

BEFORE



This corner of the garden was rarely used, apart from camping adventures.

GARDEN makeover

“Our meadow garden is so full of life”

Warren and Ruth Dickson have turned an unused part of their plot into a **TRANQUIL REFUGE** surrounded by wildflowers and wonderful views

Foxglove 'Alba'

Fennel 'Purpureum'

Plant some wonderful wildflowers in your plot too! P57

SMART IDEAS TO STEAL

- ✓ **MAKE A STEPPING-STONE PATH** through a wide bed.
- ✓ **ADD GRASSES** to borders for an untamed look.
- ✓ **STRING FESTOONS** on high poles.

How we did it...



The hedge is tamed and the digger goes in to excavate the compacted, poor soil and level the area.



A platform, staggered stepping-stone pads and a weed-stopping wall are built from American pine.



Hundreds of plants arrive and are planted, with grasses forming a framework for the wildflowers.



The festoon lights are up and the plants are busy growing to fill the bare soil between the wooden pads.

FEATURE: MELANIE WHITEHOUSE, PHOTOS: DAVID KEEGAN DK GARDEN DESIGN, RUTH DICKSON

When Warren and Ruth Dickson bought their Victorian cottage on the Cheshire/Derbyshire border in 2005, nature had already more or less taken over. "It was basically a house in a wood," recalls Ruth. "You could tell that, at some time in history, someone had invested a lot of



Warren and Ruth are reaching new wild heights in their garden!

OUR GARDEN PLAN

LOCATION

Cheshire/Derbyshire border

THE LOOK

Modern wildflower meadow

SITE

Size 72m² Faces South east
Soil Heavy clay enriched with organic matter

OUR BUDGET

Hard landscaping **£8,000**
Plants **£12,000**
Lighting **£3,000**
Furniture **£1,500**
Miscellaneous expenses **£1,500**
TOTAL: £26,000

HOW LONG IT TOOK

Clearing & preparation **1 week**
Adding soil improvers **2 days**
Digging over with digger **1 day**
Inset steps & floating platform **1 week**
Planting **2 days**
Time for site to settle prior to planting **4 weeks**
TOTAL: 7 weeks

time and energy on the garden but it was so overgrown that for years we rarely used parts of it. The layout of the grounds is quite unique because it sits on a bridleway in a triangular plot of land built into a hill going down to a river."

It was only years later that the couple decided to give their generous plot a makeover. Warren spent time searching online and eventually discovered David Keegan of DK Garden Design (dkgardendesign.co.uk). "We loved his styles, his designs and his planting schemes, and he was based in the north west," says Ruth.

GARDEN SURPRISE

To start with, David designed the main garden at the front of the house. "Our house is very contemporary and the front garden is quite architectural but softened with grasses," explains Ruth. The back garden soon followed. "We wanted continuity, so it all flowed together but wasn't so structured," she adds.

David concentrated on remodelling the steep slope near to the house, and the addition of a wildflower meadow at the very top of the plot happened almost by accident. "We discussed how we wanted a space that would make us want to walk up the path to the end of the garden, that would also join all of the outside spaces together," says Ruth. "It wasn't our intention to do a meadow garden at all but we all got a bit carried away!"

The area in question is at the very top of the plot, reached by several sets of steps, and was hardly ever visited by the couple. "We'd never given much thought to what to use this space for," says Ruth. "It felt removed because it's away from the house."

But David had grand plans for this forgotten corner, which housed a sloping lawn and an out-of-control hedge. "I wanted to entice the clients up here by installing a floating platform set within a plant-filled space," David explains. "At first, Warren and Ruth weren't convinced but they came around to the idea as discussions progressed. I used a mood book to give them an idea of what I was attempting to achieve. The challenge set by Warren and Ruth was that the space should be filled with colour in the first year, which it was."

NATURAL PARADISE

Work started on the meadow garden in the summer of 2018, the heavily compacted, poor soil proving a tough customer. A platform of hardwearing American yellow pine was built, creating a seating area with stunning views over the surrounding Derbyshire countryside. A series of wooden stepping stones was added, which would eventually lead the visitor through a sea of wild blooms. But to begin with, the meadow planting was underwhelming. "Like every garden, when it was first planted there really was nothing except little mounds of stems and wispy grass," says Ruth. "Then all of a sudden it came to life and just kept evolving – it blew us away! We'd come and stand or sit in the middle of it all and watch and listen to the wildlife. When it's at its peak in late spring and early summer it is truly breathtaking."

