

How to get the WOW FACTOR

Rosemary Alexander was the first woman to be elected a fellow of the Society of Garden Designers. She tells Ciar Byrne about her long career and shows us her beautiful Sussex hideaway

What is it that gives a garden the wow factor? Having walked around Rosemary Alexander's garden at Sandhill Farm House in Petersfield, West Sussex, I conclude it comes from caring about plants and the people who will enjoy them in equal measure.

Alexander, the first woman to be elected a fellow of the Society of Garden Designers and the founder of the English Gardening School at Chelsea Physic Garden, has considered every tiny detail, even the visitors' parking place, where she has installed an avenue of pleached hornbeams. This was originally underplanted with holly, but deer kept on eating it, so it has been replaced with the feathery switch grass *Panicum virgatum* and alliums.

The moment visitors walk into her front garden Alexander wants them to be surprised. Entering through an arch in a beech hedge, which creates a sense of mystery, you come into the green and white garden. Evergreen structure is provided by a pair of columnar Irish fastigate yews, a low box hedge and balls-and-cloud-pruned *Phillyrea angustifolia*. A white-leaved actinidia climbs up the wall. The year begins with snowdrops, galanthus 'S Arnott', and pale narcissi planted towards the back of the



border, so they are not disturbed too much. Later these are replaced by *Ammi visnaga* and white cosmos, which Alexander has grown from seed in the large open shed she uses for raising plants.

There is a pair of graceful silver birches which were here when Alexander and her late husband bought the property 20 years ago. The bark is washed every spring to retain its pale beauty. Beneath nestles a Ballerina dwarf apple tree underplanted with crocuses, *Cyclamen coum* and lilies-of-the-

valley. From there you can take the 'motorway' leading to the house and terrace, edged with 'Hidcote' lavender, thyme and *Dianthus cruentus* (the blood pink). Or you can meander through the woodland garden past rodgersia, hostas, ferns, white corydalis, self-sown arum lilies, silver-leaved brunnera 'Jack Frost' and early-flowering shrubs such as hamamelis (witchhazel), sweet-scented *Daphne bhoulua* and a large magnolia 'Galaxy'.

This was originally a flat area overgrown with trees, but Alexander added height with layers of peat, as well as a little pond – she likes to have small water features sprinkled throughout the garden for the birds. The pale pink rambling rose 'Paul's Himalayan Musk' has spread through a dying

prunus. In one corner a circle has been cleared around a *Ginkgo biloba* tree with a backdrop of golden bamboo.

In front of the old farmhouse, its doors and windows painted in Farrow & Ball's pale green Lichen, is a peaceful terrace planted with effective combinations such as the rose 'Olivia Rose Austin' with clematis 'Princess Diana', and a 'New Dawn' rose with clematis 'Blue Angel'. A giant *Euphorbia x pasteurii* 'John Phillips' provides a theatrical effect with its sputnik flowers. Pink roses, purple nepeta and large white *Crambe* ➤



Clockwise from left: the view of the countryside from the house; a blue chair forms a focal point in the back garden; the archway through a beech hedge; the front of the farmhouse; an 'Olivia Rose Austin' rose and clematis 'Princess Diana' on the terrace; a 'Perle d'Or' rose



cordifolia (flowering sea kale) surround a circular pond.

When Alexander first saw the garden she noticed its potential to create a series of 'garden rooms'. In the back garden she and her small team of gardeners have created an entirely different atmosphere. Against a north-facing wall Alexander has planted a *Hydrangea seemannii*, which her great friend, the late landscape architect Anthony Du Gard Pasley, told her would never grow. He was proved wrong. Under this is a tiny knot garden with a broken pot he gave her at its centre.

A 'Rambling Rector' rose weaves through an old apple tree and a path leads down to the kitchen garden, where raised beds are filled with neat rows of lettuces, peas and beans, overlooked by a small round summerhouse, fit for a garden elf.

