

IN BRIEF

Name Hill Farm.

What A low-maintenance, sloped garden.

Where Surrey.

Size One-and-three-quarter acres.

Soil Free-draining, slightly acid loam.

Climate Temperate and north-facing.

Hardiness zone USDA 8.

A rich tapestry of heathers, including *Erica carnea* f. *alba* 'Springwood White' and *E. x darleyensis* 'J.W. Porter', create seamless rivers of colour in Helen's steeply sloping garden. "I had to do some weeding until it all knitted together," she says, "but since then it has really looked after itself."

Rising to the challenge

Faced with a steeply sloping garden, Helen Thomas has come up with a design that enhances rather than fights the contours of the land

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Helen Thomas's assured garden rolls down gracefully towards the Surrey Hills. Below the house, the main terrace has been cut out of the slope, with walls constructed of local flint and softened by a colourful carpet of low-maintenance heathers.

Helen Thomas is an extremely lucky woman. The approach to her house looks like something out of a children's book, as it passes a moss-covered church, trees that arch and bend in the breeze and a pond and meadow that run alongside stone walls. It evokes a different time when everything was freer, greener and less complicated.

When Helen moved to this house, the garden was little more than grass, and mature trees and hedges. Unsure about the ideas her architects initially proposed for the garden, Helen came up with a plan that would provide space for her children to play in, while preserving the sloping garden's natural contours. "The house is called Hill Farm," she says. "I didn't want it to become Terrace Farm, so keeping to the contours seemed the right thing to do."

Helen has indeed worked brilliantly with those contours, and she enjoyed the process of planning the space so much she decided to retrain as a garden designer, enabling her to bring her newly acquired skills to the project. While many designers would have been

tempted to create terraces here, Helen has enhanced the steep slope by using heathers and shrubs to accentuate and mimic the movement of the land. Sweeping areas of planting separate sections of the garden, with pathways of grass and wood chippings running like ribbons between the levels. As the soil is acid loam, many neighbouring gardens are full of rhododendrons and camellias, but Helen didn't want to follow the same pattern. "I wanted to show that you could plant in a different, lighter and more modern way, using grasses as well as the more traditional heathers," she says.

Initially, her choice of traditional heathers was practical as much as aesthetic. "I had a young family and heathers were dog- and child-proof," says Helen. She started with a mix of the magnificent mauve *Erica x darleyensis* 'J.W. Porter', and the white *Erica carnea* f. *alba* 'Springwood White', planted as a matrix with the Irish heath, *Daboecia cantabrica*. Although unable to compete with the ericas, this Irish heath still stubbornly pops up every so often throughout the border, providing sustenance for pollinators in summer.

In winter, the ericas offer a rich tapestry of colour around the house, and in the long borders the grasses and sedums, which live well and die gracefully, are still impressive. ▷


Growing heathers

- **Hardy heathers are compact and evergreen shrubs** that can cope with exposure to wind and extreme cold.

- **Ericas typically flower in winter and spring**, and are more resilient in neutral and slightly alkaline soils. Callunas typically flower in the summer and autumn, and need a light, sandy and acid-rich soil. Daboecias can flower from spring to autumn and love an acid, sandy soil.

- **Prune heathers after flowering, to stop them becoming leggy.** Clip into the foliage rather than the woody stems as they won't recover, if pruned too hard.

- **To propagate, dig plants out in spring** then plant them deeper, so that a third is showing above ground. In autumn, the upper shoots should have rooted and you can plant them separately and discard the parent plant.

