

SUNNY SIDE UP

Drought-resistant, sun-loving plants bring a hint of the Mediterranean to a hot, dry corner of Kent

WORDS KENDRA WILSON PHOTOGRAPHS RACHEL WARNE

IN BRIEF

Name The Granary.

What Dry gravel garden, sheltered on three sides.

Where Near Sevenoaks, Kent.

Size 450 square metres.

Soil Sandy, with sedimentary rock; slightly alkaline.

Climate Warm and dry.

Hardiness zone USDA 8

When somebody compliments your garden it can come as something of a shock – that is, if you are the type of person who looks out of the window only to see a list of chores. Alex Mitchell, gardens editor of the *London*

Evening Standard, doesn't have this problem, not because she's immodest but because she is completely absorbed by all the good things about her garden. "When my mother says that I really must get on top of the weeds," says Alex, "I'm thinking: what weeds? I'm not seeing any."

Alex's mother lives next door, in the house where Alex grew up in Kent. Her own house is a converted farm building, her garden a former yard, encased in concrete for as long as anyone can remember. It was a useful place to ride a bike amid the machinery; now Alex's two boys dodge flowerbeds as they cycle around.

Being a former farmyard, the garden is enclosed by buildings and walls on three sides, while it is entirely exposed on the eastern side to an uninterrupted view of fields and woods. The garden is on a plateau, dropping away like a giant ha-ha before the farm flows out seamlessly towards the horizon. Or rather, this was the case before a simple wire fence was installed, to separate Alex's sheep from her plants. The fence has had the unexpected bonus of bringing a more human scale to the garden. "We learned that it was better to have something more enclosed," says Alex. "Before, it felt as though you were dropping off the edge of the world."

Alex was never tempted to make a classic English garden, here in the county known as the Garden of England. Rolling topography is referenced in the curves that she mapped out with a pencil and paper, creating flowerbeds and generous paths of Brendon gravel, with no grass in the foreground at

Left The east-facing garden looks out over the big open skies of Kent. A Brendon gravel path winds around curved beds that are filled with texture and subtle shades of green from *Melianthus major*, *Rosmarinus officinalis* and *Stachys byzantina* 'Silver Carpet'.

INSTEAD OF GREEN FORMALITY, THERE ARE FLOWERBEDS AND GENEROUS PATHS

▷ all. Instead of green formality, she has made a dry garden that is more obviously connected with its farmyard origins and with Alex's own history.

Besides being a fruit farmer's daughter from Kent, she has a primal affinity for an equatorial climate, connected with her mother. "We spent a lot of time as kids in Chile because my mum grew up there," says Alex. "My grandparents had a garden by the coast which I loved playing in." When her cousins visited, they pointed out that she'd made a Chilean garden. When Alex looked through old photos of her grandparents' house, she recognised the beaten earth paths, edged with rocks. "I had unconsciously tried to recreate a place where I'd felt very happy as a child."

She has been influenced by Beth Chatto's garden as well, which is only slightly further north from Alex's, on the sunny side of England. It would have been madness not to have taken inspiration from the seminal drought garden in Essex, given its similarly unpromising beginnings as a car park, with soil that was not only compacted but low-grade. "My soil is made up of chert, a sedimentary mix of flint and clay," explains Alex. ▷

SHAPELY BORDERS

When Alex planned her garden, she was influenced by the shapes of fields and woodland in the distance: "They're quite curvy," she explains. "And I thought that the curve of the garden might work with them." She realised after initial planting that she needed to add evergreen structure, a kind of central spine, since many of the plants fire their seeds out into the path, and has included a series of fastigate yews that will grow into shaggily tall, dark verticals. Leaf shapes and long-lasting colour come to the fore in this drought garden, as well as the direction of trunks and stems. The bulky, evergreen *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii* (1) "loves this garden". *Stachys byzantina* 'Silver Carpet' (2) is well-named, forming a soft mat at the front of the border that stays in place in winter. Seasonal ground-level colour comes from *Oenothera macrocarpa* (3): "It sprawls around with massive lemon sherbet flowers that come out toward the end of the day," says Alex. *Tithonia rotundifolia* (4), adds a bolt of orange, as well as height, along with darkening seedheads of *Echinops ritro* (5) while tall and mid-height grasses *Stipa gigantea* (6) and *Stipa tenuissima* (7) look good throughout autumn and early winter. *Cerastium tomentosum* (8) is another weed-smothering silver mat and complements the bold pink *Hylotelephium spectabile* (9), which pulls in the bees along with wiry *Verbena bonariensis* (10).





NEW PLANTS ARE WATERED IN; THEN, BETH CHATTO-STYLE, THEY ARE LEFT TO FEND FOR THEMSELVES

▷ “Underground, you have a pan which feels like solid rock.” Instead of black gold, she has stony sand.

After Alex and her wife Donna said goodbye to the builders, they discovered that only a meagre amount of topsoil had been spread on the outlined beds. “I started to dig and found that the ground was almost all subsoil,” says Alex. There was also an astounding amount of brick, concrete and lime mortar. Her solution was to grow things that like those conditions: “And the things that like it really do like it.”

In the hottest, driest corner of the garden is a table where the family eats in the early evening. Out of reach of the hose stands a thriving mastic tree (*Pistacia lentiscus*), a familiar sight around the Mediterranean, along with the tough *Rosa rugosa*. *Stachys*, sedum and the glaucous, reptilian *Euphorbia rigida*, looking happiest when hot, hug the edges of the central bed. Drought-resistant foliage that is needle-like, silver, narrow or all three is joined by the vibrant *Melianthus major* and prostrate *Oenothera macrocarpa*.

Gravel being relentlessly attractive to self-seeding plants, *Verbascum bombyciferum* and *Verbena bonariensis* are constantly on the move, looking for maximum light and minimum company. Alex’s ambition for the central bed is to create a fin-shaped profile, with vertical evergreens such as fastigate yews combined with smaller trees such as *Rhus typhina* that will grow into interesting shapes.

Alex’s blindness to failure is useful. “Loads of plants have died. I just leave those ones and move on.” New plants are watered in; otherwise, Beth Chatto-style, they are left to fend for themselves, boosted by homemade compost. “It doesn’t feel as though I’m in England when I’m here,” says Alex. Against a warm wall, a fig tree heavy with fruit is the perfect emblem for this garden. □

Left Beneath the shade of a dark-leaved maple, *Acer platanoides* ‘Royal Red’, table and benches, made from untreated teak, looks out on to Alex’s carefully structured central border where compact forms of low-growing plants such as the silver-leaved *Santolina chamaecyparissus*, contrast with the airy height provided by *Gaura lindheimeri* and *nemanthele lessoniana*.