

The Irish Garden

50 BERRIED PLANTS FOR AUTUMN

20 pages of
What-to-do-now
and Know-how

Visit to a
Piet Oudolf
meadow garden
in West Cork

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Gerry Daly answers
your questions in
Know-how



Helen Dillon writes
about a trio of
good garden trees



Mary Keenan reports
from her Co. Laois
garden

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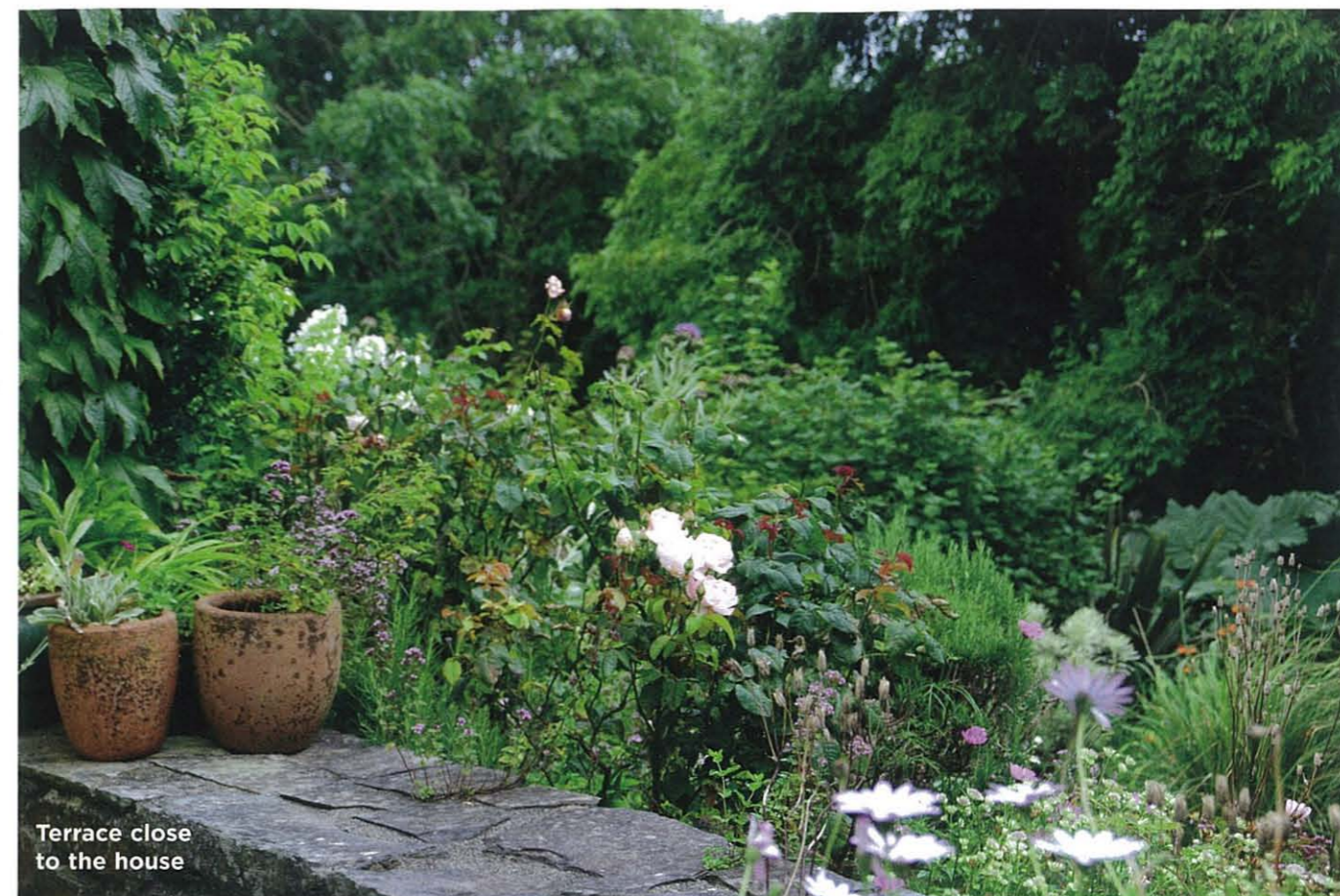
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Terrace close to the house

