

‘An outstanding Suburb garden’

In homage to Diane Berger, who has entertained us all for the past nine years with her unique blend of ditsy humour and love of gardening, I am featuring her prize-winning garden in Willifield Way as the first in a series of outstanding Suburb gardens.

In 1972 Diane was faced with an overgrown jungle on stiff cold London clay, 35ft x 75ft. Although she had always been interested in gardening (she proudly remembers winning first prize for her Garden in a Box at the age of nine), she was too busy at the time with job and young family to do much to tame her wilderness.

Since then she has won many awards, including first prize in Hampstead Horticultural Society's Best Medium Sized Back Garden Competition three years running. Her garden has evolved into a delightful mix of cottage garden, traditional herbaceous borders and state of the art planting. How has she done it?

Diane's first task was to lighten and nourish the clay. Every year, generous applications of 'muck' in the form of manure, grit, compost (home-made or mushroom) topped with bark chippings have helped to create the rich, fertile, crumbly loam in which her plants thrive. She is constantly improving both the layout and the planting. For example, the pond started life as her son's play-pool. It now has an eco-friendly sloping gravel fringe and, planted with bog-loving plants and an outstanding clump of *Zantedeschia aethiopiga* (the white arum lily), is filled with frogs, newts and fish (heron permitting!)

Of course, such a garden does not come cheap, in terms of both time and money. Oddly enough, Diane claims to spend more time working in the garden in winter and early spring when the maintenance programme is very



important, clearing, cutting down and tidying. She does not leave seedheads for the birds because it makes the garden look very untidy and takes twice as long to clear up in spring. In March, she mulches and weeds before anything really takes hold and moves plants around. "I suppose I spend about 10 hours a week in the earlier part of the year, tapering off as summer nears because my garden is planted to be maintenance-free. Once things are mulched and staked, I just go round keeping an eye on them. I spray the roses, feed everything with Growmore and keep lawns and hedges trim. In summer, I'd

only spend 4-5 hours a week in the garden."

Over the years, the lawn has been gradually disappearing as more and more features are added. A pergola links the herbaceous beds to the greenhouse and sitting out deck at the back of the plot. The pergola is smothered in climbing roses, clematis, wisteria and *Solanum jasminoides*. Album underplanted with her favourite shrub roses, Gertrude Jekyll and Ferdinand Pichard. In the greenhouse, broad beans are sown in early spring and tender perennials over-winter.

Pots of freesias, *Iris reticulata* and miniature daffodils bring early scent and colour from February on. In summer, Diane entertains in the gazebo on the terrace, shaded by a luxuriant *Clematis armandii*.

Diane has planted fruit trees and a selection of carefully chosen ornamentals: contorted willow (*Salix contorta*); *Betula utilis jacquemontii* (white-barked birch) and *Cercidiphyllum* whose

spectacular autumn leaves smell of candyfloss. Each year the trees are tipped back to avoid nuisance to neighbours from overhanging foliage.

There is something of interest every month of the year. In spring, snowdrops, cyclamen coum and primroses provide one of Diane's favourite plant associations. The garden is lovely in June when the clematis and roses are out; in high summer the herbaceous beds are in their full glory. Finally the hot border kicks in in August, with glowing orange and gold *Heleniums*, *Rudbeckias*, *Achillia* and *Circium rivale*.

Herbaceous perennials and annuals come and go, but constant interest is provided throughout the year by a group of evergreen shrubs that give height and structure to the borders: *Viburnum bodnatense*, *Magnolias*, *Nandina domestica*, *Daphne bholua*, *Eucryphia nymansensis*, *Pittosporum* and variegated Holly.

Some of Diane's favourite plants are *Veronicastrums*, striking 4ft tall upright perennials with spires of blue or white flowers in late summer and the pale lemon *Knifolia 'Little Maid'* – not such a thug as its orange relations. A few, well-chosen, ornamental grasses – *Stipa tenuissima*, *Stipa arundinacea*, *Miscanthus sinensis* and *Pennisetum villosum* – give movement and texture.

Favourite shrubs include *Garrya elliptica*, *Mahonia Charity*, *Pittosporum variegatum*, *Buddleja Palace Purple* and *Amelanchier lamarkii*.

