

'The perfect summer day of your imagination': Conran's manor house and garden



Gardening à la mode

Fashion designer Jasper Conran is transferring his skills with shape and colour to the six-acre grounds of his medieval house in Suffolk. But creating the perfect garden 'is not about showing off' he assures RACHEL DE THAME



A tree provides shade for a garden seat

Picture the most perfect wisteria-clad Elizabethan manor house, ducklings paddling in the moat, and set it in heart-meltingly beautiful Suffolk countryside. Surround the house with an embryonic English country garden and you've come close to imagining the idyll that is second home to Jasper Conran, the designer.

"It's nothing like what I was looking for but I fell in love with it," says Conran, who exchanged his house in France less than three years ago for something more accessible from his busy London base.

At more than six acres, the garden is a substantial space, but it feels comfortably friendly and not in the least intimidating. "What appeals to me about this house is its Miss Marple quality — it's so blowzy," says Conran. "I wanted to create something that was charming and quintessentially English, but not necessarily a formal garden."

"To me the house is a very large cottage: I wanted to make the garden informal and big-scale cottage in its planting, with areas of long grass and wild flowers." He has a specific atmosphere in mind: "It's not about showing

off, it's about recreating the perfect summer day of your imagination."

This may sound ethereal, but Conran — who is well into his forties, but looks unbelievably boyish — displays a very real sense of the responsibilities that come with living a charmed life. He is quick to acknowledge the help he has from his full-time gardener Billy Freeman, who came with the house, and Branch Out, a local group of adults with learning difficulties and mental and physical disabilities, who have been coming to lend a hand every week for more than two years.

"I share this garden with a lot of other people, it's their creation as much as it is mine," he says. "I believe that layers of love go into a garden — you put it in and it gives it back to you."

Having removed 16 tonnes of concrete patio and peeled away every last vestige of the rather suburban plot he inherited, Conran is creating a heavenly garden. Though there's still much to do, it is clear that the emerging scheme will be beautiful. He already loves to share this place — the village fête is held on the lawns and the house is full of friends who are welcomed with

log fires and the smell of home cooking. I brought my baby when I met him, whom Conran fussed over and lavished with kisses. Though we'd only just met, it felt like spending a lazy Saturday afternoon with an old friend.

Accompanied by Conran's dog Buster, we started our tour of the garden on the east-facing side of the house where the sun rises through a veil of ancient oaks and towering horse chestnuts. Conran has added to these, planting beech and other native specimens, \$5 in total. "When you take pleasure in a 600-year-old oak, it's beholden upon you to plant more," he says.

He's not afraid to remove trees either, cutting down foreign usurpers without hesitation. A weeping willow close to the front boundary is next for the chop. "I'm not having anything weeping in this garden," he says, and plans to replace it with an indigenous cricket-bat willow, more in keeping with the local countryside.

Nature is welcome in the garden, which is at ease with its surroundings at every turn. The odd rabbit is tolerated, slugs are part of life's rich pattern and the boundary between cultivated areas and open country is deliberately blurred. Empathy with the natural environment

and an ability to think ahead are at the core of his approach to gardening.

"I think you should get satisfaction out of the idea that you're doing something that's not for you, but for the future. You have to think, 'If I don't do it, who's going to?' You realise when you own a house like this that actually you don't own it, you're just a caretaker who has to plough considerable amounts of money into this caretaking lark."

Elegant touches are everywhere. An avenue of pleached limes has the lowest branches springing out from the main stem a good 2m

Mark Bourdillon/César Garçon



Rachel, Jasper and Buster the dog in front of the dahlias — 'big mad flowers that could be hats'



The strong shades of Oriental poppies

from the ground, allowing a clear view through the young trunks. Inspired by Sissinghurst, a simple circle of juvenile yews will eventually knit together to enclose a calming circle of pure green. Here Conran imagines lying on the lawn watching the clouds drift overhead.

