

An innovative planting of low-maintenance heathers carpets the sloping raised bed that encloses the garden's main seating area.

# *Living* LANDSCAPE

Garden designer Helen Thomas succeeded in her desire to create a space that would sit within the wider landscape when she began working on her own garden in Surrey

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**W**hen Surrey garden designer Helen Thomas and her husband moved into Hill Farm just outside Dorking in 1997, with a baby on

the way, they had no idea of the adventure that lay ahead of them. The house is well named, since it sits on the side of a hill with panoramic views in every direction, taking in the Downs, the Weald and the Surrey Hills. The previous owners were not gardeners. "What we inherited was a sloping field with a few mature fruit trees and alas these slowly succumbed to disease and wind," says Helen.

"I'd had a fairly high-pressure career in HR, and wanted to find something that I could do for myself and yet be sufficiently flexible for family life," she explains. She spent five years with the National Trust at Polesden Lacey, "which must have sown the vital seed for my future life working with plants".

Helen went on to graduate with distinction from The Garden Design School, under the tutelage of Robin Templar-Williams and Moira Farnham. "All my skills of spatial awareness and planting combinations come from that course. They also taught me to draw, which is something I couldn't do before. Now I do all my designs the old-fashioned way, giving my clients hand-drawn and hand-coloured plans."

The decision to design the family garden came from an unusual prompt, however. "We'd been doing a lot of building alterations in the house, and the architect presented me with a drawing of what he thought the garden could look like. I thought: 'I could do better than that.' So, in 2009, Helen took on the daunting task of being her own client. Her first action was to sit the family down to establish what each of them had on their wish list.

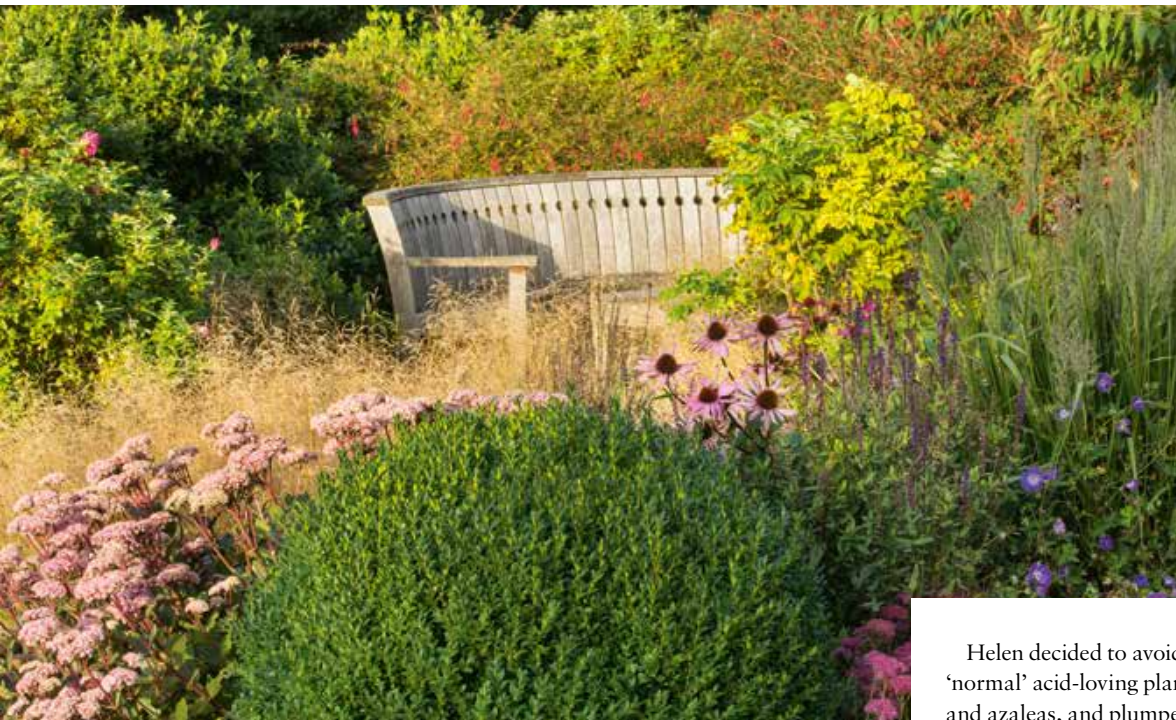
"The original garden wasn't much more than a sloping football pitch and the answer to my rather foolish question went along the lines of zip wires, goal posts and all sorts of other paraphernalia. Despite this 'helpful' information, I decided to forge ahead and follow the process that we had been taught on the design course," she says.

The garden at Hill Farm consists of almost two acres and the house sits in the centre. As there is no obvious 'front and back' to the garden, Helen's design had to flow from all views, despite the changes in light and differing soils around the site. "I knew that the garden was predominantly sandy acid loam," she says, "and being on a slope it's exceedingly well-drained. As the garden was virtually a blank canvas, I didn't have any indicator plants to tell me where the pockets of clay were."



