green of *Euphorbia myrsinites* AGM and mass plantings of *Fritillaria meleagris* AGM in long grass partnered with *Primula veris* AGM. He says: “I’ve always been drawn to Fullers Mill. I like gardens that are quiet; that whisper rather than shout.”

Visitors express a similar view, referring to the peace and tranquillity they find here. The calming sound of gurgling water as well as the noise-blocking trees and shrubs in the garden and forest trees in the wider borrowed landscape, add to this sense. The garden was voted Regional Winner of the RHS Partner Garden of the Year competition for two years running (in 2021 and 2022), and I’m not surprised.

In its early days, this was a domestic garden that only had to please Bernard and Bess. For Rory, the early months of his tenure, with the garden largely closed to visitors through winter, have provided the opportunity to get to know the soil and plants, and to see how seasonal flooding affects the area. Bernard talked of “letting a space develop organically”. Rory feels that with the garden team and volunteers he can make the necessary small, but incremental changes to maintain Fullers Mill as a plant lover’s garden – and to develop it in keeping with the local climate, in a way that’s resilient for the future. 

Barbara Segall is author of *Secret Gardens of the South East* and a member of the RHS Fruit, Vegetable and Herb Committee



Five floral highlights



Magnolia x loebneri
‘Leonard Messel’ AGM
Deciduous tree with scented blooms in the Top Garden



Fritillaria verticillata
Bulbous clumps of the whorled fritillary catch the sun in the Top Garden



Arum creticum
Fragrant yellow spathes are followed by bright orange berries in the Top Garden



***Viburnum carlesii* ‘Charis’**
Woody shrub with pretty pink flowers and delightful scent in the Top Garden



***Osmanthus x burkwoodii* AGM**
Evergreen shrub with clusters of highly-scented white blooms in the Low Garden

In The Quandaries (above) are many blue-grey and lime-green euphorbias, alongside wooden obelisks that will support *Clematis* growth when the days warm

The sparkling pond (right) reflects silhouettes of trees in the golden early-morning light