 Find the best heathers to grow at gardensillustrated.com/heathers



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8 KEY PLANTS

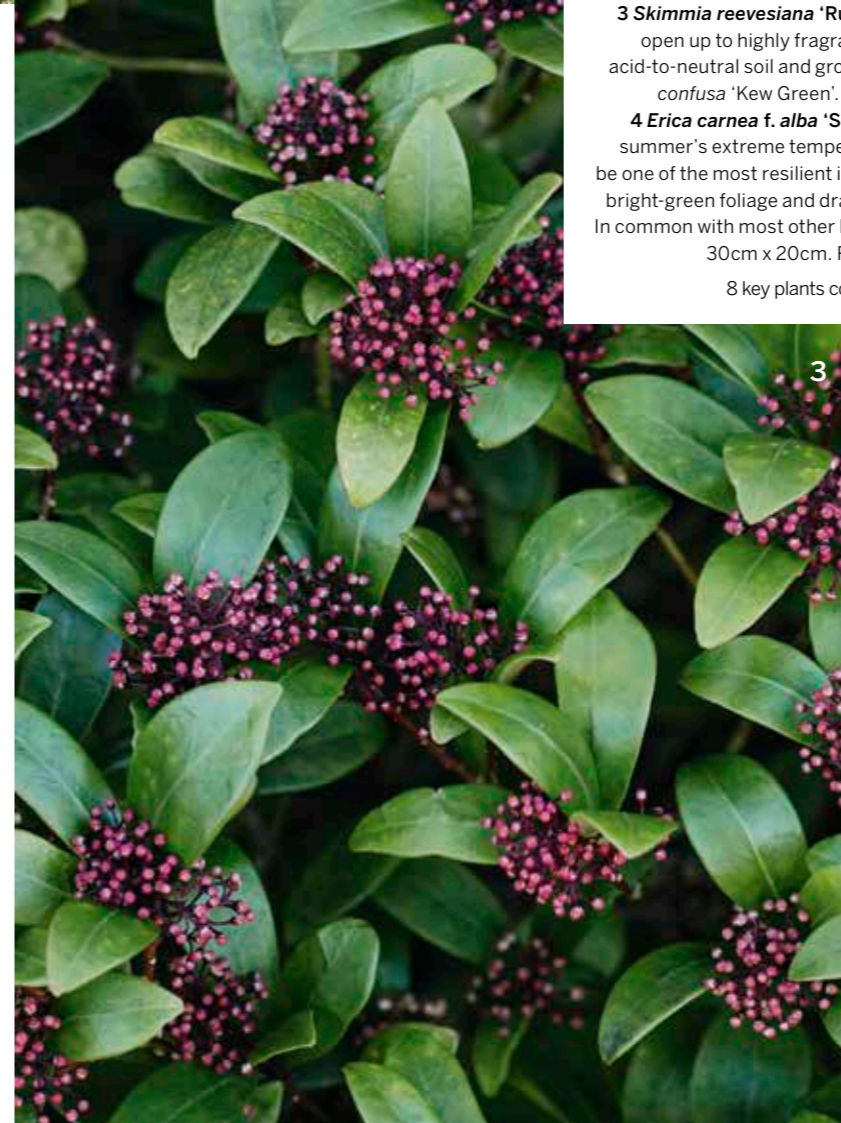
1 *Helleborus argutifolius* Offering apple-green freshness from January to March, this evergreen perennial is best grown in neutral-to-alkaline soil but is thriving in the acid soil at Hill Farm. 50cm x 90cm. AGM*. RHS H5, USDA 6a-8b†.

2 *Cyclamen coum* Flowers consistently from January through to March offering gorgeous pops of pink. It's a hardy perennial that will happily grow at the base of deciduous shrubs. 10cm x 10cm. USDA 4a-8b.

