



Blurring the boundaries

Rhodds Farm, Lyonshall, Herefordshire
Tim Longville is bewitched by the skilful opening out to the landscape that has transformed a rural workaday place into a romantic, timeless garden

Photographs by Val Corbett



Preceding pages: **Nothing here except the buildings is more than 12 years old.** Above: **Poppies and allium seedheads line the herbaceous borders.** Right: **The reading willow figure watches over *Gunnera manicata***

RHODDS FARM, tucked away down a tiny roadway—the splendidly named Jack’s Ditch Lane—deep in the north Herefordshire countryside, is a surprise and one that teaches a number of valuable lessons. Richard and Cary Goode came here in 2004, when there was no garden and the house was still very much an unpretentious Victorian farmhouse. Both Mr and Mrs Goode work from home, Mr Goode dealing in Russian aerobatic aircraft, his wife designing gardens, and as if that wasn’t enough, they also own and run a small hotel (and garden) in Sri Lanka. So the first lesson taught by the fine garden here now is how to create and maintain one that’s complex, varied and interesting, despite such busy lives. An extension of that lesson is how to make such a garden also one that suits—and copes with the difficulties of—the site on which it is made.

Because difficulties there certainly were. Where there was soil, it was sticky, stony boulder clay and, around the house, there was no topsoil at all (Mrs Goode wonders whether a previous owner could have sold it). To the north of the house, there was an ugly tarmac car park; the whole site is long and thin. A long privet hedge separated pasture to the south from the garden to be; northwards lay a wooded (and originally bramble-filled) hillside.

Essentially, what Mrs Goode aimed to do was, first, remove any solid boundaries between garden and landscape (hence to the south, for example, privet hedge out, park



railings in) and then to create a garden ‘of two halves’: relatively formal immediately around the house, but increasingly informal as it spreads out and away from it.

Even in the formal areas, she insists that, as the priority was to preserve the views, this could not be a garden of ‘rooms’, so hedges are kept to an absolute minimum. Instead, the relatively formal garden is one of ‘areas’, in which one section merges gently into—and is visible from—the next. Remembering both the pressures of their busy lives and the vast expanses of the surrounding rolling Herefordshire landscape, the sorts of plants Mrs Goode uses as her ‘core palette’ are ‘thugs that are happy on this site’, such as *Euphorbia griffithii* Fireglow, *Phlomis russeliana*, *Symphytum caucasicum* or its even more vigorous second cousin *Trachy-*



stemon orientalis, ‘all of which came from a tiny scrap I begged from Mallet Court Nursery,’ she explains with a wry smile. What’s more, she uses them in ‘sheets’, because ‘that sort of big planting echoes this big landscape’.

Even in the most formal areas, planting in sheets is still frequently the rule. To the east of the house, for example, there is now a splendid brick-built, tower-like ornamental dovecote, its bulk designed to balance that of the barn, the diamond-shaped holes in its walls echoing those in the structure. The same diamond pattern is used in the pool at the dovecote’s foot and in the central box-edged bed in the main formal rectangular lawn beside it.

The central formal beds on the dovecote’s other side are edged with a block planting of *Alchemilla mollis* from which rise the

The raised diamond-shaped pool, which echoes the holes in the wall of the dovecote. The trees flanking it are *Pyrus calleryana* Chanticleer and in the distance are beds of *alchemilla* and the iris Silver Edge

Need to know

- **Area** Two acres of the main garden, plus, to varying degrees, 13 acres of woodland
- **Altitude** About 600ft above sea level
- **Soil** Basically, stony boulder clay, with a lot of variable imported soil brought in to replace missing topsoil. The best soil in the whole garden is in the four island beds, as that whole area was made out of what was originally pasture

dramatic flowers of masses of *Iris sibirica* Silver Edge. This makes both practical and aesthetic sense: on the one hand, it saves labour; on the other, the restricted palette of plants, used in large groups, makes a greater visual impact than a wider palette used in smaller groups or as individual specimens.

