



ROOMS WITH A VIEW

When garden designer Sally Court first came to Shalford House in West Sussex she was faced with a daunting combination of steep slopes, waterlogging springs and a thin, clay soil. Despite this unpromising start, a garden of rooms for entertaining and pleasure has been created to link seamlessly with the surrounding landscape. Annie Hardy visits. Photography by Jerry Harpur

Above: Looking back towards the house from the top pond. The lush lawn leads to steps up to the croquet area where strong formality ties in with the house.

Shalford House is situated at the end of a private road of expensive but inauspicious houses. But, head down a dirt track and pass through a set of ornate gates and an oasis of formal gardens and woodland unfurls. There are no other roads or houses in sight and the woody hill that encircles the formal gardens exudes an air of tranquillity. The thoughtfully extended old farmhouse is on a reassuringly human scale, with a faint echo of Lutyens in its tall chimneys and the feeling of a well-loved home.

Sally Court first came here 15 years ago as a fledgling garden designer when her clients, Vernon and Hazel Ellis, bought the rundown house and derelict garden of six hectares. It is a huge, ongoing project and it took considerable effort just to clear the neglected land. Several outbuildings and a small cottage had to be demolished, revealing a large working well in the process, which has now become a feature below the terrace. The scheme is still a work in progress as four years ago the Ellis' acquired a further 12 hectares of derelict woodland behind the house.

ROOM TO ENTERTAIN

The Ellis' brief was simple — link the house to the garden and provide an entertainment area. As keen opera lovers the clients were eager to create a generous space to hold the occasional opera evening. Vernon Ellis also expressed affection for the gardens of Hidcote and Kiftsgate, and a particular interest in the concept of distinctive garden rooms with differing atmospheres. Apart from these broad brushstrokes, Court had an open hand and a healthy budget to develop the south-facing garden how she wished.

The garden has two distinguishing features to its character: the formal gardens near the house that lie mainly to the south, and the wilder woodland areas behind the house and on the hill opposite.

It is an enchanting site but not without its difficulties. The soil is heavy clay and the land drops abruptly away from the house to a large pond before rising up to form the hill opposite. Natural springs found throughout the garden prove both a delight and a drawback. The unpredictable nature of the emergence of new springs, especially after stormy weather, has proved particularly hazardous when constructing walls and other structures. It also means that some of the garden is baked hard while other parts remain soggy with water. Added to this are a plethora of rabbits and deer that manage to find a way into the garden despite a supposedly deer-proof perimeter fence.

The house itself is long and thin and sits side-on to the driveway, linking in places with the high stone wall that marked the old northern boundary. ➡



Above: The ornate water fountain forms the centrepiece to this formal garden room.

Above right: Fat lavender plants and stone plinths flank the entrance to the croquet lawn. The planting here is kept cool by a restrained palette of whites and blues, with eruptions of *Stipa gigantea* seed heads punctuating the borders.

This makes the front of the house a very awkward space. The boundary wall so close to the house pushes you away from the front entrance, while the open vista to the south pulls you towards the back of the house. In order to counterbalance this Court has placed a series of box parterres at the end of the house that serve to anchor it to the drive and take you in the direction of the front door. Unfortunately, the wall is such an effective block that you find yourself, without effort, standing on the generous York stone terrace at the back of the house admiring the croquet lawn below.

NATURAL RHYTHM

The natural rhythm and balance of the designer's planting and hard landscaping is quickly felt. On the terrace the fat lavender borders spilling onto it and a sequence of steps down to the croquet lawn set the tempo. Planting is abundant but restrained; here the generous borders brim with whites, silvers and greys with sporadic splashes of blue — a subtle and highly effective mix with a cloud of *Stipa gigantea* seed heads providing vertical interest.

Once on the lawn, the clever use of two large boxwood squares slow you down and funnel you towards the main steps that lead into the rest of the garden. There is a natural pause here, as you become aware of land falling away beyond the steps. Only the tree line on the opposite hill and the sky are visible ahead, so there is a wonderful feeling of being suspended in air as you approach the edge.