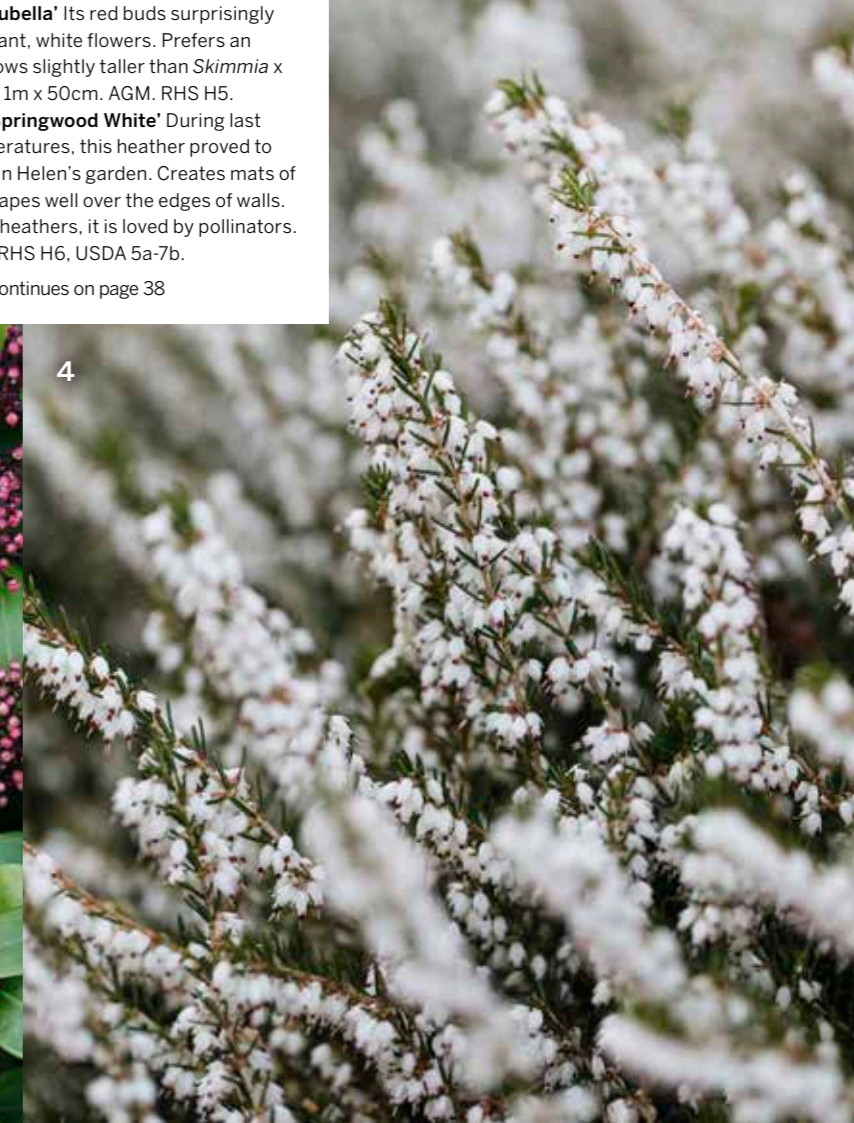
3 *Skimmia reevesiana* 'Rubella' Its red buds surprisingly open up to highly fragrant, white flowers. Prefers an acid-to-neutral soil and grows slightly taller than *Skimmia x confusa* 'Kew Green'. 1m x 50cm. AGM. RHS H5.

4 *Erica carnea* f. *alba* 'Springwood White' During last summer's extreme temperatures, this heather proved to be one of the most resilient in Helen's garden. Creates mats of bright-green foliage and drapes well over the edges of walls. In common with most other heathers, it is loved by pollinators. 30cm x 20cm. RHS H6, USDA 5a-7b.

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8 KEY PLANTS

5 *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Malepartus' This *Miscanthus* stands well throughout winter and is hardy to -15°C. It's a little tricky to move once established, so make sure you plant it in the right place. Best cut back in February. 2m x 1.2m. RHS H6, USDA 4a-9b.

6 *Prunus* 'Accolade' This early ornamental cherry with pale-pink blossom will thrive in full sun and any moist but well-drained soil. 8m x 5m. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 5a-8b.

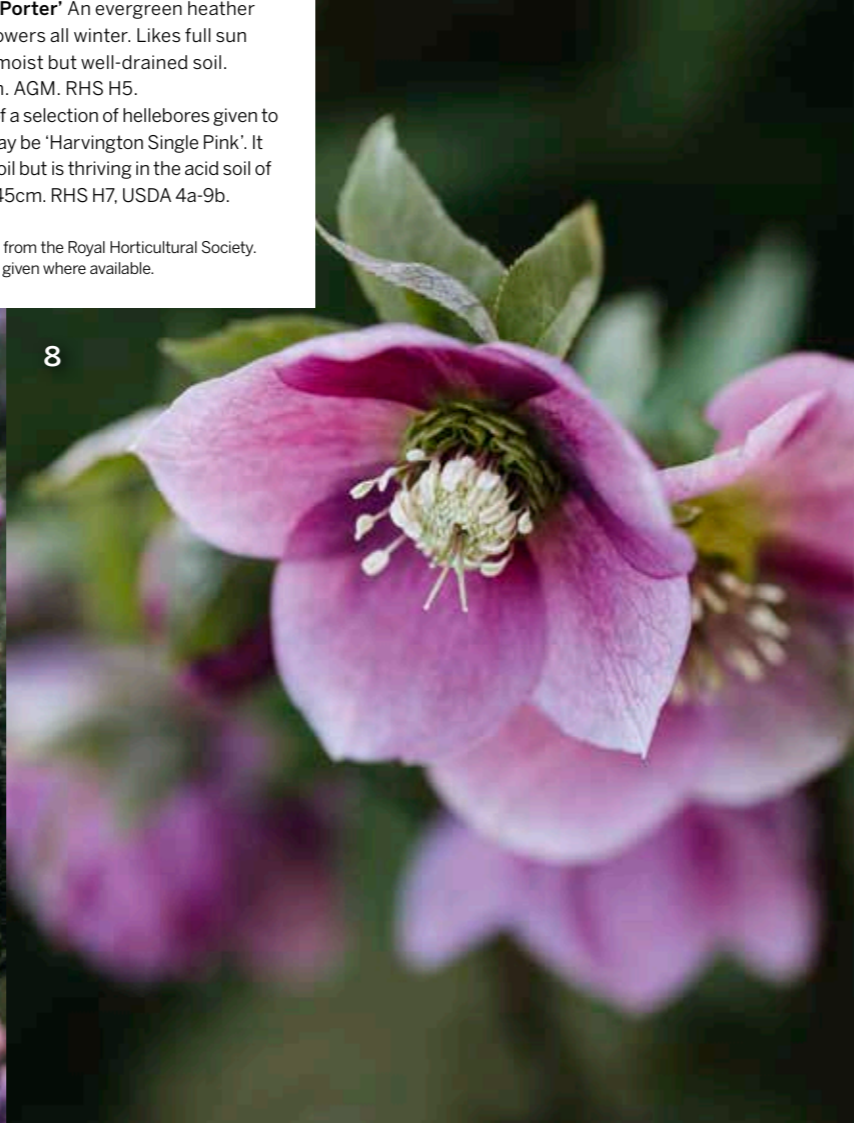
7 *Erica x darleyensis* 'J.W. Porter' An evergreen heather that offers pink-mauve flowers all winter. Likes full sun and an acid or neutral, moist but well-drained soil. 35cm x 55cm. AGM. RHS H5.

