

A true meeting of minds

Foxwood Farm, Marlborough, Wiltshire

A collaboration between designer and plantsman has resulted in a garden that immediately settles this dramatic Modernist home into the traditional landscape, finds Tiffany Daneff

Photographs by Marianne Majerus





A GREAT design can often spring from a single idea. At Foxwood Farm in Wiltshire, it was the aged eleagnus that sparked the masterplan. With its mature boughs almost dropping to the ground and silvery leaves that moved in the lightest breeze, the old tree had been much too lovely to remove, so the new house was designed around it, leaving the tree standing at the heart of what had been the working farmyard.

Simon Green, a film-maker turned architectural designer, deconstructed the out-buildings and dairies and reused them to build a groundbreaking Modernist house for his family with floor-to-ceiling glass windows and doors and a dramatic cantilevered deck.

The house built, he turned his attention to the 40 acres of land, planting several silver birches and other mature trees to

provide some structure, as well as a backdrop to the garden. That done, he realised he needed some help with the courtyard, so he brought in Sean Walter of the The Plant Specialist nursery, a South Africa-born plantsman and designer who had created the roof-garden terrace for the National Theatre.

It was when the two men were standing under the great boughs of the eleagnus talking through the options for the tree that Mr Green asked Mr Walter to create a masterplan for the whole garden.

Mr Walter's suggestion of surrounding the eleagnus with a square bed of rusted Corten steel and underplanting it with *Muehlenbeckia* (Australian ivy), which has wiry red stems that pick up the colour of the steel, had struck a chord. They both had the same goal: they didn't want to get rid of things for the sake of it, but instead to build on the old to make something that

was minimal and modern, yet sympathetic to the landscape and its traditions.

Foxwood is on the North Downs and surrounded by flat arable fields and distant wooded slopes. When Mr Walter first saw it, the house appeared quite exposed and needed settling into its surroundings. Mr Green was already planting parkland trees on the borders of his land, but the stand of three birches he had planted close to the house looked a bit skimpy. By adding quite a number of multi-stemmed birches—which have a much more interesting shape than single-stemmed ones—Mr Walter has created a natural-looking copse.

Now, from the front door, you can walk along a mown-grass path past the birches to a wide meadow of fescue that colours a rich reddish brown in high summer. This grows locally, so all that has been done is to encourage it further

in to the garden. When the meadow is cut, the seed is spread under the birches and fastigate hornbeams that hide the tennis court and, together with the randomly positioned box balls, helps to blur the edges of the garden with that of the fields beyond.

This was improved by digging a ha-ha that gives uninterrupted views over the fields. Mr Green also commissioned from the local blacksmith a set of varying sizes of steel spheres and scattered these on both sides of the divide, so they look as if someone has just rolled them across the grass.

The existing yew hedge—tall, dark and gloomily solid as only yew can become—was also given a pick-me-up and is now almost unrecognisable. Its height was significantly reduced and the top subtly sloped, but, more than that, it's been fractured, opening up gaps through which you can look towards a handful of yew cubes set out across the grass.

‘The steel spheres look as if someone had just rolled them across the grass’



Preceding pages: The garden wraps around the house, softening the architecture with plantings of grasses and herbaceous perennials. *Above left:* The eleagnus in the courtyard is underplanted with wiry-stemmed Australian ivy. *Above:* Looking over the cantilevered deck towards the pruned *Catalpa bignonioides* Nana. *Right:* Stepping-stone granite setts. *Far right:* Steel spheres mark the line of the ha-ha

Everything at Foxwood appears easy, yet it's all been carefully thought through, with sightlines radiating from the interior and views perfectly framed. Similarly, the broad pale timbers in the kitchen have been matched with the limewashed boards on the deck outside where you can sit and look out over the lawn and the oval dew pond.

Mr Walter has book-ended the lawn with two big planting beds of hardy herbaceous perennials. Early in the year, there are alliums and tulips followed by oriental poppies and *Valeriana pyrenaica*, but the planting is geared towards high summer, with a mixture >





The curved white-marble sculpture on the lawn is by William Peers. In the foreground is a loosely structured perennial bed with persicaria

of late-flowering sanguisorbas, *Dianthus carthusianorum*, *Persicaria* Firedance and *Eupatorium maculatum* Riesenschirm.

No detail is overlooked. A small side path made of setts has been planted with thymes that spill out in soft purple rills. By breaking up the setts into blocks, Mr Walter has avoided creating a solid path. In the same way, the curved rows of hornbeam hedges that disguise an awkwardly sloped area above the vegetable beds have been fragmented. The setts in the courtyard have been laid at 90° angles and a shadow gap has been left where two hard edges meet.

It is this collaboration that, in the end, makes the garden work so well. When the plantsman designer wants pots to plant ferns along the wall of the courtyard, the architectural designer has bespoke concrete planters made that fit exactly into the space. It was Mr Green who had the idea of making three squares—one a brimming water feature and one the eleagnus bed. The third was going to be lawn until Mr Walter suggested using *hakonechloa*, the Japanese forest grass, which just nudges ahead with its effervescent green foliage that's tinged red in autumn.

It is only as the visitor takes the final corner past the orchard of crab apples, the new planting of pink-stemmed birches and

How to create a garden for a new-build home

- Plant a lot of mature trees and shrubs to create a backdrop for the garden, to give height and to screen unwanted elements
- Link the new garden to the landscape by taking ideas, colours and textures inspired by and related to plants, materials, colours and textures of the vernacular. Here, the red brick of the old farm is picked up in the rusted Corten steel that's been used to edge the paths and beds and in the coppery tints throughout the planting
- Allow for large planting beds and plant perennials as these get off to a quick start and will perform well in their first season. Add bulbs to give spring interest
- A new-build can seem harsh and angular—counter this by choosing plants that provide movement and a lightness and airiness in their forms. With their filigree canopy, birch trees are a good choice, as are grasses that will bend and flow
- Soften walls by planting them with climbers such as Boston ivy, *Parthenocissus tricuspidata* var. *veitchii*, *Hydrangea petiolaris*, Virginia creeper, wisteria and roses
- Yew cubes are created by planting a group of four yews. Plant some with 3ft-high specimens and others with 6ft-high ones to create variety. After a couple of seasons' pruning, the yews will have grown together

late-flowering *Aster divaricatus* and heads around the back of the house that almost the finest touch is revealed. After a hot, dry summer, the mono-plantings of the feather-reed grass *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* Karl Foerster have never looked finer. Tall, straight and biscuit-coloured, these rectangular blocks are dramatically staggered with almost luminous blocks of *hakonechloa*—and all merely to screen the parked cars. 🐾

The Plant Specialist nursery, Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire (www.theplant-specialist.co.uk), stocks a range of plants and offers a design and landscaping service. It will have a stand at the Great Dixter Autumn Plant Fair on October 6 and 7. Simon Green launched www.moholondon.com to create buildings with a difference, with a team of specialist collaborators who like to blend art with architecture