Although the planting looks very natural, it's been carefully designed to shift through the seasons. "The planting palette here is designed as an evolutionary colour wheel," says David. It starts with spheres of allium 'Purple Sensation' alongside tall white spires of foxglove 'Alba', a picture softened by the lacy fronds of fennel 'Purpureum' and *Stipa tenuissima* 'Pony Tails'. Spots of colour are added as poppy *Papaver orientale* 'Patty's Plum' unfurls, above a carpet of astrantia 'Snow Star', *Stachys byzantina* 'Silver Carpet', and geranium 'Rozanne'.

As summer progresses, the temperature notches up with a splash of vibrant-red and black from *Papaver orientale* 'Beauty of Livermere' and *Achillea* 'Walther Funcke', turning to a sea of dusky-oranges with *Achillea* 'Terracotta' and *Helenium* 'Waltraut'. Echinacea 'Ruby Giant' peers above the haze, before the pure-white petals of anemone 'Honorine Jobert' bring the season to a close.

The seedheads and papery-brown spent flower stems are left in place over winter before all is cut back to ground level in early spring in preparation for next year's new growth and a return to high-summer colour. "The planting blends in with nature and looks completely at one with its surroundings," says Ruth.

WILDLIFE HAVEN

The lush planting means the meadow garden is alive with animals, birds and insects. "Throughout spring and into late summer, it's bee heaven and the garden actually hums!" says Ruth. "We're so lucky to have so many birds using it too, from bullfinches to woodpeckers, owls and buzzards. We are blessed with bats, foxes, voles and even roe deer. Badgers have a wander through too and they live around the meadow garden, which is lovely, but the rabbits like this bit of the plot a bit too much!"

It's hard to draw a line between natural and man-made in this pretty space, and it's not always clear what's an intended bloom and what's a wild imposter. "The meadow garden is surrounded by countryside, which is constantly trying to claim it back!" adds Ruth.

The couple, along with their 19-year-old son Jacob, now spend a lot of time in their garden entertaining family and friends. "We like the calmness of outdoors and find it rejuvenating," says Ruth. "Warren works very long hours as managing director of a large insurance brokers, so his time in the garden is time to switch off. It's also his passion, his therapy, and an escape. I just enjoy the rewards of his hard labour!"

On balmy evenings, lighting casts the meadow garden in an enchanting glow. "We chose festoon lights to go around the periphery and weave along the path from the house. The lighting gives a magical feel to the space and suits the setting perfectly," says Ruth.

"Redesigning this section of our garden has made us visit a place that we hadn't really used in 15 years," she adds. "It's a tranquil space and, given the craziness of the pandemic in the past years, it has also been a refuge for us. It helps us remember why we fell in love with this spot more than 15 years ago."



SUNBURST-BRIGHT
Helenium 'Waltraut' pops up to add late-summer warmth from August to September.

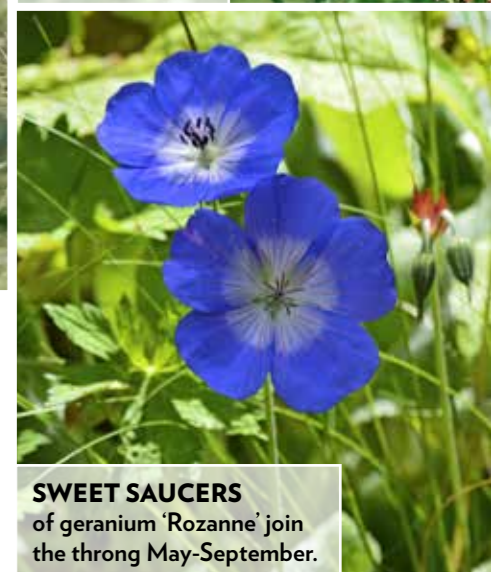


MIGHTY-WHITE
foxglove 'Alba' gives bees their nectar-fix all summer long.

GARDEN MAKEOVER



SHIMMERING
sprays of *Achillea* 'Walther Funcke' bring joy June-September.



SWEET SAUCERS
of geranium 'Rozanne' join the throng May-September.

CALL OF THE WILD

Vibrant blooms create a sea of shape and colour, best enjoyed with a glass of champagne!



YELLOW LAB
Doogie has a field day among the long grasses.



PURPLE REIGNS WHEN
Allium christophii becomes star of the show June-July.

GARDENING DONE
for the day, it's time to get busy with the fizzy!



PLUM-WINE RUFFLES
drink up the sun to make *Papaver orientale* 'Patty's Plum' sparkle May-July.



Want to rewild a pocket of your garden? Turn to p60