

true to nature

With a brief to create a garden in the Italian countryside in tune with its surroundings, the designer Stuart Barfoot combined subtle landscaping with romantic plantings in a wildlife-rich scheme that captivates the senses

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A group of cypress trees in the meadow forms a striking contrast with the richly textured planting around the terrace. Flowing drifts of plants, including white *Hydrangea* 'Annabelle', mauve *Verbena bonariensis*, emerald green *Amsonia tabernaemontana* and purple *Salvia x sylvestris* 'Mainacht' mingle with dark crimson *Rosa Munstead Wood*

The first things you notice as you arrive at this rural Italian garden are the huge sky and the open landscape. Then it's the birdsong, loud and sweet in your ears and, as you explore further, the drone of bees, the whisper of grasses and the sudden scent of a rose. It is a place that sparks all the senses.

This unspoilt, underpopulated part of the central Lazio region north of Rome, near volcanic Lake Bolsena, lies in the heartland of the ancient kingdom of the Etruscans: when the owners of the property first came to the area, they were wooed by stories of its kings, forgotten tombs and mysterious ley lines. Enchanted by the atmosphere and energy of the place, they decided to make it their permanent home, spending many months restoring the 19th-century house to make it as self-sustaining as possible, which included installing solar panels and a boiler fired by hazelnut shells from local trees.

The garden came next and it was important to the owners that it was created with the same care for the environment as the house. They commissioned the English designer Stuart Barfoot to help reconfigure and plant the space after hearing about his work at Torrecchia Vecchia near Rome (featured in *House & Garden's* April 2018 issue), where he spent nearly a decade reshaping the garden into a romantic arcadia. Stuart connected instantly with this place and started work on a plan to develop the site with the lightest of touches. 'I wanted it to feel as though it was part of nature,' he says. 'The landscape and skies are so strong here that you can't go against them. The wildlife is amazing, too, so we wanted to bring out what was unique about the location.'

As they cleared the space, they made discoveries, including some brick-arched openings into caverns in a small escarpment behind the house. Leading to Etruscan tombs and part of a necropolis, these add to the air of mystery that pervades the spot. As does the distinctive circle of cypress trees in the meadow in front of the house, one of the few features that has been retained from the original garden. Like a group of ancient monoliths, the evergreen cypresses are a constant in the ever-changing cycle of the seasons, standing proud while the rest of the garden fades and regenerates each year.

Although the total area of the plot nears six hectares, the formal, gardened parts are relatively compact, in keeping with the owners' aim of sustainability – and also to allow plenty of room for nature to encroach and root the garden in its setting. Behind the house, Stuart removed the existing terraces and recontoured the land into a gentle slope to blur the boundaries between the garden and the landscape. The slope is left to grow semi-wild, with enticing paths winding through the long grass, opening up here and there

to reveal views to the sun-kissed fields beyond. Thickets of tangled hawthorn, wild apple and pear, sloe, viburnum and honeysuckle break up the slope's uniformity, providing shelter, nectar and berries for the birds and bees. 'The thickets were inspired by the ancient meadows and thickets on Old Winchester Hill, where I walked as a child,' explains Stuart. 'The idea is the paths wind around them, creating a sense of journey as you pass through the garden discovering its contrasts of light and shade, enclosure and openness. Once established, these areas are low maintenance and ecological, requiring very little water, fertiliser or care.'

