



# Winning WAYS

Britain's Best Gardener's Garden 2014 is Ramblers in Gloucestershire, a welcoming, well-designed and plant-packed spot anyone would yearn to call home ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS JOHN CAMPBELL | WORDS STEPHANIE MAHON

The double borders on the lower terrace at Ramblers squiggle across the slope, with colourful cottage favourites on one side and a new gravel bed opposite.

gardens: gloucestershire



## gardens: gloucestershire



**ABOVE**  
Marmalade the cat stalks the top terraces by the house, which is swathed in climbing roses.

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
Jane's cutting garden sits alongside the veg patch and fruit frames.

Indulge me a moment, and picture the perfect little country garden - the sort of place anyone would yearn to live. Pristine lawn, borders of boisterously colourful plants and manicured hedges? Is there a sweet stone cottage with a picket fence, smothered in roses? A kitchen garden and a cut-flower patch? Perhaps in this fantasy there are a few hens running about the meadow; and lovely places to sit and enjoy a glass of wine as the sun goes down.

This is the reverie that has converted people the world over to the idea of an English garden. The reality, a dream made green, is *Ramblers in Gloucestershire*. Looking out over this exceptional plot, I see it is for good reason that the couple sitting across from me have been crowned the 2014 winners of the Cobra Britain's Best Gardener's Garden Competition.

Jane and Leslie Hale have gardened this sloping patch of land on the border of England and Wales for almost 30 years. 'We lived along the valley,' Jane explains, 'and we used to look after the owners' pony when they went away. One day, they knocked on the door and said they wanted us to have this house - we just had to have the pony too!'

When they moved in, there was no garden to speak of, just a few shrubs, some lawn and the remains of a veg garden. 'There was a feeling that we wanted to do something special,' Jane says. 'We had two small children, however, so we did it gradually. There was a field that came with the house, and as we developed the garden, we started to include parts of it. At the beginning, the field was so close to the house that the pony would come right up to the window and stare in at us.'

She and Leslie set about making the plot more manageable, by creating several terraces that step down from the house to the orchard and kitchen garden. A walk around the garden loops visitors in and out of different spaces and rooms as they descend. High round-edged hedges shield each area from the others, but gateways and windows cut into them offer glimpses of the magnificent views of the valley beyond and different parts of the garden. 'I've always thought about where we live, in this valley,' Jane explains. 'The garden mustn't jar. This is a country

