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INSIDEOUT

Compiled by **Tiffany Daneff**

LITTLE HOUSE IN THE BIG WOODS

Using timber from the land and water from the stream, Sue and Ian Mabberley have transformed this former forester's cottage and garden into an almost completely self-sufficient home. By **Tiffany Daneff**

Photographs **Rebecca Bernstein**

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When Sue Mabberley moved to

Nant y Bedd, a forester's cottage in the Black Mountains, the house came with her then-husband's job with the Forestry Commission. 'The office was over there,' she says, pointing across the road to two timbered barns (now palatial potting sheds), where she also worked as the forest clerk. That was 33 years ago and, says Sue, 'in those days the foresters' pay came in small brown envelopes.'

Much else has changed since. In the mid-Eighties the offices were closed as part of cutbacks and Sue was able to buy the house from the Commission. Over the years she has added on the former timber workshops and small parcels of adjacent forest and riverside. But that's not all. With her husband Ian, Sue – who took early retirement from Natural Resources Wales last year – has been making **an almost self-sufficient heaven in the hills**.

They live ten miles from the nearest village, up a softly winding valley road bordered in early summer by frothy pignut and blue-grey drystone walls. The road is sparsely dotted with farms but you know immediately when you have arrived. Left, through the honeysuckle arch, cobbled paths lead up to the grey sandstone house and wind around a pretty cottage garden bursting with beds of aquilegia and limnanthes, the poached-egg plant. To your right are the barns, a hanging rope bridge (think *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*) across the stream whose banks blaze ▷

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◁ with buttercups in early summer, and, **half-hidden behind a fedge (a living willow hedge) woven by Ian, is a natural swimming pond.**

The latter was built for Sue by local landscape sculptor Mick Petts. Sue loves swimming so much that as a child she used to walk the seven or eight miles from her home in Llanvaches, Monmouthshire, to the nearest lido. The seven-foot-deep pool is double-walled with Douglas fir harvested from their wood, and sits next to the stream that runs from the top of the garden, down past the house, and under the road to join the Grwyne Fawr river – where they are clearing the banks to make a walk along this pretty tributary of the Usk.

Beside the pool is a shepherd's hut, complete with pull-out bed and wood-burning stove, which doubles up as a spare room when friends and family visit. 'It's insulated and really warm, even in winter,' says Sue.

Like the Esse in the kitchen, the stove is fed with their own wood, much of it fallen, which Ian collects, splices, splits into four-foot lengths (using a splitter they bought each other one Christmas), and seasons in an impressive array of hand-built woodsheds. Nothing goes to waste; even the thin branches are chipped to make garden paths, and ash from the fires goes onto the garden.

Two solar panels on the roof of the house provide scalding hot water, enough for three baths a day in summer and, says Ian, in winter they give background warmth to the tank. They also have a micro-hydroelectric generator (bought with Ian's redundancy money), which is discreetly housed in a small

wooden turbine house perched across the stream. Thanks to generous feed-in tariffs, the 3-kilowatt turbine will pay back the initial outlay of £23,000 in seven or eight years. (Ian did some of the labouring, otherwise the figure would have been £30,000-plus.) Ian is now non-executive director of a company installing micro-hydro systems. He is also a community councillor and trustee of the local tourist information centre.

More importantly, he helps in the garden. 'I'm not the gardener,' he points out quickly. Maybe not, but he's a dab hand at DIY – just the kind of person every gardener should marry. He has built a timbered bridge, compost bins (seven), fruit cages, raised beds, cold frames and potting benches, not to mention the iron plant supports and finials he made after attending welding and blacksmithing courses.

They are as resourceful as possible. **A friend designed and wove blankets from the wool shorn from Sue's three Ryeland sheep.** One of the most successful innovations is using surplus sheep's wool packed inside plastic sheeting to make duvets for the compost bins – heating them up to temperatures that kill weed seeds.

When Sue first came to Nant y Bedd there was little growing along the steeply sloping banks of the stream apart from a few cherry trees. Today the gully is planted with ferns and gunnera, the raised beds are filled with veg and all is linked with cobbled paths using stones laid on their ends – the same technique as paths throughout the Brecon Beacons.

What's particularly impressive is how Sue has ▷



LIVING THE GOOD LIFE
Clockwise from top left: copper rings protect salads and herbs from slugs; take a dip in the natural swimming pond; the woodstore is a work of art; a well-organised potting shed; recycled boards form a compost bin; Ian and the log splitter. Opposite: sweet rocket and Welsh poppies, and a plant support forged by Ian (top); blankets woven from fleeces from Sue's sheep



DON'T LOOK DOWN...
...from the Indiana Jones-style bridge. Below: the stream runs through a gap in an artful dry-stone wall

◁ worked things out as she has gone along. An ash sapling that was left to grow and became too difficult to be dug up has been twisted into a living sculpture.

A horse chestnut bang next to an oak tree (the conker and acorn were planted long ago by her daughter Natalie, now 27), is heavily coppiced so that both can survive, creating a baffling feature.

In the lower garden there is more that catches the eye: a long, low wall prettily dotted with sedums in the sun and ferns in the shade; a large circle of willow woven by Sue hangs suspended between two firs, creating an Andy Goldsworthy moment.

Although Sue didn't build the rope bridge herself, she commissioned it after seeing a photo of a similar design in a garden in Canada.

Nant y Bedd now opens for the National Gardens Scheme, and about seven years ago, when it was still being developed, it featured on BBC Two's *Open Gardens* programme, which looked at contenders for the scheme. 'We had to submit a project that Carol Klein could advise on,' Sue chose a north-facing bank of brambles, nettles and ground elder. They cleared it by pulling and digging – the garden is organic.

'Carol said that ground elder is fine in some places,' recalls Sue. 'She chose to be filmed against ground elder and pink hardy geranium.' This sensitivity to the landscape and thoughtful combining of garden plants and wild species makes Nant y Bedd such a special place. ◆

SUE AND IAN'S TIPS FOR KEEPING ONE STEP AHEAD OF GARDEN PESTS

SLUGS AND SNAILS
Ian cuts rings of copper from old domestic hot-water tanks: they use them to keep slugs off young leafy crops.

Sue puts down organic slug pellets, beer traps (home-made beer!) and eggshells, but swears that nothing keeps off the slugs as well as copper. Even her hostas are safe – a notable achievement in Wales.

In the lower garden the little call ducks make a meal of the slugs.

MOLES
'Moles are a real problem,' says Sue. 'Wherever we cultivate, moles appear.' They do have a mole-catching cat but even he was unable to prevent their destructive tunnelling under the raspberries.

'In the end we dug out a foot-and-a-half-deep trench and lined it with a hammock of chicken wire. Then we piled everything back in.' Thankfully, it worked.

MORE ONLINE
For more from Sue and Ian, visit nantybedd.com. For lots of gardening advice and great ideas to inspire you, visit saga.co.uk/gardening

Nant y Bedd will open for the National Gardens Scheme charity on July 19-20, noon till 6pm. Details can be found in the NGS's The Yellow Book or online at ngs.org.uk