A central stone walkway is framed by an avenue of silver-leaved weeping pears, leading down to the focal point – a high-backed blue chair flanked by pots of courgettes and African marigolds. Even on a damp June day

the scent of roses fills the air, including Graham Stuart Thomas's favourite 'Perle d'Or'.

The lawn and herbaceous border look out over a spectacular view of fields, hills and woods, with the hedge pruned in waves to imitate the treeline. There are grasses galore, including the blue *Festuca glauca*, as well as an inviting bench framed by the indigo salvia 'Caradonna', pink astringia and tall orange foxtail lilies.

Alexander, who was born in Bridge of Allan in Scotland, married young at 18 and moved to a house with a large garden near Dunblane – which she did not know what to do with.

'A girlfriend, Ruth, said I really ought to get to know about gardening. She gave me the Sunday Times Gardening Book by Lanning Roper, who was a very well-known landscape designer, and that changed my life,' she recalls.

The same girlfriend introduced her to an Edinburgh landscape architect.

'She came out to see me and said: "You're quite young to have a responsibility like this, so I'm going to

tell you why I'm doing everything". She explained to me how you design a garden, and how you make borders – and I became completely hooked. Every time I could I went off and looked at plants and gardens and began to teach myself their names.'

When her marriage began to fall apart, and with four young children in tow, she decided to pursue garden design as a career. She worked as an apprentice for an international landscape design company, first in Glasgow for three years and then in its London office.

'They didn't want me there because it was completely male-dominated,' she says. 'I was the first woman, so they made life as difficult for me as possible. They made me work on Christmas morning – I was the only person in the office and I had four children and was divorced.'

Once in London she studied garden design at the Inchbald School under Du Gard Pasley and John Brookes. She recalls: 'I was a hopeless student. I was so thrilled to escape from Scotland that I went clubbing all night



and was pretty useless first thing in the morning.’ (The children were at boarding school by this time.)

‘Somehow, even though I wasn’t very good at studying, the tutors became really good friends.’

She went on to take over the teaching at Inchbald and in 1983 decided she wanted to set up her own gardening school. She approached Chelsea Physic Garden and they agreed. To begin with she admits it was a rather amateur affair – ‘not quite ladies who lunch but slightly that’ – but it has become much more professional over the years, with alumni including garden designers Jo Thompson, Joe Swift and Cleve West.

Meanwhile, Alexander had met her second husband, a judge, and they took a lease on Stoneacre, a National Trust property in Kent where she maintained the 15-acre garden alongside running her school. It was here that she gave Fergus Garrett his first job before he went to work at Great Dixter.

Twenty years ago her daughter persuaded her to move to Sandhill

‘I think we’re so lucky – those of us who have gardens’

Farm House, where she hosts visiting garden groups from all over the world as well as her students.

As such a sociable person, she has found lockdown particularly difficult. ‘If you really want the truth, I’ve absolutely hated it. Hated waking up in the morning and thinking I can’t go anywhere. I miss my London life hugely. In my normal life I spend three nights a week in London and the rest of the time down here, and I think that’s pretty perfect.

‘My husband died just over two years ago, he was my great adviser and critic, and I found it really hard when he wasn’t coming down here any more. I miss having his criticism and encouragement. That’s why I like having all the groups, but the past few

months having no groups and no people, I’ve thought: “What’s the point in doing this?” So, I’m very pleased we’re starting to come out of it now.

‘I think we’re so lucky – those of us who have gardens or a place in the country – because you can keep sane that way. If I was locked up in a tiny London flat with four screaming children... I don’t know how people do it.’

What does the future hold for a woman who has already packed so much into her life?

‘Just to keep going with the school as long as I can. I get very cross with people who say, “When are you going to retire?” What’s the point in saying that? I love what I do. I’ve still got plenty of energy and I’ll only give up when I’m forced to through ill health or something like that.

‘I’m still designing a bit, I’m still writing books and I’ve now been asked to design a rose garden for a wedding venue in South Korea. I hope I can keep going here for a long, long time.’ ■