GOLD  
MEDALLIST

Cobra Britain's Best  
Gardener's Garden 2014  
*Ramblers in  
Gloucestershire*

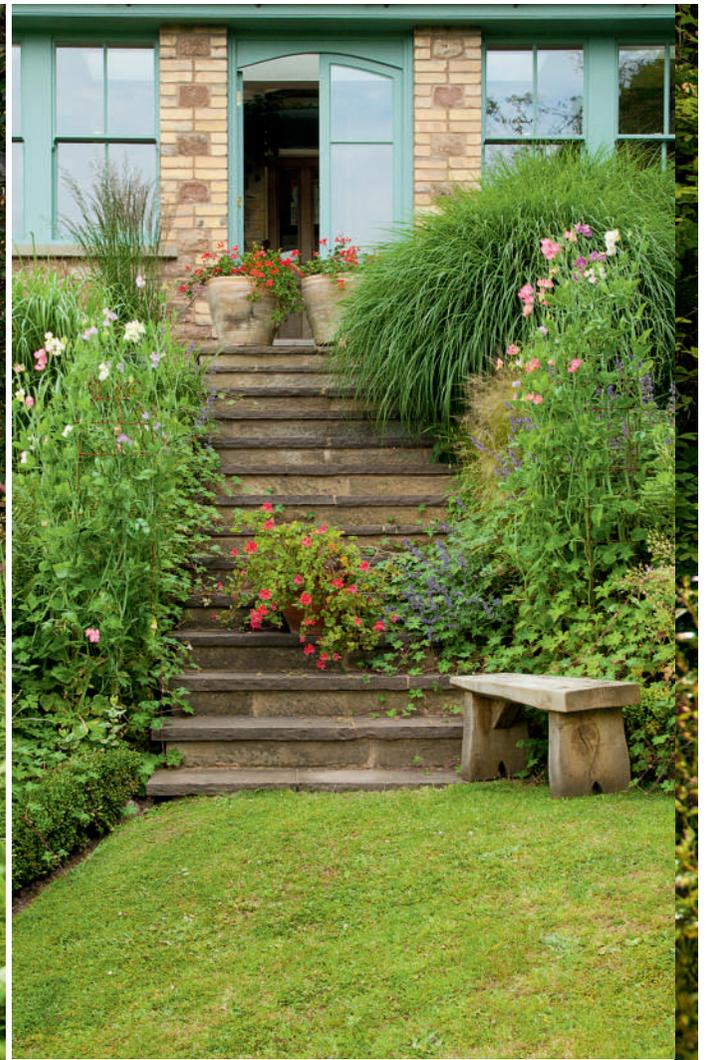




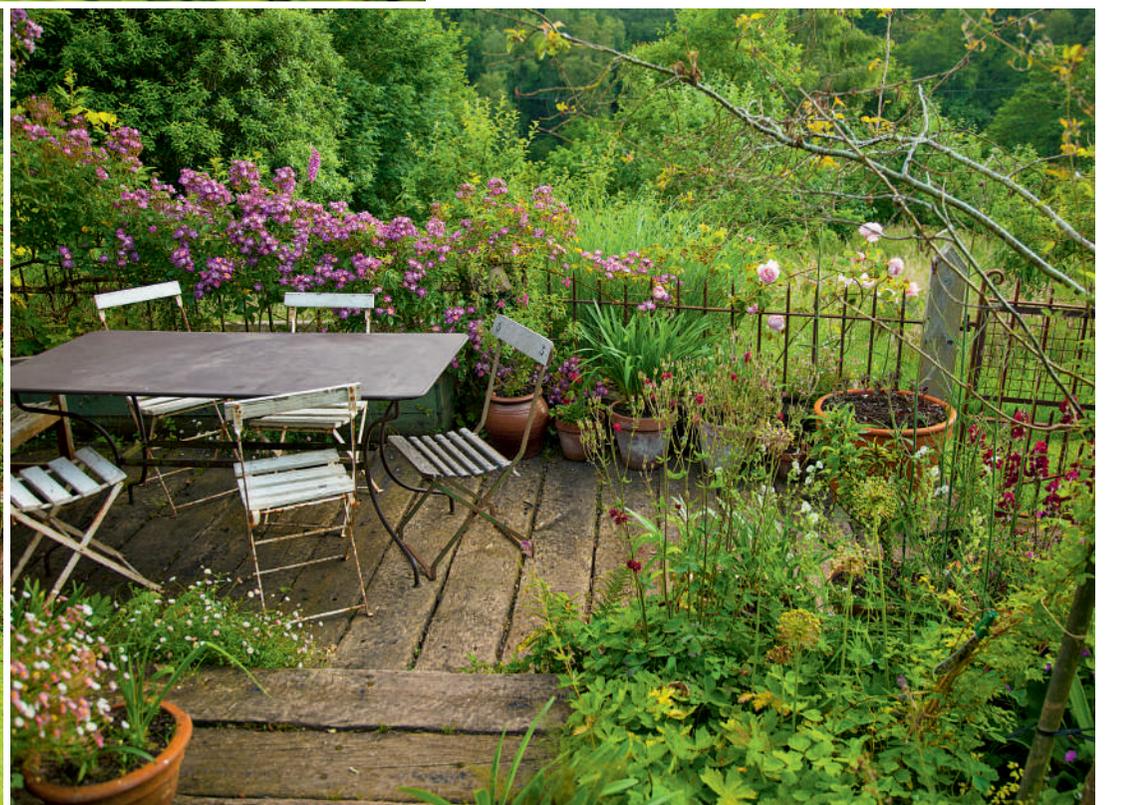
garden with a woodland view, and it has to feel that it's part of it, so we borrow the landscape. I like the feeling of going around a garden and not knowing what's around the corner - a little bit of mystery. There's the sense that you've got to keep going to find out what's here.'

A wander through the levels reveals an obvious love for and knowledge of plants, and Jane speaks passionately about their star performers. 'I couldn't live without euphorbias,' she says. 'They go all through the year. *E. cyparissias* 'Fens Ruby' comes out early in spring; *E. characias* subsp. *wulfenii* is magnificent; and *E. stygiana* is large, architectural and green all winter. They are my desert island plants.' ►

**LEFT** The sunset lights up Jane and Leslie's box-edged beds filled with classics such as euphorbia, astrantia, achillea and geraniums.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** A glimpse of one of Jane and Leslie's many intriguing little areas down a shady path; a new garden room gave the couple the opportunity to relandscape the back garden and put in steps, where they grow sweet peas and pots of pelargoniums; one of several spots for a sit down in the garden, if they ever took one; the arbour in the orchard arbour, called 'the bothy', is fringed with red *Rosa moyesii* and white *R. 'Goldfinch'* behind.





With a name like Ramblers, it's no surprise the couple has a dazzling array of roses, most strikingly a magic muddle of 'Rambling Rector', 'Paul's Himalayan Musk' and 'Cornelia' along the side of the house.

The lowest terrace is a full-length double border that has both late-spring and late-summer flushes. One side features colourful mainstays including foxgloves and geums, while the other is a new project, a gravel border with a pared-down palette of *Allium nigrum* and *Stipa gigantea*. It adds a contemporary planting note to the otherwise country-cottage feel.

Just below is a meadow, with an orchard of apple trees that was planted 10 years ago. Last year, they had a bumper crop, and made apple juice and cider to sell over the garden wall with Jane's bunches of cut flowers. Passers-by take advantage of this home-grown produce, and visitors often enjoy taking something home with them to remember the

garden. 'We have opened for the NGS for 12 years now,' Jane says. 'It's lovely to share the garden with people, and you learn so much, because through them you see the garden in a different way.'

