

The *starring* ROLE

The gardens at one Cotswold hotel are being turned into a five-star asset

WORDS AND PICTURES BY MANDY BRADSHAW

Once, gardens were the scenery of the hotel world, planted with labour-saving schemes designed to give a comfortable background but never given the starring role. Now attitudes are changing and increasingly hotels are recognising that a beautiful garden is as much of a draw as the building itself.

The Lords of the Manor hotel in Lower Slaughter is one of those newcomers to this new way of thinking and what was once a rather neglected asset is slowly being given a new lease of life.

The project to overhaul the eight-acre site that surrounds the beautiful 17th century Cotswold stone building began 18 months ago with the appointment of Chelsea medal-winning designer Julie Toll as a consultant. Julie, who is based in Hertfordshire, was already known to the hotel's owners as she had worked on their private London garden.

"When I was brought in the garden was in a very run down state," she recalls. "There was a lack of flower and colour, which you need in a hotel."

It would have been easy to rush in Ground Force style and do an instant makeover but this is more of a long-term scheme. Julie, who trained at Pershore College of Horticulture, works to a strict budget and the implications for maintenance are a constant consideration.

"However good a design is, it's only as good as the people who look after it," she observes.

Hence, with only two full-timers tending the garden, every new development has to be carefully evaluated.

Getting the foundations right is the key to success in any plot and the first elements to be tackled, although not the most glamorous, were important. The hotel is blessed with a natural water feature – the River Windrush runs through the lower part of the garden – and there is



Colourful flowers now greet guests at the hotel

a small island and waterfall. Over the years the wall surround the island had become damaged and the water was running over it, rather than down the fall. Repairing it was, admits Julie, a boring but essential job.

Tree surgery was also high on the list of

priorities, both getting rid of potentially dangerous dead wood and lifting the canopy of the many mature trees to allow more light into the garden.

More exciting has been the creation this year of a bog garden in what was once a pretty neglected spot. ▶



The newly planted bog garden has transformed a neglected corner



Old fruit trees and box hedging give the Walled Garden year-round structure

“There was Japanese knotweed and every other problem weed you can imagine.”

With the help of a landscape contractor, Julie reshaped the banks, altered the course of water that ran through, including making a dam to create small pools, and brought in several large pieces of Cotswold stone to add more interest. What was possibly once an old icehouse has had its entrance widened and now acts as a small grotto at one end, while chipped bark paths allow you to wander through the area.

The planting is mixed and designed to provide interest throughout the year. The starting point was an existing mature

Cornus mas and this has been used as a focal point. More trees, including amelanchier, magnolia and liquidambar, have been added to this along with moisture-lovers, such as gunnera, rodgersia, rheum and hostas, including the variegated ‘Patriot’ and beautiful ‘Devon Green’. Easy ground cover includes *Viola cornuta* ‘Alba’, *Bergenia* ‘Abendglut’ and ‘Overture’, which have a rich red autumn colour, and the dainty *Geranium* ‘Katherine Adele’, which produces tiny pink flowers with a darker stripe over many months. An added bonus is the dark flush to its deeply lobed leaves.

“They are all common plants but

unusual varieties,” comments head gardener Martin Bain, who has worked at the Lords of the Manor since January.

Move further down the garden and the mood becomes even more informal with wild angelica and a large clump of skunk cabbage. The island is home to cherry laurel, dicentra, ferns, polygonum and a startling show of pink lythrum. Reached only by wading over the top of the waterfall, it’s a space that has to be fairly self-reliant.

“Everything on there has got to be pretty tough,” says Martin, “as it’s not going to get a lot of attention.”

First impressions can be everything and an important area to be tackled was ►



Above: *Geranium* 'Katherine Adele'

Right: Lavender is used extensively around the terrace

the garden around the hotel's entrance. What was a scruffy, narrow border has been transformed into a colourful summer and early autumn display in two L-shaped beds.

It follows a traditional English style – a particular favourite with the hotel's many Japanese guests – with a colour scheme of mainly pinks, mauves and blues, including asters, *Verbena bonariensis*, dark-leaved heuchera and nepeta, with again good varieties of commonly grown things. *Sedum* 'Matrona' has the bonus of lovely dark stems, there's a lipstick pink phlox and the soft pink rose 'Hermosa'. Indeed, part of Julie's skill lies in mixing different shades of the same colour: *Salvia nemorosa* 'Amethyst' and perovskia, with an accent plant such as yellow coreopsis.

Mixed borders further along the lawn have been given a more robust treatment with a combination of miscanthus, limey *Cornus alba* 'Aurea', polygonum, geranium and hesperis, for evening scent. Again, there is the slightly unusual, this time *Rosa* 'La Sevillana', which has fire engine red blooms.

Some plants, such as a deep red hemerocallis, were in the garden when Julie started but were scattered around the plot.

"I brought them together to make one clump and I'm going to divide it again and move some. There were some nice plants in the garden but they were dotted around and not arranged in any sort of order or repeat pattern.

"The way you use plants and associate them makes the difference between it looking a mess and looking a coherent scheme."

Elsewhere, the original planting merely needed a little tweaking to give it a new



lease of life: taking out plants to leave a simple arrangement of *Stipa tenuissima* surrounded by lavender in one bed has created a more restrained and effective design.

The hotel is blessed with a garden walled by beautiful Cotswold stone and this has the potential to become a real gem. Already, gnarled old fruit trees that form a group at the centre and clipped box hedges that divide the space give it character and year-round interest and, such is the importance of the box, there has been extensive work to counteract the effects of box blight.

The terrace is the other area that has seen a lot of attention with a combination of lavender, *Erigeron karvinskianus* and sedum. Variegated vinca is used as ground cover and standard bay in a pot helps to hide toilet windows.

"It's smart but not loud. It's quite subtle," comments Martin.

The surrounding borders have a mix of planting, including Japanese anemones, achillea, phlox, stipa, salvia, echinops and

rudbeckia. Giant onopordum make a dramatic feature, there are brightly coloured alstroemeria at the entrance to the garden and huge drifts of shasta daisies, asters and ligularia. Traces of the garden's past are seen in old espaliered pears along the walls and there are plans to eventually cover the boundary with roses.

It's all part of a long term vision for the garden that includes a wild flower meadow along the river, rejuvenating the lawns, dredging the bottom lake, revamping the walled garden borders, introducing more vegetables to the small box-edged kitchen garden, and further extending the planting into the car park to give an extra welcome to guests.

It will be a gradual transformation but one that should see the gardens promoted from chorus line to starring role. ■

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