



# NATURAL *Progression*

By harnessing and deferring to nature Carol Bruce has perfectly balanced wildness with constraint in her superbly imagined and endlessly abundant garden at Old Bladbean Stud in Kent

WORDS POSY GENTLES PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS



**This image** A place to sit and admire the gentle fullness of the planting.  
**Opposite** The manicured Double Mirror Borders recreate the immersive effect of walking along a country lane.



**Above** A view down one of the two axes in The Double-Mirrored Borders, with its paired arrangements of Irish yew pillars, box balls and painted obelisks.

Set among the gently rolling hills of the Kent Downs, Old Bladbean Stud could easily fool you into thinking it is a classic English garden. In its three acres there are impeccably edged lawns, painted obelisks, tumbling roses and towering delphiniums, punctuated and stitched together throughout by Irish yews and box balls. Yet it is never watered or fertilised, and there is no compost heap.

Carol Bruce, who designed the garden from scratch and works on it five hours a day, employs no gardener but has an army of shrews who take care of the slugs. “I’ve spent 21 years designing a system that harnesses natural processes rather than opposing them,” she says. “I’ve basically made a garden that looks like a well-tended English garden but functions like a wild place. And that’s what we all need right now – a way to garden entirely in deference to nature without watering or using chemicals and absolutely geared towards wildlife.”

The response to her garden has been so positive that Old Bladbean Stud was voted the 2023 South East Regional Winner of the Nation’s Favourite Gardens competition run by *The English Garden* in conjunction with the National Garden Scheme.

Carol started to make the garden in 2003 after undergoing cancer treatment. “I realised I had to do this because I wouldn’t be living my life properly if I didn’t. You could say it was an act of frustration at my inability to express myself authentically in any other way,” she says. Carol and her husband searched for a house to renovate, with some “scruffy old land” attached. Old Bladbean Stud was perfect: “It was literally rough ground with nettles and thistles and piles of concrete.”

Having acquired her “perfect” plot of land, Carol took a novel approach to creating a new garden. Instead of burying her nose in piles of books and applying for courses, she shut herself off from outside influences and walked the surrounding countryside and woods to develop her own garden philosophy based on what she saw in nature. “I saw that the wild plants were healthy and verdant – yet nobody watered or fertilised them or treated them for bugs and diseases. I decided to import the surrounding ecosystem directly over the wall into my garden.”

It was not to be a free-for-all, however. Carol says: “I’ve given the flower beds to Mother Nature, but I have made important concessions to humans, which I call the ‘gardenhood triggers’. These signs



This stand of vivid blue delphiniums exemplifies Carol’s ‘survival of the fittest’ approach: of 200 planted, just 20 survived, but they have proved to be star performers.



Through the fan-shaped beds of The Rose Garden, all paths lead to a steel sculpture, *Angel*, by Pete Moorhouse.



of human handiwork give you the assurance that the garden is loved and tended, so you know there are no bears or wolves!” Carol has both ADHD and Asperger Syndrome and says a garden that appears neglected is emotionally distressing for her. Many people who visit her garden are also very relieved to discover that No Mow May is not a prerequisite for nature-friendly gardening.

Carol is blessed with hyperphantasia (a condition linked to ADHD that conjures extremely vivid mental imagery), which meant she was able to envisage the entire garden in her mind before she’d lifted a finger. She set about dividing the three acres into five garden projects “with a journey round it, so I knew I wasn’t going to lose the coherence of the space by focusing too much on individual areas”. She established a “livery” of box balls, Irish yews, paths and velvety lawns, which run through the garden to give it “a sense of oneness”. In the borders, Mother Nature was to be given a free hand – but this was to be a liberty contained within strong principles.

Carol chose 44 species, rather than named varieties of hardy perennials, strictly colour themed in each area of the garden and, applying the principle of survival of the fittest, allows them to self-seed and

colonise. If a plant is ailing, she lets it die. She initially planted 200 delphinium seedlings and only 20 made it, but the survivors look spectacular every year. “Each surviving plant is uniquely adapted to this place and this time,” she says. Carol plants only between 1 November and 1 March because she never waters. “This means I have no tender perennials, no bedding plants, no tubs: nothing that needs watering in the growing season.” In November, she strims all the perennials to four inches, and then goes over the clippings with the strimmer to leave a mulch on the flower beds. She uses no other compost or mulch.

