



Winter's tapestry

Helen Thomas's garden, in the Surrey Hills, where bark paths run through drifts of heathers *Erica x darleyensis* 'J.W. Porter' AGM and *E. carnea* f. *alba* 'Springwood White'. Tall stands of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Malepartus' mark the boundary between garden and Ranmore Common.

Helen Thomas's inspirational Surrey garden proves the seasonal value of often underappreciated heathers

Author: **Vanessa Berridge**, garden historian and international garden writer.
Photography: **Marianne Majerus**

If you think of heathers as just static ground cover, a winter visit to Helen Thomas's garden in the Surrey Hills will come as a revelation. Helen has planted drifts of purple, white and green heathers, which flower throughout the year and reach a peak of interest in winter. Stem colour, shape and texture, cherry blossom, great stands of sunlit miscanthus, and rich fragrance also contribute at Hill Farm to a seasonal tapestry of remarkable depth. Low-key and green in summer, Helen's garden catches the soft light in September with late-flowering perennials such as *Echinacea*, sedums, *Persicaria* and *Geranium Rozanne* ('Gerwat') AGM. Momentum gathers through winter, and continues into spring with snowdrops, hellebores, narcissus and bluebells in shady woodland areas.

The garden has evolved over the two decades Helen and her husband Martin have lived in the red-brick Edwardian house, once a pair of farmworkers' cottages. Their house stands in the middle of the 0.75ha (1¾ acre) garden, sloping away

in all directions. Therefore the two main challenges were to make sense of the contours and to create attractive vistas from each of the windows.

Initially, Helen was constrained by the needs of two small children: walled banks by the kitchen were planted with big shrubs and fenced to stop her toddlers toppling off. 'But they soon learnt how to climb fences,' she says, 'and would fall from a greater height. Also, all we could see from the kitchen window were fences and shrubs. Looking out, you need good shapes and contrast.'

In 2008 renovations to the house forced a rethink, with Helen designing a seating area by the kitchen. Her pleasure in doing this prompted a career change from human resources to garden design. Having completed her training at Painshill Park, Surrey, in 2009, she applied her newly acquired skills to her own garden. She worked with the contours: rather than terracing the hillside, she used planting to outline the steep slopes and laid lawn where the ground is flatter. Helen also looked beyond the garden at the Surrey Hills and the views up to Ranmore Common. She chose local species wherever possible. Birches, ferns, and heathers thrive in the acidic Surrey soil, with many ferns arriving of their own volition. Semicircles of

The garden rolls out seamlessly towards the Surrey Hills. Helen has planted carpets of heather, chosen for their leaf and flower colour across the seasons. Here, trailing, pale *Erica carnea* f. *alba* 'Springwood White' AGM softens the edges of her brick and flint walls.



'Amid carpets of heather floats purple moor-grass... shining with cobwebs, dew and frost in low winter light.'



Purple *Erica x darleyensis* 'J.W. Porter' (far left), happy in neutral to alkaline soil, mingles with paler *E. carnea* 'Lohse's Rubin' and *Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Carpet' AGM, beneath *Prunus x subhirtella* 'Autumnalis' blossom.

In late winter, *Helleborus argutifolius* AGM greets visitors as they approach the front door (left).

beech hedging were planted for focal points; the main herbaceous border of grasses and perennials is backed by a hedge of native hazel, hawthorn, field maple and spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*). The hedge is kept low, blurring the border between garden and the North Downs ridge beyond.

Designing with stone and heathers

Around the kitchen patio, Helen built walls of brick and flint in the Surrey vernacular. The patio itself is paved with Pennant stone from Cardiff docks, a nod to her husband's Welsh origins. 'The pieces were a hotch-potch of sizes and some were carved with dockers' initials, so they give real character,' she says. Tumbling above the walls are swaths of purple winter-flowering *Erica carnea* 'Lohse's Rubin' and *E. x darleyensis* 'J.W. Porter', recalling for Helen the moors of Yorkshire, her home county.

Contrasting with the purple heathers is *E. carnea* f. *alba* 'Springwood White', its slightly trailing habit softening the sandstone wall edge, along with *Euonymus fortunei* 'Silver Queen' and sprawling grey-green *Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Carpet'. Amid carpets of heather floats purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *caerulea* 'Poul Petersen', shining with cobwebs, dew and frost in low winter light. >>



Red seedheads of sedums give structural interest throughout winter, among wispy grass, snowdrops and the large dark leaves of *Bergenia cordifolia* 'Purpurea'.



Red flowers of *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Diane' AGM (left) contrast with pale hellebores and snowdrops. Helen's studio, overlooks her uplifting winter garden (below).



As a link, *Molinia* is also planted in other beds around the house, and in the main herbaceous border across the lawn, their foliage 'like fireworks in autumn.' *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Malepartus' gives winter-long structure to this border.

Effective planting combinations

Heathers (some 600 plants) flow beneath frothy white blossom of *Prunus x subhirtella* 'Autumnalis', and under multistemmed white birches (*Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii*), which stand out against a dark green holly hedge. Elsewhere, peeling cinnamon bark of *Acer griseum* creates a striking effect.

An early project was the creation of a pond at the lowest part of the garden. Dogwoods are planted down the slope and around the pond, where they are illuminated by winter sun. Red-stemmed *Cornus alba* 'Sibirica' AGM is mixed with green *C. sericea* 'Flaviramea' AGM and glowing orange *C. sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire', together setting off shimmering white bark of *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii* 'Grayswood Ghost' AGM.

The air is heavy with the scent of witch hazels, in particular yellow spiders of *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Pallida' AGM, with the lily-of-the-valley fragrance of creamy skimmias along the steps through the shrub bed towards the house.

Despite its complexity, this garden is relatively low maintenance. For two or three years while the heather carpet was establishing itself, Helen needed to weed constantly, but now when the

Inspiring winter planting at Hill Farm



Hill Farm, Logmore Lane, Westcott, Dorking, Surrey RH4 4JY; helen@helenthomasdesign.co.uk; 07771 962221.

Size: 0.7ha (1¾ acre). **Age:** 8 years.

Soil: sandy loam with pockets of clay.

Standout winter plants: long-flowering heathers; white-stemmed birches against a dark holly hedge; winter cherry; cinnamon barked *Acer griseum*; cornus; structural trees and shrubs with good stem colour.

Garden Style: a semi-formal yet flowing garden, with shapes, textures and planting chosen to relate to the landscape beyond.

Open: 15 September for National Garden Scheme (ngs.org.uk).

flowers are over, the heads are simply snipped off. *Miscanthus* is cut down in early March, its prunings acting as mulch for new growth.

Heathers have long been an unfashionable choice of plant among gardeners, but Helen's garden makes you question why, especially as she claims that they are 'completely dog, children and football-proof'. Perhaps it's time for a revival of these undervalued stars of the winter garden. ○

Resources

Plants mentioned are listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2018*, and online at rhs.org.uk/findaplant

See the National Plant Collection at the newly replanted Heather Landscape at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey.