



#### IN BRIEF

What Italian garden with English inflections.

Where Lazio, Italy.

Size One-and-a-half acres.

Soil Fertile and free-draining, with chunks of tufa (limestone).

Climate Short, hot and dry summers, with temperatures rising to 42°C and long, cold winters with temperatures dropping to -7°C.

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

A mown oval lawn creates a play area at this family garden set deep in the Italian countryside. Big-scale shrubberies seem to embrace the house, while beyond it the land rises up sharply towards an area of newly planted ornamental thickets.

# Sweeping promise

Vast lawns, roses and a mix of cottage-garden favourites give this stylish garden in central Italy a distinctly English flavour

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The terrace is where the garden begins, but it is not a viewing platform. Stuart's gardens are more about the journeys through than vistas



For the past century and more British garden designers have gone out to work in Italy, offering something of our romantic Arts and Crafts style to a different climate and culture. Cecil Pinsent, Russell Page and Dan Pearson are among the leading designers who have trodden this route. Stuart Barfoot – who runs an international practice from Brighton – in fact worked for a decade as head gardener at one of Pearson's Italian gardens, before going on to train as a designer himself. So he was well-placed when asked in 2012 to advise on a one-and-a-half acre garden surrounding a sturdy shuttered farmhouse in the agricultural countryside of northern Lazio.

"My first reaction whenever I go somewhere is to see what is there – the natural landscape," Stuart says. "It was very strong in this case. There's a huge energy. I think it's something to do with the Etruscan history of the area – a spiritual atmosphere."

But Stuart also saw something strangely familiar in the landscape. "It felt like it was almost English: rolling countryside, a lot of green. There are sheep and arable farms, and woodland, and lots of wildflowers in hedgerows. It does look a little like the Cotswolds."

Stuart's clients are a couple who had decided to relocate to Italy. "They'd had enough of London, I think," he says. "They said that they wanted a sanctuary from their busy working lives, something magical that transported them. They believe in [landscape] energies, which do not move in straight lines. That's why they wanted no straight edges and nothing geometric in the garden."

Accordingly, the main moves of Stuart's design are a substantial amorphous terrace on the southeast side of the house with two oval lawns spinning off it, enveloped by large-scale, shrub-dominated plantings, where roses – especially 'wild' sorts such as *Rosa forrestiana* and *R. californica* 'Plena' – create an 'English' feel. These large areas of planting might even be described as shrubberies, if that wasn't such an unfashionable term.

The terrace is where the garden begins, but it is emphatically not a viewing platform. Stuart says his gardens are more about the journeys through than vistas and perspectives.

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**Above** *Rosa* 'Rambling Rector', here used as a link plant, is one of a number of classic cottage-garden plants deployed by this English designer for his clients, who were previously based in London.

**Right above** The rose *R. Munstead Wood* (= 'Ausbarnard') makes a deep, rich pool of red amid clipped box and nepeta, gathered around a secluded terrace with seating. Beyond, white foxglove plumes and golden *Stipa gigantea* light up shadier areas.

**Right below** A mown path wends its way through the grassy slope above the swimming pool, with thickets including wild species roses such as *R. rubiginosa* and – beyond – more *R. 'Rambling Rector'*.





# USING PLANTS FOR ATMOSPHERE

The owners of this designed garden wanted an escape, a place of sanctuary and privacy that would be both embedded in the local landscape but also possessed of its own character – with more than a soupçon of Englishness about it. Designer Stuart Barfoot instilled all these characteristics by means of big, shrubby plantings – with roses to the fore – almost as if to cocoon the house.

*Rosa 'Scharlachglut'* is a key plant that works well in a large-scale context, Stuart says. "They are early into flower so they are never out-competed, and you get lovely reflections in the swimming pool. The huge, shiny red hips are a bonus in autumn, offset by grasses and asters." Species roses have been added to bolster the 'wild' atmosphere of the garden, which is surrounded by what Stuart calls "ornamental thickets". *Rosa forrestiana* is a vigorous and healthy wild rose with a cascading habit, smothered in rich-pink single flowers beloved by bees. It has small but attractive hips in the autumn. Stuart uses it to "provide height and create pools of density against which to work the softer, more ephemeral herbaceous plantings".

Below the shrubs are perennial plants that provide colour and softer textural variation. Wild red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) is used in areas set aside for rewilding and meadows. "Apart from its beauty in habit – gently weaving through the wild grasses – it also provides a haze of colour here and there, which changes depending how much is flowering," Stuart says. Several cultivars of cranesbill geraniums augment the cottage-core feel of the planting style; *Geranium himalayense* 'Derrick Cook' is favoured as "a gentle grower but strong, with soft blue-white flowers and pale veins".

On either side of the lawn on the main garden front are shrubberies, lent structure by clipped box shapes, offset by the intense blue of *Salvia x sylvestris* 'Mainacht', foxglove spires and the acid-green of *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*.

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▷ “The terrace, which is a kind of elongated kidney-shape, has been designed to encourage people to move away from the house, to become immersed in the garden,” he explains.

The roses are supported by other sturdy shrubs, such as deutzia, philadelphus, euphorbias and *Viburnum opulus*, along with traditional English cottage-garden subjects including penstemons, foxgloves, alliums, nepetas and geraniums. In that sense it truly is a little piece of England abroad. The plants need to be on the tough side, given that temperatures here can soar to 42°C in summer and drop to -7°C in winter, with up to a metre of snow.

The main area of shrub plantings gives on to a large mown oval lawn, which meets an annual ‘pictorial’ wildflower meadow beyond in a deliberately abrupt manner. An irrigated lawn is a controversial feature today, but Stuart is unrepentant. “I’m very practical-minded,” he says. “I was a gardener for years. People don’t want a huge, baking-hot terrace – they want a space children can play on. Personally, ▷

A little farther from the house, the planting becomes even more unburdened in tone – groups of *Allium hollandicum* ‘Purple Sensation’ with nepeta and the spiky foliage of *Cynara cardunculus*, set against a backdrop of *Rosa moyesii* and white *Philadelphus coronarius*.

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▷ I don't like lawns, but there are vipers climbing in the roses, and they have had snakes in the house, so a lawn for playing on seemed the safest option for the children."

Planting around a smaller oval lawn on the southwest side of the house adds yolkly yellows to the mix – roses *R. Golden Celebration* (= 'Ausgold') and *R. 'Golden Wings'* – with more purples and blues from clematis, ceratostigmas, *Buddleja 'Lochinch'* and geraniums, including *G. 'Brookside'*, *G. 'Orion'* and *G. Rozanne* (= 'Gerwat'). To the northeast of the house, a wide, grassy path leads down to the swimming pool and its terrace, surrounded by *Hydrangea paniculata*, *Rosa 'Scharlachglut'* and, for later in the season, groups of asters including *Symphotrichum 'Little Carlow'*. This is a windy spot planted with *Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum 'Mariesii'*, cotoneaster, wild pear and apple, crataegus, magnolias and wild roses, and is the only area where grasses are used, as an understorey planting.

As with many designed gardens, Stuart's overall policy has been to adopt a more informal, wilder feel the farther away one moves from the house. In this case it means the creation of what he calls "semi-wild thickets" on the fringes of the garden as it melds with the surrounding fields. "As a child I spent a lot of time on Old Winchester Hill," he explains. "And I have been really inspired by the flora of the steep slopes there – crataegus, sloes, wild apples, peas and so on. I would go in and make a den, where it was dark, and then emerge into the light. I tried to recreate something of that feeling."

A steep bank on the northwest side of the house rises to a plateau where an olive plantation had been struggling. Stuart replaced this with a thicket including holm oaks to make a visual screen and sound barrier to cut out any noise from the road. But perhaps the most notable feature at the edge of the garden is a sculptural group of cypresses, clearly visible from the large oval lawn and indeed most parts of the garden. These were in situ when the clients moved in and are one of the few retained elements. It is not known why they were planted there. But perhaps every garden needs a little mystery. □

**Above** The scarlet *Rosa 'Scharlachglut'* is the rose that perhaps lends most definition to the garden, cropping up as a link plant across the piece. Here, it adds excitement to the swimming pool area, with roses *R. 'Rambling Rector'* on the banks, and *R. Iceberg* (= 'Korbin') on the pergola next to the house. Later on in the season, green mounds of *Hydrangea paniculata* take centre stage, alongside the rugosa rose *R. 'Blanche Double de Coubert'* with asters and *Pennisetum* grasses coming into play by late summer.

**Right** A sculptural group of cypresses, set in the grassy meadow at the fringes of the garden, helps to anchor everything in place. In the foreground are the frothy *Hesperis matronalis* var. *albiflora*, white foxgloves, nepeta, *Geranium 'Brookside'* and *Nicotiana glauca*, together with the box balls, which provide a sense of structural weight to the overall planting design.



#### USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Stuart's work at [stuartbarfoot.com](http://stuartbarfoot.com)