Resisting the temptation to over train, prune or clip, Conran feels his forte is putting informal planting into structured areas, softening what would normally be hard edged. Turning a potential eyesore into a treat is another useful skill: the walks of a recent extension to the original house are used as a prop for fast-growing climbers.

A magnificent mulberry tree planted 30 years ago by a previous owner — Angus McBean, the renowned theatre photographer — sits squarely in the middle of the long path leading from the house. Though it interrupts the vista, Conran cannot bring himself to cut it down. "In any case, it produces excellent mulberries, which make a delicious syrup, very good with ice cream."

The tree is at the centre of a symmetrical arrangement of narrow beds linked with turf paths. Small box balls punctuate the beds, interplanted with old-fashioned rugosa roses,



Informal summer planting softens structured borders

irises and silver-leaved pinks. Once again Conran is thinking ahead, and his plans have a strong sense of drama. "The idea is that, as time goes on, these balls will get very large, and I'm planning to have only dark, almost black irises planted between them."

As he is a designer, it comes as no surprise to find that Conran has a sophisticated way with colour. The garden continually inspires his work and vice versa. A man with definite likes and dislikes, he favours 'Paper White' narcissi, parrot tulips and delphiniums, and despises variegated foliage, big yellow daffodils, begonias and marigolds, "though I find that what I thought last year I don't necessarily think this year. For instance, I'm starting to become fond of burnt orange and rust-coloured irises."

His current favourites fill a long deep border backed by a red brick wall. Here, black opium poppies rub shoulders with moss roses and clematis, with clouds of *Alchemilla mollis* and *Artemisia* 'Powis Castle' at their feet.

Refreshingly unprecious about garden design, Conran is open to the concept of the garden being in a constant state of flux. "You must allow a garden to emerge, and you can't have it all at one time." He also believes that a garden shouldn't be too manicured. "You have to work within the rules and then break them — you have your structure and then you mess with it."

Although he's clearly still at the rules stage of building the structure into this young garden, Conran is impatient to get on with the fun of messing. "The joy of a garden is that if it doesn't work, you can take it out. You should take risks and put your own personality into it from the outset."

The flamboyant side of Conran's personality is certainly reflected in bed after bed brimming over with an explosion of sumptuous dahlias. "If you like something, have it. People turn their noses up at dahlias . . . see if I care."

Though these particular dahlias are something of a stopgap while he decides on a more permanent planting scheme, there are yet more in the vegetable garden — rows of shocking pink, hot orange and scarlet flowers, all destined for the house. "Dahlias really amuse me. It gives me such pleasure throughout the autumn to see this riot of big mad flowers that could be hats."

The lavender-edged vegetable garden is Conran's pride and joy, a passion inherited from his father Sir Terence. Here, long raised beds filled with produce surround a central willow walk, which is very much in its infancy. The top of each whippy leader is tied to its neighbour to form an arch, festooned in summer with swags of sweet peas.

Wooden benches are strategically placed to encourage you to linger, apples are fan-trained onto wires and herb beds are cut into the lawn. Hand-tied bunches of harvested onions hang from hooks outside the picturesque shed, next to artfully arranged wheelbarrows — ugly plastic tools are actively discouraged. This is the kitchen garden of my dreams.

Having worked up an appetite, we feasted on home-grown produce — knobby potatoes with the skins on, deliciously sweet carrots and blackberry and apple pie cooked by his estate manager Aidan Webster. It was a perfect reminder of the value of growing your own fruit and vegetables. Conran is a passionate garden-maker, a sensualist blessed with an artist's eye and an effortless sense of style. The garden's structure and proportion are flawless, the colour combinations sublime. I can't wait to see the early promise fulfilled as it edges towards maturity. In the meantime, the image I will take away with me is of Conran bounding across the garden with armfuls of his beloved dahlias, Buster trotting behind.

■ Jasper Conran's new flagship store opens in Sackville Street, London W1, in spring 2005