**Above** Miscanthus and ornamental grasses in a sweeping border that also includes dusky-pink *hylolephium* (sedums). **Left** Heathers, ferns and silver birch combine in a contemporary way. **Right** The spreading branches of *Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Carpet' edge steps to the lawn.





**Clockwise from top**  
Helen's favourite grass, *Deschampia cespitosa* in front of a Gaze Burvill bench backed by a fuchsia; garden designer and owner Helen Thomas; the lawn follows the site's natural slope; a container of erigeron, gaura and achillea.



*Helen planted heathers in seasonal ripples, producing flower colour from November into early spring*

Helen decided to avoid the temptation to plant the 'normal' acid-loving plants such as rhododendrons and azaleas, and plumped instead for using heathers in a large drift around the terrace, and dotted around the garden. "I grew up on the Yorkshire Moors, and although heather might seem an unusual choice for a garden now, it represented a little bit of nostalgia for my childhood," she explains. "We had little ones running around everywhere and I didn't want to have to worry about plants being bashed with footballs. Once the heathers had formed a thick carpet, it really was job done. I also wanted something that would be green all year round, and I also liked the idea that they would be 'different'."

She planted them in seasonal ripples, producing flower colour from November into early spring. Early on the summer cultivars suffered badly from a couple of late-winter bouts of heavy snow, but some survivors are now popping up in odd pockets. "As soon as they finish flowering, I run the clippers over them and use a little spring tine rake to flick out the foliage that falls into the cracks," Helen explains.

Despite the family's desire to turn the garden into an adventure playground, the first thing that Helen did was to soften the edges of the lawn with bold sweeping curves. Even the small football pitch at the end of the garden received this treatment. "The whole garden is on a slope, except for the flat area at the bottom. The previous owners of the house next door built a tennis court, and the spoil from these excavations was 'donated' to Hill Farm to create this platform," she explains.

Helen was keen not to do anything to change the levels in the garden, leaving it as a natural slope. She has, however, used some old railway sleepers in odd corners to provide support where she felt it was needed. "I feel that if you start to change the levels too dramatically, the design will begin to jar. Don't be afraid of simple paths to cut through planting."

With the greatest of ease Helen has created large borders, and mixed plants within them. She feels





*“I feel that a good garden has to give you space to breathe and an indefinable feeling of calm”*

that for a large garden you have to be bold, and the secret of her success is to have a small palette of plants, but to use them in large numbers.

“One of my favourite plants is *Deschampsia cespitosa*,” she notes. “It may not be the most stunning, but it’s very easy and it looks great with the sun behind it, billowing in the wind. I must have around 50 to 100 of them around the garden.”

The garden reaches a crescendo of colour in autumn, but Helen is satisfied that every season brings its individual joy. The main structure of her grand design was in place for her first National Garden Scheme opening in 2013, although there have been some changes since then. She welcomes visitors every other year, and this year the date to note is 15 September 2019. “The grasses will be at their peak then, and there will be lots of other late perennial colours, although it will be a little early for the autumn foliage display,” she explains.

Helen describes herself as a minimalist, but it’s clear that her triumph as a garden designer lies within her landscape philosophy. She is a devotee of Arne Maynard, a modern-day Capability Brown, who draws out the essence of a place so that the garden relates and responds to its surroundings.

“I look at the vernacular of the property and the land beyond it, and whatever is in the middle has to connect. When I enter a garden for the first time, I can normally spot the difficult-but-easily-sorted elements that the owner has become ‘blind’ to. I think that people are over-fixated with their boundaries, using every inch of their garden right to the fence. As a result they can end up with odd and uncomfortable spaces. Unless a pergola or water feature is going to do something, I persuade them to leave them out.”

“I feel that a good garden has to give you space to breathe and an indefinable feeling of calm. I think that the concept of garden rooms is now moving aside for more naturalistic spaces, which we’ve seen at recent Chelsea Flower Shows.”

Would Helen be tempted to design a garden at Chelsea herself? “That’s an interesting question,” she says. “It would be nice, but with teenage children, May is already so full of exam stresses – perhaps it’s something to consider for the future!” ■

**Hill Farm, Dorking, Surrey RH4 3JY opens for the National Garden Scheme on 15 September, 11.30am to 4.30pm. [ngs.org.uk](http://ngs.org.uk); [helenthomasdesign.co.uk](http://helenthomasdesign.co.uk)**

## Design IDEAS

Helen’s advice on how to work with a garden designer

**Start the conversation** before any hard landscaping has been laid down to ensure that all services are connected to the overall design.

**List the practical things** you need, and then decide how you want to feel in your garden: safe, enclosed, nostalgic, calm or energised? Don’t add anything unnecessary and work with what you’ve got.

**If your garden sits** within beautiful surroundings, use native trees so that you blend in with the landscape rather than jarring against it.

**If you tend to fiddle with** your garden, a garden designer can give you a long-term design and planting plan to work with so you’ll avoid making costly mistakes.

**Take a long-term view** of the project so that the major plants you choose have time and space in which to develop naturally.

**Take a chair** and sit in different spaces to work out where you can maximise potential views within and beyond the garden.

**Don’t fixate** over your boundaries.