For containers, Diane will often recommend *Plectranthus argentatus*, a lovely silver-leaved foil for blue petunias or the black grass, *Ophiopogon nigrescens*. Another good plant is the tender *Astelia*, a favourite of Christopher Lloyd who Diane admires for his flair and energy. Piet Oudolf has been another influence; his prairie planting at Wisley is worth a visit.

You can see this outstanding Suburb garden for yourself when Diane opens it to the public from 2-5pm. on Sunday 24 July as part of the London Gardens Scheme

ANNE CRAWLEY



DIANA IWT

THE GARDEN CALENDAR

In your garden in May

- ☼ Plant out half-hardy annuals and bedding plants when all danger of frost has passed.
- ☼ Continue to hoe regularly on dry, sunny days to stop weeds taking hold.
- ☼ Continue nightly slug and snail patrols, particularly around young seedlings, hostas & delphiniums.
- ☼ Cut off dying leaves from daffodils & tulips. Lift and divide any clumps that flowered poorly. Store tulips in a cool, dry shed for replanting in November.
- ☼ Sow seeds of vigorous annual climbers such as convulvulus and canary creeper to grow through shrubs and roses to provide colour later in the year.
- ☼ Towards the end of the month, plant out hardened-off runner beans and sweet peas on bamboo wig-wams.
- ☼ Plant out and stake dahlias, chrysanthemums and gladioli

In your garden in June

- ☼ Continue to mow weekly and in dry weather leave the mowings on the grass to conserve moisture and feed the lawn.
- ☼ Water all containers freely and daily in hot spells. Mulch dahlias and moisture-loving plants with compost or shredded bark.
- ☼ Hoe often to keep weeds at bay in borders and around fruit and vegetables.
- ☼ Deadhead flowers in beds and containers but leave rose hips for the birds. Pinch out growing tips of annuals to make bushier plants.
- ☼ Feed container plants with liquid tomato fertiliser regularly.
- ☼ Set out tomato plants. As they grow, tie securely to stakes, pinch out side shoots and water & feed regularly.
- ☼ Take cuttings of side shoots of fuchsias, clematis, pinks, rosemary & thyme and root in a cold frame.

In your garden in July

- ☼ Feed established and new roses with a rose fertiliser. Tie in vigorous new shoots on climbers and ramblers as they develop.
- ☼ Continue to hoe and deadhead regularly. Water early in the morning or in the evening to reduce the amount lost in evaporation.
- ☼ Cut back *Alchemilla mollis* and geraniums when they start to look tatty. New growth will soon appear.
- ☼ Divide May & June flowering irises every three years. Split into small sections, trim leaves to 15cm and reset almost on the surface of the soil.
- ☼ Clip box topiary to keep its shape. Remove almost all the new growth. Most hedges can be trimmed into shape (*Euonymus*, hawthorn, hazel, Lawson & Leyland cypress, *Philadelphus*, *Weigelia* etc.) Use secateurs on broad-leaved plants as the cut leaves will turn brown and look unsightly.
- ☼ Clean bird tables and feeders to avoid disease. Scrub them clean with warm, soapy water and rinse with clean water before putting out fresh food.
- ☼ Continue to feed tomatoes and tie in main stems to supports. Plant French marigolds alongside tomatoes to ward off whitefly.
- ☼ Summer prune apples and pears.

Suburb gardens open for charity

The National Gardens Scheme is a charity which raises money by opening gardens to the public. Owners generously open their gardens on specific days and money is raised from entry charges plus the sale of teas and plants. Last year, £95,000 was raised by the London area gardens.

This year, six Suburb gardeners are opening their gardens on weekend afternoons in Summer. Do support them.

8 May – Michael Franklin 94 Oakwood Road.

29 May – Pru & Mervyn Unger 48 Hampstead Way

12 June – Tony Stone 54 Wildwood Road

24 July – Diane Berger 86 Willifield Way

24 July – Carol Kemp 157 Hampstead Way

Details of these and all other London gardens open for charity are available from Clifton Nurseries, price £1.

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