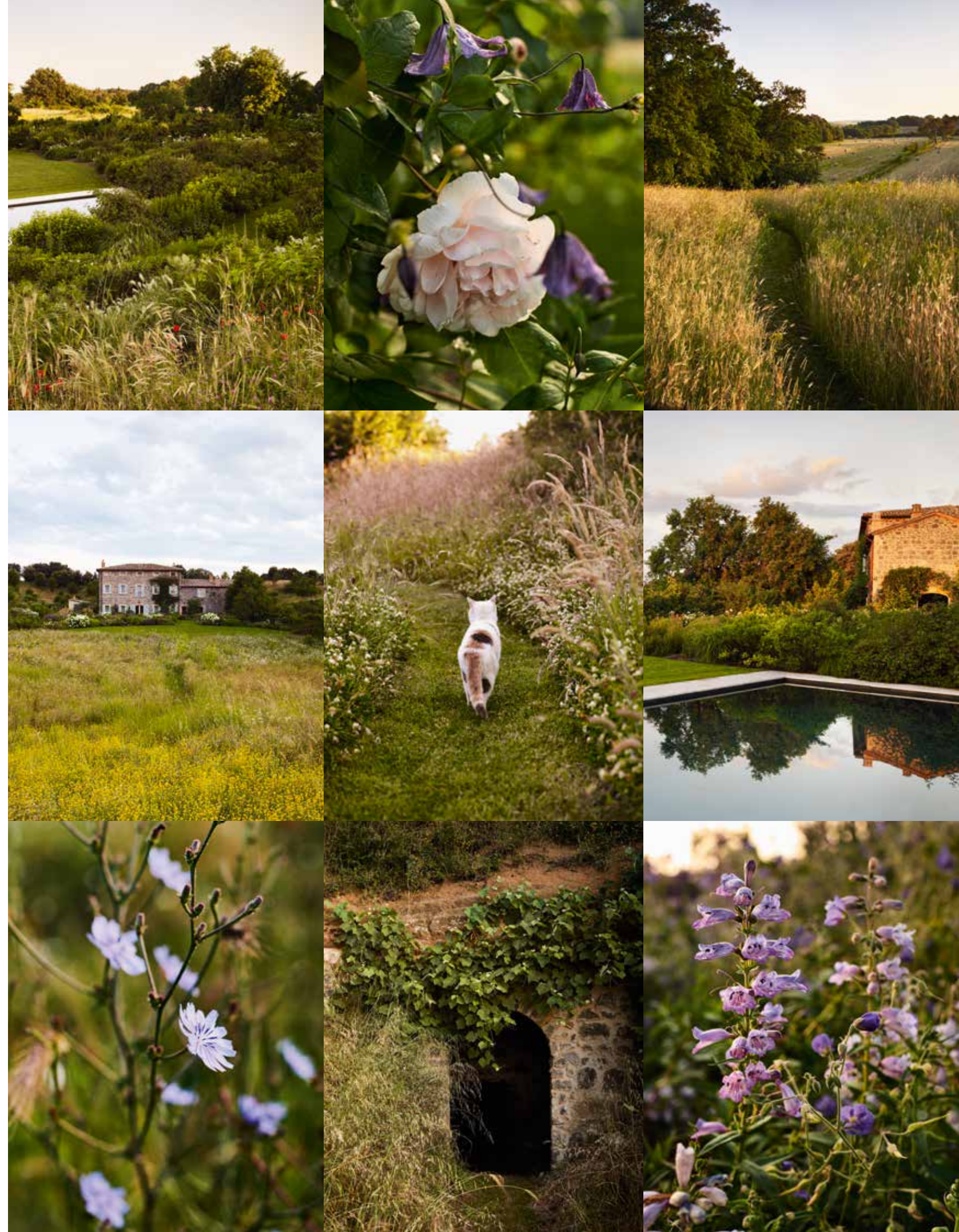
The most intensively planted area of the garden is the terrace at the front of the house, where a rich matrix of herbaceous plants and shrubs flows into and around a limestone terrace. By making holes in the paved area to form a series of organically shaped beds, Stuart created several different seating areas to entice people into the garden, each one cocooned by soft planting. 'The brief from the start was that there should be virtually no straight lines in this garden, so the terrace is devised from two interlocking circles,' he says. 'The house has a very strong presence, so I was convinced we needed a lot of planting beside it to soften the look. I'm interested in how people live in the space and their movements around it. My design is all about guiding people round the garden, but not in an overt way.'

With his horticultural training, Stuart is a master at weaving plants together and takes a practical approach: 'I ask myself what the plants will look like together, how they will interact throughout the year and how we can keep the weeds to a minimum.' There is repetition in the planting but it is never formulaic, so the schemes have their own flow, movement and rhythm to reflect the patterns seen in nature.

The colours are brave and bold to suit the artist-owners – deep crimson and magenta when the roses are at their peak, morphing to dusky purples and mauves in early summer, punctuated by mounds of green and white *Hydrangea* 'Annabelle', gold-spun *Stipa gigantea* and buff-brown *Rosa* 'Julia's Rose'. *Salvias*, *nepeta* and lavender-blue *Penstemon* 'Sour Grapes' are almost luminous in the evening sun, while *Gaura lindheimeri* and self-seeding *nigella*, *nicotiana* and *verbena* cushion the edges of the stone terrace. 'For me, gardening is about adding layers – the ephemeral things that come and go are just an extra layer,' says Stuart. He loves the almost-chaos of tangled plants and is growing clematis through roses to add another dimension as the flowers fade.

Sitting among the plants on the terrace as the sun gets lower, you cannot help but be aware of the shimmer of wildlife. Yellow and black swallowtail butterflies descend in clouds to feed on the spires of agastache, and birds chatter and swoop from one thicket to another. The Etruscans were deeply spiritually connected to the natural world, so it seems entirely right that such reverence is shown towards wildlife in this garden that works in perfect harmony with nature □

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Stuart Barfoot: stuartbarfoot.com



OPPOSITE TOP ROW FROM LEFT A glimpse of the pool from the banked meadow above. *Rosa* 'Madame Alfred Carrière' with a clematis scrambling through it. A path mown into the meadow grass beyond the house. MIDDLE ROW FROM LEFT The façade of the restored stone house. Spirit the cat roams the network of grassy paths. The saltwater pool is lined with black basalt from a local quarry. BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT Wild chicory. An entrance to the caverns behind the house. *Penstemon* 'Sour Grapes'

The owners specified there should be no straight lines in the garden, so the limestone terrace extends out into the organically shaped beds. Seating areas are surrounded by immersive plantings, which are designed to ebb and flow with the seasons

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