Stepping down, the scene before you is of a luxuriant lawn dissected by a stream (which began life as a drainage ditch) edged with colourful marginals. Meandering down the hill it flows into a large pond at the bottom of the valley.

Looking left (to the east) there is a glimpse of the walled garden containing the orangery, vegetable garden, propagation house, potting shed and other such delights. Below this is the top pond that feeds down into the stream. Further on, the rockery and summer house, which stands at the edge of the meadow, can be seen and a number of big grass borders, providing a sea of colour in the autumn, serve to link this area to the big pond below.

To the right, obscured from sight by the terrace wall and planting, is the top pergola, the tennis court, extra parking, a parterre, the winter garden, water cascade, a large entertainment terrace, secret garden, lower pergola and sunken walled garden.

LINKING THE GARDEN

Looking directly downhill the stream dominates the garden, effectively cutting it in two. This would be problematic except for the skilful way that the designer encourages you to move round the garden. Each part of the garden links to another, revealing glimpses of the next space, and in this way the visitor is enticed to crisscross the site. This keeps interest high and makes navigating this sloping site effortless.



Both sides of the garden meet at the big pond at the bottom of the valley. This clay puddle pond contains an abundance of wildlife, including newts, frogs, dragonflies, ducks, moorhens and the occasional snake. The pond is fed not only by the stream from the top of the garden but from another source that flows through the bog garden, with its giant gunneras and plank bridge, found in the bottom west corner of the garden. The water then flows out to an impressive waterfall and on through a pretty glade.

The use of light and shade is a recurring design element in the garden. This is executed with great effect at the top pond where the thoughtful use of shade gives the water a darker, deeper mysterious look to make this spot a peaceful space to sit and relax. In the secret garden below the terrace the light and dense shade provide a cool refuge, while the area beneath the sunken garden feels almost prehistoric in mood with its fernery and stumpery.

DESIGN DIFFICULTIES

Overall the impression is of a garden strong on structure with impressive planting, so it was hard to find fault. However, the terrace area did feel out of sync with the rest of the garden. Sited on the old cottage it seemed very bare, but having said that, it had the atmosphere of an empty stage, which would be very appropriate for the opera evenings.

GARDEN FACT FILE

Location: Surrey/West Sussex border
Size: 18 hectares
Aspect: south facing
Soil: clay on the south facing slopes, sandy loam in the woodland; acid
Weather: mild with frost pockets
Average precipitation: above average
Designer: Sally Court
Client name: Mr & Mrs V Ellis
Design start date: 1993
Construction start: 1993
Total cost: considerable
Design fee: 12%
Hard-landscaping budget: 45%
Soft-landscaping budget: 55%
Contractors: Landscape Management (original contractor); Home & Garden Improvements (current contractor)
Outstanding features: walks with views, use of water, wildflower meadow, grass beds, woodlands
Public access: Open through the National Gardens Scheme (NGS). Access to the copse at the back of the house
Further information: Sally Court; email: sally.cgd@btconnect.com

COMMENT FROM THE DESIGNER



This project has grown from the original brief 15 years ago, from the two hectares adjoining the house into an 18-hectare project. My clients were very open with their brief, saying only that they enjoyed visiting gardens with 'garden rooms'. I am extremely fortunate that as our relationship developed they allowed me to experiment with areas within the gardens.

The garden was severely neglected, overgrown with unsuitable trees and derelict outhouses. Initially I was only able to carry out a limited site survey but was later able to commission a six hectares survey from which I have developed the plans. My aim with the various gardens is to link the house, a small 300-year-old farmhouse, with the land while creating an affinity with nature and respect for the location.

Early in the contract I changed contractors to one I felt had more empathy with the site and the way I work. As a result we have a mutual respect and together have been able to create a very special garden.

I think that over time I have become too possessive about this project and almost resent my clients 'interfering'. Recently my clients have become more involved and have briefed new gardens that I don't think integrate happily with the original plan. I have to remind myself that I am merely facilitating their requirements; it's not my garden.

