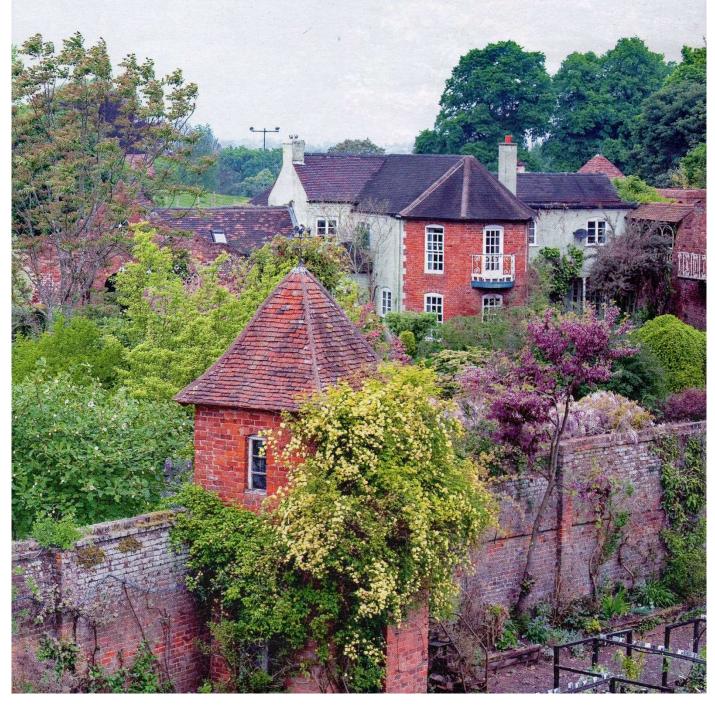


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Box of delights

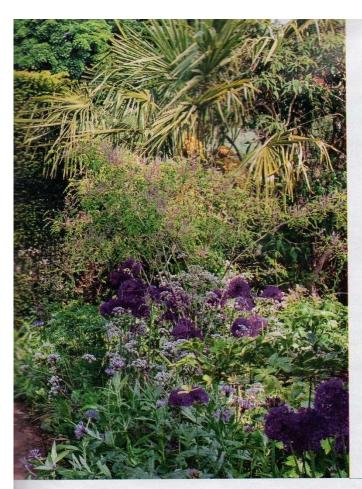
Overflowing with treasures like some exotic fairytale casket, the bounty of this RHS Partner Garden in Worcestershire is shared – together with its owner's experience – through the adjoining nursery »

Author: Stephen Lacey, plantsman and writer. Photography: Jenny Lilly



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Stone House Cottage

Bountiful within bounds

Drifts of Allium hollandicum 'Purple Sensation' partner pink Anthriscus sylvestris 'Ravenswing' and Chusan palm in this small yew enclosure leading towards the main lawn, with Ceanothus 'Concha' and pink Tamarix gallica beyond. Within the beds, shrubs are kept well pruned to maximise the planting opportunities around them.

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Packed walls

Eye-catching climber Actinidia kolomikta (left) scrambles up one of the towers beside semi-tender scarlet Clianthus puniceus (lobster claw), which sometimes needs winter protection with netting and fleece.

Spectacular displays

Cornus florida
f. rubra (right)
makes a handsome
backdrop to this
35-year-old
wisteria, grown
as a standard
up a supporting
post but never
yet requiring
branch support.



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tone House Cottage Garden has only one foot in the rolling Worcestershire countryside. The other is somewhere in Italy, among the towers of San Gimignano perhaps, or the crumbling walls and wisterias of Ninfa. Arriving in the farmyard-like nursery, side-stepping bantams and barking sheepdogs, you are invited into the garden through a round entrance tower to find yourself in a dreamy Rapunzel, Romeo-and-Juliet world of mellow brick and tile, balconies and stairways, all foaming with plants.

Louisa and James Arbuthnott conjured up this remarkable vision from an old walled vegetable garden in the mid-1970s. James was the draughtsman and master builder, subdividing the 0.4ha (1 acre) site with a central yew axis into hedged compartments and, over successive winters, constructing the towers from reclaimed bricks – some gleaned from the demolished Worcester prison. He was brought up in this area – his parents ran a nearby prep school – and, after leaving the Army, he and Louisa decided to move back here specifically to start a garden and nursery. His love of building, Louisa tells me, goes back to a childhood playing with Minibrix and Lego.

Plant passion

Louisa has been passionate about plants for as long as she can remember – asked by her father what she wanted for her 21st birthday present, she chose a greenhouse. 'Physically, I just love gardening,' she says. She has brought up five children at Stone House Cottage, and still runs the garden and the excellent nursery single-handedly, with as much zest as ever.

'James did the design more or less in one go,' she says. 'The little enclosures help disguise the fact that the walled garden isn't square but goes off at all angles. The idea was to create a more intimate and domestic feel, and give me different microclimates for planting. And they make the garden more interesting, together with the towers, which are inspired by Italy and elsewhere but mostly James's invention.'