Glenkeen garden

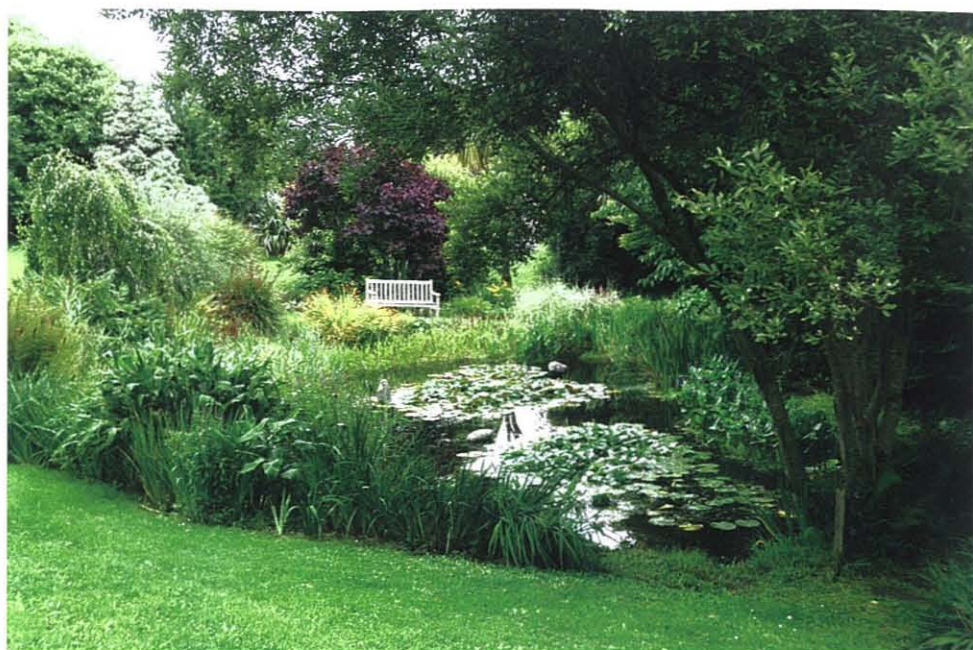
Tucked away down the boreens of West Cork — the sort with a grass strip up the middle — Glenkeen is a garden of felicitous happenstance, as Ulrike Crespo and Michael Satke related to **Gerry Daly** when he visited recently

Both Michael and Ulrike were interested in looking at gardens, more than in gardening as such, until the opportunity to make a garden arose. “I first came to Ireland on a visit with my grandparents in the 1970s for a fortnight and I loved the countryside,” recounted Ulrike. “I visited again in 1991 and drove from Sligo all the way down the west coast, arriving in Bantry. It was one of those fantastic summers and I looked around for a house to buy. There was a farmhouse here for sale and it had a view of the sea at Roaringwater Bay. A field in front of it swept down to the shore and I thought it would be really nice to have that access to

the seashore, so we looked into it and the American lady who owned it was ready to sell. It was just a cow meadow with lots of brambles and nettles.”

A new house was built, well sheltered by twenty-five large elm trees, and, around it, Ulrike began to plant mainly flowers and shrubs, especially roses, lots of roses. “I had seen *Rosa rugosa* planted by the sea in the north of Germany and I wanted to re-capture the wonderful scent and flowering, and it is very good seaside plant. There was no overall idea for the garden, I just planted little by little, reading about plants and which needed sunshine or shade.”

The house is approached by a driveway down the hill from the breen, and on one side there is a lawn area with borders, some with roses and hydrangeas. The entrance to the house, facing north, is quite shaded and has been filled with rhododendrons and hydrangeas. At the other side of the house, the ground continues its fall to the old meadow, and this fall is dealt with by a series of stone steps with retaining walls and borders. These borders are well-drained, open to the sunshine and planted with plants that enjoy those conditions, such as agapanthus, fennel, lavender, oregano, African daisy, columbine and globe artichoke. At the bottom



Pond in the hollow at the bottom of the slope

of the slope, well-placed in a hollow, is a pond, planted around with a selection of small trees, such as *Cercis* 'Forest Pansy', weeping birch and a large native grey sally. The pond-edge planting is a mixture of native species, such as bulrushes and yellow flag iris, with exotics including blue-flowered pontederia, pink waterlilies and restios.

Michael also had a summer home a few kilometres away and the couple met in 1995. Michael had ideas, visions, for the garden, and they set about new planting of trees to replace those lost when the elms all died from Dutch elm disease. "We didn't want to make an overall plan," said Michael. "We started in stages with different themes — a bamboo theme, a water theme, a rhododendron theme. The idea was to keep it very natural but to work with nature to create interest that encouraged visitors to explore the garden, to lead them through it, so they saw different things, something new and special. But we had to work with the site too — some parts were wet and some were dry or rocky so we had to work with the existing ground. We are both interested in art and American land art was an influence when we were deciding on where to plant or not. It was like art influencing or combining with nature. So every year there was a new project, new planting or a meadow or an access way."

The couple have visited many gardens in other countries, notably recently in Cornwall, because the climate is mild like West

Cork. This is not so much for gathering ideas because they have their own approach but to see what other gardens were doing. "We love to see gardens, out of curiosity and to enjoy them. Some of the Cornish gardens had trees 150 years old. That made me very envious," laughed Michael. "Many people are still in the English landscape style, but we wanted more wilderness, so half of the garden now is wild, the other half is garden, but the two are mixed and sit side by side, not cut away."

"We did not look at other gardens for ideas because the land is different and we had to work with what was here," said Ulrike. "It is nice to see the flowers, and some might suit our garden. I like the flowers and the colours. I like blue flowers in all shades of blue and pink and white, but not red, especially in spring as it is too strong. In autumn, yellow, orange and red are okay because it is the season. So we learn by doing, reading too."

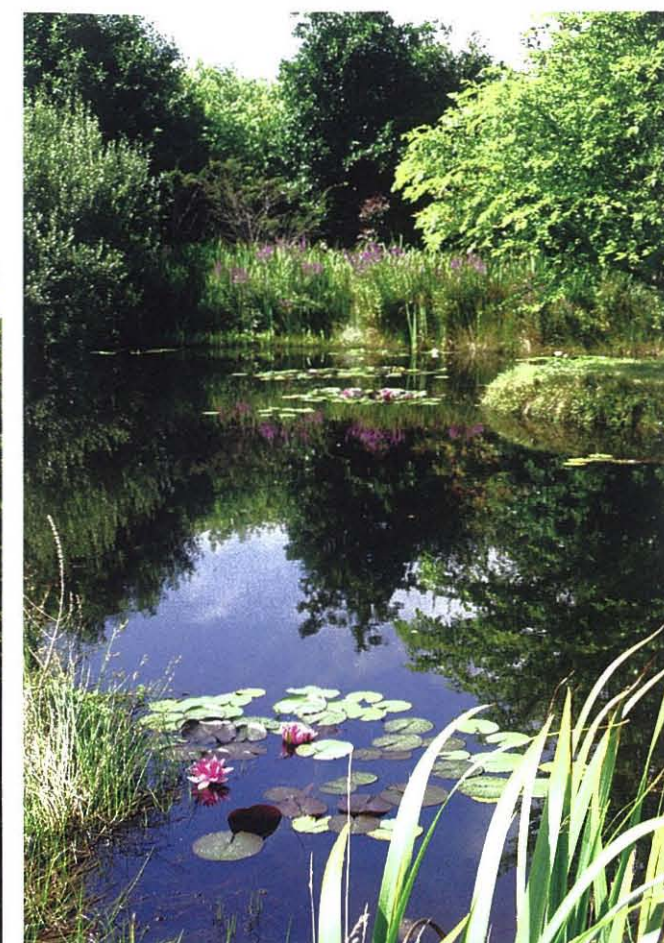
"An Irish garden should not be too exotic but work in with the countryside around, which is why you see just ordinary trees as you approach the garden", said Michael. "We wanted to make a meadow with grass and flowers. We saw a small advertisement in a gardening magazine for Piet Oudolf, the Dutch designer of meadows, and we tried to contact him for his expertise. Eventually we got him on the phone and asked him would he come to Ireland to make a meadow garden for us. He said: 'Hold on.' Then yes, he could come next week! It was one of his earlier projects, bigger than some he had done. He came here, and we also visited him in the Netherlands and we worked on colours of flowers."



