

CELEBRATE
AMAZING
TRANSFORMATIONS

2015
Competition
winner

The wooden pavilion sits beside a colourful mixed border planted with alliums, verbascum and hydrangea

A FINE ROMANCE

Elaine and John have turned their garden into a dreamy, award-winning space awash with soft pinks, purples and creamy whites

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY NICOLA STOCKER



Gravel path lined with lavender and a wicker box leads to a circular lawn

HOME PROFILE

WHO LIVES HERE

Elaine Thurston, 44, a housewife, her husband John, 51, a designer of interior plant displays, and their two sons, Thomas, 19, and Alex, 18

THE PROPERTY A 1920s semi-detached, three-bed house in Great Wyrley, Staffordshire. The couple spent £4,000 redesigning the garden

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Elaine and John survey the garden from their pavilion



The back of the house viewed across a colourful perennial border planted with alliums, knautia and wild carrot

First thing every morning, Elaine Thurston draws back her bedroom curtains to look out over the beautiful garden that she and her husband John have created. 'If the weather's good, I'll spend much of the day gardening or sewing in the pavilion, watching the wildlife in the pond,' says Elaine.

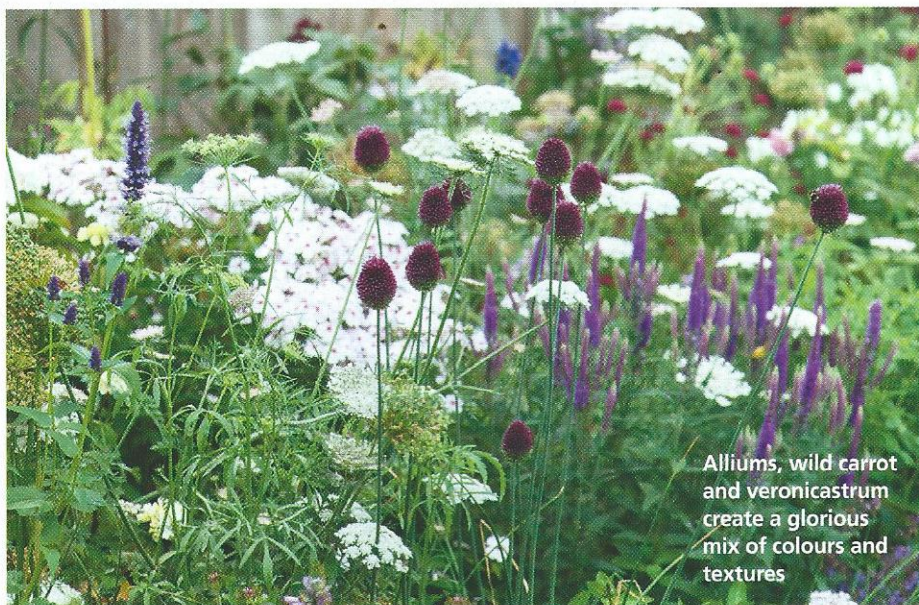
The stunning scene that greets her is a far cry from what was on view just three years ago, when Elaine and John's garden was little more than fence-to-fence lawn with a few shrubs, a sorbus and flowering cherries along the sides. 'We moved here in 1993 and the garden was an ideal playground for our two boisterous boys,' explains Elaine. However, once they became teenagers the swings and slides went, leaving the 24 metre by 7.6 metre plot a blank canvas. 'At last we were able to have the outdoor space we'd always wanted – a tranquil, cottage-style garden with a soft, romantic colour palette of pinks, whites and baby blues,' she says.

The garden development coincided with Elaine giving up her job because of the bad migraines she has suffered since having children. Not knowing from one day to the next how she'd feel, Elaine needed a project that was both fulfilling and flexible. Encouraged by John, she started drawing out possible garden designs on graph paper. The one they finally went with is based around a series of circular shapes that represent the patio, pond,

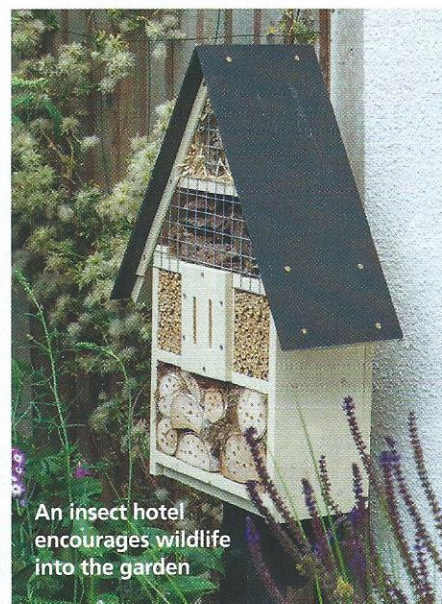
lawn and wooden pavilion. 'John marked them out on the lawn, using canes, string and hosepipes, and I tweaked the design until it was exactly right,' she explains.

Work began in 2012 with the stripping back of the lower half of the lawn, leaving a small circle of grass four metres in diameter. The garden slopes down a metre from front to back, so the whole design is on a slight diagonal. The soil is a free-draining, sandy loam over shale, so once John had formed the new borders he dug in lots of horse manure. Then he laid a circle of paving as a base for a wooden pavilion, which was a sale bargain from Dunster House. 'My hobby is sewing, so the pavilion gives me somewhere to work,' explains Elaine.