Because the plants have cross-fertilised over the years, interesting variations are starting to emerge. There are now blue, mauve, white and pink-flowering plants of *Campanula lactiflora* descended from the first seed source, which was blue. The initially white *Geranium pratense* is producing seedlings that have blue speckled flowers. The *Phuopsis stylosa* population now has flowers in different shades of pink – from magenta to a paler version of the original bright pink. “It’s such a fluffy plant that it looks almost impressionistic, blurring the distinction between light and colour,” notes Carol. She grows the wildflower devil’s bit scabious

**Top left** Irises are one of the key plants in a livery Carol has designed to unite the garden.

**Above right** A densely planted bed of alliums, eryngium and pure white *Geranium pratense*.

**Above left** Lamby was an Irish wolfhound owned by Carol, immortalised in a bronze sculpture by Zenos Frudakis.

# ROMANTIC ROSES *at Old Bladbean Stud*

Carol's beloved roses shine in summer in all their sumptuous, plush-petalled glory



## 'THE MAYFLOWER'

Combining the shape of old roses with the vigour of new, this mid-pink David Austin shrub rose is hardy and bushy.



## 'TUSCANY SUPERB'

Deepest maroon velvet petals on this gorgeously scented gallica rose surround a boss of golden anthers.



## 'CONSTANCE SPRY'

Luminous pink satin petals with a strong myrrh scent on David Austin's original rose. It flowers just once each summer.



## 'JOHN CLARE'

This floriferous rose was launched by David Austin in 1994. Its double orange-tinged pink flowers have a light scent.



## 'DUCHESS DE MONTEBELLO'

Powder-pink fully double flowers on an upright plant that tolerates poor soil.



## 'HONORINE DU BRABANT'

This lilac-tinged bourbon shrub rose is wonderfully striped and stippled and keeps on flowering well into autumn.



## 'HUNTER'

The striking crimson flowers of this rugosa hybrid offer a superb contrast with the glossy dark green foliage.



## 'GYPSY BOY'

Its crimson-purple petals ruffled like a Flamenco dancer's skirt, this scented Bourbon shrub rose grows vigorously.



## 'HENRI MARTIN'

This moss rose is Carol's favourite. Its clusters of cerise-crimson, semi-double flowers are powerfully fragranced.



in her borders, which came from seeds she collected on a walk: "It's late to flower and fulfils the same role as *Verbena bonariensis*."

The perennials achieve stunning effects in The Rose Garden, Carol's first project. Amid colonies of delphiniums and *Allium cristophii*, *Campanula lactiflora* and *Eryngium giganteum*, and against a backdrop of mature sycamore and field maple trees, old roses in shades of pink – the moss rose 'Henri Martin', the gallica 'Tuscany Superb', the bourbon 'Honorine de Brabant' and David Austin's 'Constance Spry' – are trained over metal domes to create the effect of enormous beehives studded with blooms. Carol explains: "The Rose Garden is all about immersion and it was inspired by my walks through the surrounding woodland. I wanted it to feel like stumbling into an enchanted woodland glade. In midsummer, when it's at its peak, people sometimes come out in tears."

The end of the physical journey around the garden, and the culmination of Carol's journey in creating the garden of Old Bladbean Stud, is The Double-Mirrored Borders, inspired by walking down country lanes "where you look along the planting, not at it". With its rows of Irish yews, box balls and painted obelisks, it is strikingly more

cultivated than the rest of the garden. Carol says: "It's the only part of the garden where plants have to stay put. It's a benign dictatorship rather than a liberal democracy."

A 300-foot lawned walkway is flanked by a pair of borders that are symmetrical from end to end and side to side, with planting in colours that mirror the sky, which is vast and uninterrupted overhead. There are clouds of *Allium cowanii* in spring, fluffy white sanguisorba and delphiniums and irises in graduating shades of blue. Successional planting is in the same hues and flower shapes throughout the summer to give stability to the effect. Carol says: "It was conceived as a wanderlust containment field. It's a journey and a destination combined. The symmetry means that wherever you are, the view is the same whether you look ahead or behind you, so it holds the drive to forge ahead in stasis." She says this garden contains all the lessons learned from making the rest of the garden. "It really worked. Finally I've no urge to make another garden!" ■

Old Bladbean Stud, Canterbury, Kent CT4 6NA. Opens for the National Garden Scheme on 25 May, 8 and 22 June, 6 and 20 July. Visit [ngs.org.uk](https://www.ngs.org.uk) or [oldbladbeanstud.co.uk](https://www.oldbladbeanstud.co.uk)

**Above** Golden-hued *Phlomis russeliana* and heavy-headed peachy *Rosa* 'Buff Beauty' glow in the summer sun.