It doesn't seem like she and Leslie ever stop, but with all of this activity and the garden to look after, how do they manage? 'We don't ever really get the chance to sit down,' Jane explains. 'We have to be honest about the fact that we are not creating new areas anymore, but instead trying to make things easier as we grow older. We made quite a lot of changes last winter in the veg patch, as we had a lot of grass to mow, so we put in bark paths. From a maintenance point of view, it is easier, and it looks better, and has also deterred a lot of pests such as rabbits and slugs. But we still spend the majority of our time in the garden. In summer, it can be 90% because of the large veggie patch and the cut flowers I grow for weddings.'

They do have some help from a local man, Henry, who trims the hedges, and a couple of gardeners who pop in once a week. 'Beth and Julie come on Monday mornings and they are brilliant,' Jane explains. 'They are very positive and love the garden, and we work as a team.'

Jane and Leslie's enthusiasm and energy is extraordinary, but they insist that it's not a one-way street, and what their plot gives back makes it more than worth the effort. 'I have to go around the garden at some point every day,' says Jane. 'It's a passion - I can't imagine not doing it. It is a touchstone, and whatever else is going on in your life, sometimes just a bit of time out in the garden sorts things out in your head and gives you time to think.' She and Leslie smile at each other, and I can see that although chuffed to be named champions, just living at Ramblers is prize enough for them.

**Ramblers, Lower Common, Aylburton, Glos GL15 6DS. Open in May and June for the NGS. [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk)**

**ABOVE** At the edge of the garden is a pretty seating area backed by an enormous leylandii hedge. *Rosa* 'New Dawn' and akebia, the chocolate vine, have decided to grow up it, so it has now become a curtain of planting in summer.

*'It's lovely to share the garden with people... through them you see the garden in a different way'*

**Jane & Leslie's planting tips ►**

# RAMBLERS NOTEBOOK

## JANE & LESLIE'S TOP PLANTING TIPS

- **Agapanthus** are really useful in the garden once the first flush is over, as you can stick pots of them in gaps.
- **You have got to have alchemilla** in a country garden. We think it's lovely, as it grows in places where you couldn't have anything else. Shear it to get a repeat again in September.
- **'Cornelia'** is the earliest rose to come out, and it repeats again later on.
- **Things we love** include the early flowering little white *Allium cowanii*; *Nepeta* 'Six Hill's Giant'; and *Clematis viticellas*, which are amazing.
- **Geranium 'Salome'** is another favourite of ours, as its pale lilac flower is pretty, and it runs all over the place in July and August.
- **The rootstock we chose for our apples trees** was half standard (ELMA M25), so that we wouldn't have to climb up to collect the fruit.



## ALSO IN THE AREA

If you visit the garden at Ramblers, Jane and Leslie recommend these other nearby places:

- **GARDEN Hampton Court** This garden and castle in Herefordshire had a big effect on the couple, especially the green oak structures and the planting. Hope-Under-Dinmore, Leominster, Herefordshire HR6 0PN. Tel: +44 (0)1568 797777. [www.hamptoncourt.org.uk](http://www.hamptoncourt.org.uk)
- **PLANTS RHS Malvern Spring Festival** Jane and Leslie always go to this show in May to buy plants. 'We love it there, as there are lots of nurseries in the one place, and the quality is good.' To find out more, go to [www.threecounties.co.uk/rhsmalvern](http://www.threecounties.co.uk/rhsmalvern)
- **NURSERY T. Cackett Nursery** Jane and Leslie go here for fantastic plants locally. Little Drybrook, Coleford, Glos GL16 8LP. Tel: +44 (0)1594 563266.



## PLANT PICKS

Jane and Leslie love plants and have a long list of favourites they recommend. Jane's must-have grass is *Carex buchananii* (above left) - 'It's beautiful even in winter, and allows other plants to have their drama.' *Achillea* 'Mondpagode' is a large, tall variety (above right) that offers height and bulks out to make an impressive, eye-catching clump.

## GARDEN CHALLENGES

**WEEDS:** Jane and Leslie confess that their biggest struggle in the garden is perennial weeds. 'We have a tremendous amount of ground elder,' Jane admits. 'We can't get rid of it, so we hide it by positioning plants near it that are going to bulk up quickly and weaken its spread, pushing it back.'



## TRUE GRIT

The new border is mulched with gravel, and as most plants chosen for here don't like standing in this clay strip, it has made a massive difference. It features *Allium nigrum* and *Stipa gigantea*, with *Verbena bonariensis*.

## THE SHAPE OF THINGS

The impressive hedges that create rooms in the garden are a mix of beech, hornbeam, holly and box. Jane and Leslie have them clipped with a rounded profile to keep the shape soft, and cut windows and gateways to give glimpses of other areas. The arch of this gate into the orchard was made possible with the use of a reinforcing bar to create the shape and give support to the structure.