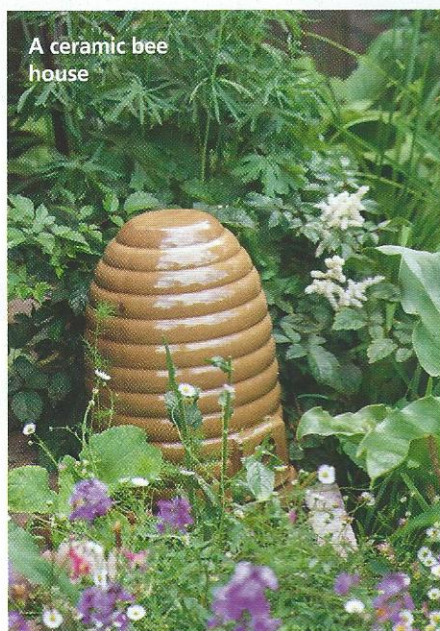
It wasn't until 2014 that they renovated the upper section of the garden, a west-facing patio area that catches the last of the sun's rays. Money was tight, so Elaine tried to reuse the original, rather unappealing paving in the new design. 'Nothing worked,' she says. In the end they saved up for a Bradstone circular patio, making savings in the path that links with the pavilion. 'It's simply built from paving slabs laid in gravel, but we had to be careful not to lay the gravel too thickly or it goes everywhere,' she explains. Elaine's father constructed much of the woodwork, such as the insect house. Finally the old timber shed was given a new lease of life



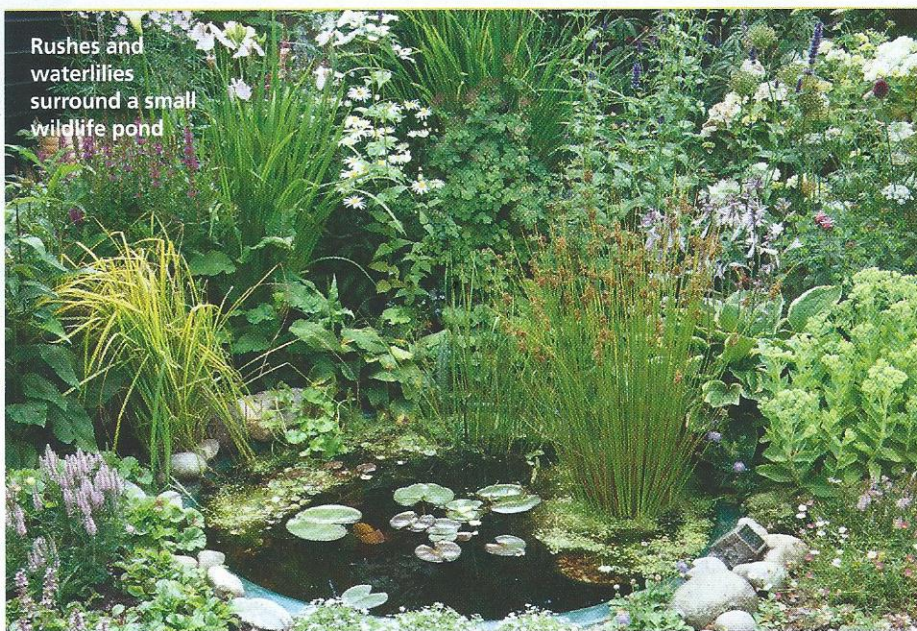
Alliums, wild carrot and veronicastrum create a glorious mix of colours and textures



An insect hotel encourages wildlife into the garden



A ceramic bee house



Rushes and waterlilies surround a small wildlife pond

with a coat of black paint, making it 'disappear' into the planting.

Good teamwork has been behind every stage of this garden's transformation, especially when planning the borders. John originally trained at Rodbaston Horticultural College, while Elaine studied for a City & Guilds course in floristry. 'I have a good eye for colour, so I design the planting schemes, while John has the plant knowledge,' she explains. When Elaine said she'd like some plants in a soft yellow for a border, John found a buttery *Coreopsis* 'Moonbeam' and a pale aquilegia.

By undertaking the work themselves, Elaine and John have been able to spend more on the plants. Increasingly their focus is on native British specimens such as valerian, bugle and columbine, which are bee and butterfly friendly. 'Our garden is now filled with different insects, including lacewings, solitary bees and hoverflies,' says Elaine. There's also a blackbird that follows her around the garden. 'She raised two broods last year, and I can now almost hand-feed her,' Elaine says. 'We're delighted with the cottage garden feel and love the fact that there's always another season to look forward to and new plants to discover.'

● Elaine and John won £2,500 of DFS prizes in the Renovation of the Year 2015 Room Transformed category

● See p72 for how to enter Renovation of the Year 2016

How to install a WILDLIFE POND

- ★ Elaine and John have a small wildlife pond beside the patio and a larger one opposite the pavilion. 'Frogs, toads and newts are now breeding there. They eat the slugs so we don't have to use slug repellents or insecticides – nature does the work for us,' says Elaine.
- ★ Each pond is preformed in fibreglass and installed in a hole deep enough to allow for a layer of building sand at the bottom, to both protect the liner from sharp stones and provide a stable base. John used a spirit level to ensure each pond was level all the way round. Then he lined the bottom with a thin layer of gravel and a few stones before filling with water. 'Allow to settle for a couple of days before planting,' he advises. Finally, to ensure that frogs can clamber in and out of the water, place a branch or large stone at the edge of the pond.
- ★ Both ponds are enclosed by decorative plants: **for shade**, water lilies and frogbit, which float on the surface and inhibit the growth of algae; **oxygenising plants**, such as hornwort and dwarf hairgrass, to provide food for fish and release oxygen; **bog plants** such as hostas and irises, which thrive in a damp area beside a pond but don't like their roots in water; **marginal plants**, such as pickerel weed and flowering rush, which do well on the edge with their roots in water, but contained in baskets to prevent the soil being washed away.