8 *Helleborus x hybridus* One of a selection of hellebores given to Helen by her father, which may be 'Harvington Single Pink'. It prefers a neutral-to-alkaline soil but is thriving in the acid soil of Helen's garden. 45cm x 45cm. RHS H7, USDA 4a-9b.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.
†Hardiness ratings given where available.



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▷ Grasses include *Calamagrostis brachytricha*, along with the upright *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Malepartus', and the shorter and more lax *M. sinensis* 'Abundance', which arches over the edges of the paths. Helen has dotted the lighter *Molinia caerulea* 'Poul Petersen' around to create a shimmer effect.

Hellebores, used to brighten areas – the apple-green *Helleborus argutifolius* is especially zingy at this time of year – have now colonised in swathes and spread across the borders. And beneath the deciduous shrubs you'll find purple and white patches where cyclamens are triumphantly pushing through.

Like many gardeners, Helen found last summer's sky-high temperatures and drought something of a wake-up call. "I was a bit worried about the heathers and some of them became scorched and looked stressed by the end of the summer," she says, "but they all made it through." Her winter garden was built to be self-sufficient and has no irrigation. "We have a 40,000 litre rainwater tank, which we use to water the garden intermittently," says Helen. "We also have a regime of mulching in spring and autumn with a thick layer of woodchip."

Hill Farm certainly lives up to its name, with its steep climb up through the heathers and perennials, punctuated by silver birches,

Betula utilis subsp. *jacquemontii*, before you emerge, blinking into a sunny, hilltop, kitchen garden. "This is currently my favourite part of the garden," says Helen. "It has allowed me to experiment, grow, eat and observe, and actually do some gardening. I've been thinking about wildlife gardening, and how everything in the garden is interconnected. It's given me the space to watch butterflies, bees and nature in general."

Her children now grown, Helen has an opportunity to introduce new planting into the mix that demonstrates her growing awareness of ecological interconnectedness. "The garden I built worked well as a family garden, but now we have different needs," she says. "I want to use the garden as a way of learning, experimenting and educating." It will be exciting to see how it evolves, but for now, Helen's garden is a triumph of winter beauty and a wonderful space to explore on a brisk winter's day. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Hill Farm, Logmore Lane, Westcott, Dorking, Surrey RH4 3JY. **Open** For NGS, 17 September 2023, 11.30am-4.30pm.

Find out more about Helen's work at helenthomasdesign.co.uk

Above Beneath a mature and statuesque pine, the zingy-green *Helleborus argutifolius* has spread and interspersed with ferns and *Galanthus nivalis*. These are repeated on the other side of the lawn, beneath the structural and striking winter skeletons of *Acer griseum* and *Betula utilis* subsp. *jacquemontii*.