Having such strong design and characterful architecture is the perfect complement to Louisa's planting which she herself calls 'itsy bitsy, ditty dotty'. Every time I visit (I have known this garden since the 1980s) I marvel at quite how many plants she manages to pack in. There are no big clumps of anything and shrubs are pruned to within an inch of their lives (her old Osmanthus x burkwoodii is only 1.5m (5ft) high and 1.2m (4ft) wide; mine, much the same age, is more than three times that). But beautiful harmonies of colour, texture and ecology, some generous interludes of lawn and small trees,

'I like being adventurous. If plants die, I see it as nature giving me a chance to grow something else.'

and the constant seduction of the walls and towers lifting your eyes skywards, prevent any sense of indigestion.

The walls and towers give tremendous opportunities for growing climbers and shrubs, including those which, in this chilly Midlands climate, might be considered of doubtful hardiness. I don't grow plants guaranteed to die, but I like being adventurous,' Louisa says. 'And if they do die, well, I see it as nature giving me a chance to grow something else. Trying new plants, and growing things from seed, that's what gives me the kick.'

Scarlet Clianthus puniceus (lobster claw), myrtles, azaras, olearias and silver Teucrium fruticans are among the wall shrubs that have given years of service. She and I both obtained our Buddleja agathosma many years ago from the same source - Esther Merton, generally referred to in respectful tones as 'Mrs Merton', who had a semi-legendary garden at The Old Rectory, Burghfield, Berkshire - and, as with me, her plant has proved bone hardy. Still little known, this Buddleja is a lovely, lax-growing wall shrub, with mauve, raspberry-scented flowers on the bare branches in spring, followed by large, woolly grey leaves. Needless to say, while my plant has tentacles 3m (10ft) long, Louisa's still forms an elegant panel.

Pea potential

Counter to modern designer fashion, Louisa remains fond of coloured foliage. Variegated and purple pittosporum are prominent, the purple well partnered with Mahonia gracilipes. Partial to members of the pea family, including Judas trees and indigoferas, a few years ago she alerted me to the marvellous Indigofera howellii, which produces its long racemes of vivid pink flowers tirelessly throughout summer and autumn. Rather than trimming it back regularly, which seems to make the racemes smaller, she takes the stems down to ground level from time to time.

Free rein purple

This magnificent Chinese wisteria was planted as soon as this tower was built by James, in 1991. It is pruned and trained only sporadically, partly because Louisa dislikes ladders and heights.

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Stone House Cottage

Magical miscellany

The brickwork supports an array of climbers including yellow Banksian rose, scented Stauntonia hexaphylla, and Actinidia kolomikta with its heart-shaped foliage boldly tipped with white and pink, as well as the fabulous wisterias, planted long ago and with names long forgotten. Some have now ascended to impressive heights. 'They are all loosely grown because I am frightened of heights and don't like spending time on ladders,' says Louisa, 'and anyway, I don't like things too regimented.'

Most of the walled garden's flowerbeds have plants for all seasons - 'everything here is random in every respect' - and early in the year a miscellany of bulbs pops up between the perennials. Bulbs also feature in the mini meadow she has made within the garden - weakening the grass by sowing semiparasitic yellow rattle, and then adding plugs of cranesbill and ox-eye daisy from her own seed, and Dactylorhiza orchids given to her by plantswoman-photographer Valerie Finnis. Snakeshead fritillary, Erythronium 'Pagoda', Gladiolus communis subsp. byzantinus and blue Triteleia laxa 'Koningin Fabiola' all thrive here. Louisa cuts everything here down with an Austrian scythe in early August.

Stone House Cottage was the setting for one of the most memorable evenings that I have ever had in a garden. For over a period of some 25 years, James and Louisa used to host midsummer musical evenings, with minstrels playing from the towers and the audience tucking into picnics. A sort of laidback Glyndebourne. On the evening I went we were enjoying an Italianate heatwave, and the garden was looking particularly magical. At the end of the evening, I asked Louisa if I could set fire to her clump of Dictamnus albus (it emits a flammable vapour on hot, still nights that can be ignited without harming the plant). I have never managed to produce such a whoosh of flame before or since, and I got a round of applause from the departing audience. I hope she will include some more dictamnus in the new gravel garden she is now making - another flourish of artful plantsmanship in the offing in this tour de force of a garden. O

Resources

Most plants mentioned here are listed in *RHS Plant Finder 2017*, and online at **rhs.org.uk/findaplant**

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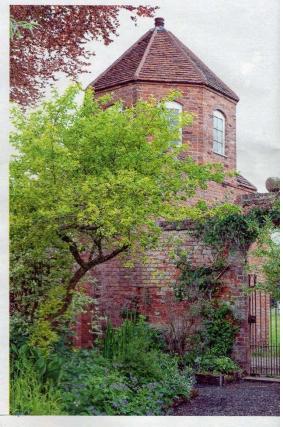
Splash of spring sunshine

The sulphur-coloured double flowers of Rosa banksiae var. banksiae complement well the mellow brickwork. Early-flowering, it grows on an east-facing wall, and its vigorous growth is kept in check by pruning in late spring.



Lightening the shade

Cornus mas
'Aureoelegantissima'
follows its latewinter flowering
with yellowvariegated leaves,
and makes a cheery
addition to a
shady corner. It is
underplanted here
with hellebores,
epimediums,
corydalis, roscoea
and geraniums.



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