Successes and failures: The winter garden, although planted with appropriate plants, always disappoints with its lack of impact — I would have preferred to leave this as a wooded area to link with the woods beyond. The rockery, a client must, sits uncomfortably in the Sussex landscape. The melding of the formal borders into the wild flower meadow and grass beds is hugely satisfying.

Another problem is the clutter of cars. At Shalford House they completely dominate the entrance to the house and gardens. At the moment the boundary wall leaves no choice, but there may be a solution in a link through the wall into the woodland behind, providing there are no problems with public rights of way.

One other minor criticism was the choice of stone on the scree bed situated halfway down the garden by the stream. The stones were off-white and felt too bright — a darker stone may have looked better. It certainly didn't help that the deer had nibbled the planting (which included *Alopecurus pratensis* 'Aureus', *Carex morrowii* 'Variegata', *Festuca glauca*, *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *caerulea* 'Variegata' and *Pennisetum alopecuroides*) to within an inch of its life.

Other problems were down to the previous gardeners and their poor husbandry — a row of standard photinias below the terrace has never recovered from the ministrations of one particular gardener. It's a common predicament — once the garden is built it is beyond the designer's control. The only solution is to have a client like Mr and Mrs Oppenheimer (at Waltham Place) who took the recommendation of their designer, Henk Gerritsen, when they appointed their head gardener — Gert-Jan van de Kolk.

I spotted other incongruities and found out that these were attributable to client input. It must have

Above right: The stream that splits the lawn in two is lined with colourful marginals such as these *Primula vialii*.



been an awkward moment for Court when she returned to the site to see that the client had felled a line of conifers that effectively screened the tennis courts. Two trachycarpus left over from the client's conservatory in London are planted nearby, unfortunately at odds with the rest of the planting.

CONCLUSION

Niggles aside, there is no doubt that this is a beautifully crafted garden. Court's 15 successful years designing for the Ellis' is evidence of her excellent relationship with them and this is echoed in her relationship with her contractor who has also been involved with the project from almost the beginning. Court has admirably fulfilled the brief and has successfully linked the house to the garden. She has also created different rooms, with changes of pace and atmosphere, and given her client a garden that has much scope for entertaining.

It is evident that Court has made room for a dialogue between herself and nature. A keen observer, with a sharp eye for detail, she has had the time, patience and luckily the space to work with nature properly. She has allowed nature to respond and regenerate. What she has left in is as important as the things she has taken out and her judicious pruning and thinning, particularly in the woodlands, has restored harmony and balance. The return of wild orchids near the house, for example, and an increased abundance of birds and wildlife is confirmation that Court has made Shalford House much more than the sum of its parts.

ANNIE HARDY IS A GARDEN AND LANDSCAPE DESIGNER BASED IN SURREY. Email: anne@annehardy.co.uk

COMMENT FROM PHILIP DODSON, PROJECT MANAGER:

I was initially asked by Sally Court to help tidy the gardens, but this was to become a full-scale landscaping project, the magnitude of which I could never have predicted. Upon arrival it became clear that due to the geology and logistics of the site it would indeed be a daunting task to turn the clay slopes of the Sussex hillside into a garden of any worth.

After the initial clearance of all conifer plantations it was obvious that a great deal of topsoil would be required to create working beds. Over the years I have lost count of the thousands of tonnes of topsoil that have been imported in order to create a growing environment to accommodate the huge diversity of planting planned by the designer. There was also a need for the installation of many hundreds of metres of interlocking land drains to alleviate winter flooding.

Dry summers meant that heavy earthmovers and diggers were required to make headway into the hard clay soil. In contrast winter months were hampered by wet sticky clay that would be more at home on a potter's wheel. The ability to walk like a mountain goat was a necessary requirement!

In spite of everything this has been an extremely worthwhile and rewarding project. Through having a good working relationship with both client and designer I have now achieved a dream, a living tapestry of colour, texture and moods that leaves a legacy for future generations.