Between that area and the main lawn is the garden’s only real herbaceous border. It is the only one for the obvious reason that that form of gardening is anything but labour-saving. Here, however, Mrs Goode has indulged herself in a rich spectrum of purples, blues, reds and oranges. The plants used include alliums, poppies, heleniums, asters, aconitums and a rudbeckia she particularly recommends, *R. subtomentosa* Henry Eilers, because, unusually, it is ‘small and delicate’ yet ‘stays upright. It

‘As the priority is to preserve the views, this could not be a garden of “rooms” ;

doesn’t need staking’. She adds: ‘I hate staking because, however well it’s done, the result never looks natural and relaxed.’

Time-saving and coping with the demands of the site have combined to determine what happens between the formal lawn and the southern boundary, where only a seriously narrow strip of land was left with which to work. Mrs Goode’s solution has been a quartet of mixed island beds, with balancing box ➤



6 Rhodds Farm may not be paradise, but it's a very good approximation 9

'mounds' between them to anchor the area and provide some interest during winter.

Between here and the barn is the first of the garden's two main stretches of water, a pond essentially for wildlife, although with some discreet ornamental planting around its edges. Beyond, a path lined with the rose Sander's White and a variety of clematis leads to the vegetable garden, although Mrs Goode cheerfully confesses that, in fact, 'I'm keener on fruit than on vegetables'.

Beyond that again, it becomes difficult to be sure whether you're in garden or wood, until, eventually, you emerge on the edge of a sizeable lake (which the Goodes insist on calling a duck pond). There is ornamental planting here, but no beds as such. Instead, Mrs Goode simply 'plants into the wild'.

In this area, beyond a new planting's first year, she does very little weeding, so plants either survive the competition or they don't. Once more, she gardens in such a minimal way for two reasons, one aesthetic, one eminently practical: 'I don't want it to look cultivated and, anyway, I don't have time.'

The same is true in spades in the 13 acres of the woodland garden proper, where paths wind up the hillside to reach viewpoints from which you look out to the Welsh hills on one side and Shropshire on the other. Once Mr Goode had cleared this whole area of brambles, a network of paths was created, although most are concentrated on the areas nearer the house, which is also where the majority of the ornamental planting is to be found, mostly in the form of shrubs such as cornus, magnolias and species roses. Mrs Goode is currently very excited by—and is keeping a keen eye on—a range of spontaneously occurring seedlings from the climbing rose Cedric Morris.

These lower levels appropriately include one path known as the Stairway to Heaven, which is lined with scented shrubs and acquired its name because it leads to the Goodes' pet cemetery 'and so, hopefully, to Paradise'. Rhodds Farm may not be paradise, but it's a very good 21st-century approximation.

The garden at Rhodds Farm, Lyonshall, Herefordshire, opens for the NGS (www.ngs.org.uk) and as part of the Gardens in the Wild festival in June (www.gardensinthewild.org). It's also open for groups by appointment (01554 340120; cary.goode@russianaeros.com). Visit www.rhoddsfarm.co.uk for information about the self-catering accommodation in the converted barn

Above: The dramatic block-planting of *Alchemilla mollis* and *Iris sibirica* Silver Edge. To the sides, rows of *Pyrus calleryana* Chanticleer with *Miscanthus sinensis* Morning Light. Facing page: Scarlet *Centranthus ruber* and the eye-catching 'Mohican haircut' of the grass *Hordeum jubatum* by the wildlife pond

Favourite plants

Cary Goode recommends:

- *Daphne bholua* Jacqueline Postill is a sturdy, upright, evergreen shrub that produces its wonderfully scented flowers in incredible profusion from February to April
- *Physocarpus opulifolius* Diabolo for the sake of its remarkable dark chocolate-purple foliage, the perfect setting for its white flowers, which quickly turn to red berries
- *Rosa x odorata Mutabilis* for the sake of the unique colouring of its flowers
- *Verbena bonariensis*—its height, sturdiness and airiness make it invaluable
- Astrantias such as Buckland (with an endless supply of green-and-pink flowers) and Roma (with an equally endless supply of pure-pink ones)
- Any veronicastrum—they're indispensable for adding height and colour to late-season borders
- Any viburnum, an enormously varied, useful and beautiful family of shrubs