Central area of the old meadow, part wild, part garden



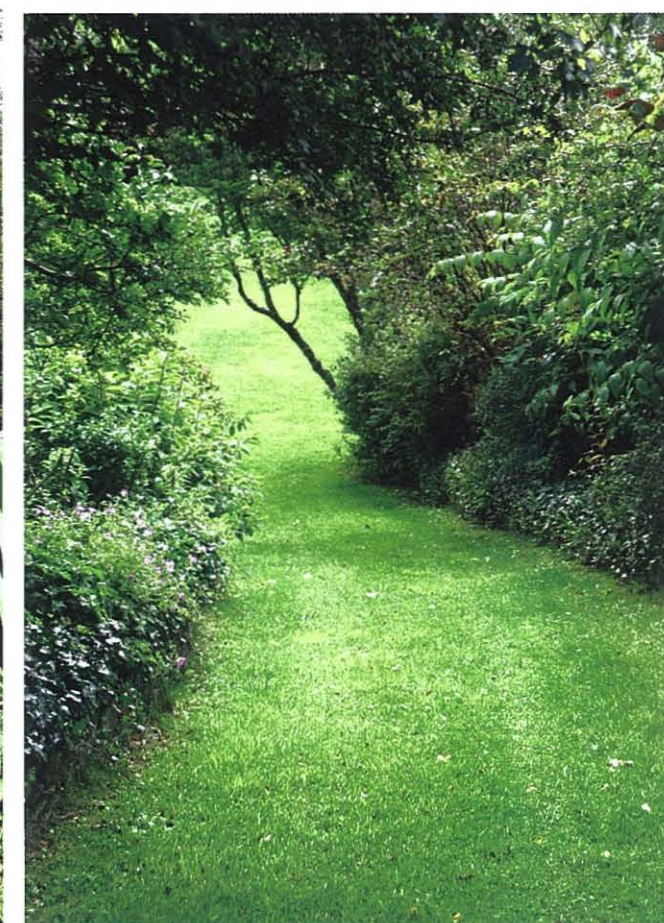
Path to a sea-viewing platform



Large pond with water-lilies and native plants



Metal gateway that invites the viewer onwards



Mown grass path and massed shrub planting



View across the flowering meadow garden

Purple *Stachys officinalis*, pink astilbe and blue geranium

Meadow garden punctuated by clumps of golden oat grass

“There was a lot of preparation work, once the plan was finalised,” said Ulrike. “The ground had to be ploughed, part of the old cow meadow, and the stones taken off, and it was ploughed twice. It took nearly three years, spraying and cultivating to get rid of all wild grasses and weeds in the soil. And then the plants arrived in May.” “There were two big lorries came from Holland and they could not fit down the boreens and had to be off-loaded and the trays of plants carried down the road,” said Michael. “There were 30,000 young plants and we had fifteen

people planting for a week, the first two days in the rain. Everything was marked out by Piet, each group of plants, which plants and how many, and this was all listed, and the plants were laid out alphabetically so that they were easy to find. It was very exciting!”

“He came back two years later to see how the plants were growing, but he has not seen it since,” said Ulrike. “I could have strangled him because he told us the plants would prevent weeds — after three years, no more weeds.” Michael said: “But we have four women for two days a week this summer to keep on top of weeds. We are putting in more grasses to make it easier. We invited him to visit after ten years but it was impossible for him, he was too busy.” “Some things did not do well. Echinacea, which was an important part, died out. Geraniums are good. Some things just disappeared. So it has changed somewhat”, said Ulrike.

The meadow garden peaks in late summer with many plants in flower in August and the grasses in full flow, and it is the jewel in the crown of the garden. However, it is charming earlier in the summer with the show of new foliage and some early flowers, including daylilies, astrantia, euphorbia and phlox. And it looks well in winter while withered and gone to seed with the seed-heads of grasses, veronicastrum, sedum, monarda, salvia, astilbe and perovskia, among others. While Piet Oudolf’s planted meadows or prairies, part of the ‘new



Pockets of blue, pink and purple flowers woven through various grasses

perennial movement’, are familiar from photographs, it is a great pleasure to actually stand in the garden, which is about 4,000 square metres and rises with the natural slope of the land, revealing itself in myriad angles. The plants that have persisted best are mostly those that like moist soil.

This was a relatively early Piet Oudolf design with blocks of planting repeated informally, the grasses about one-quarter of the number of plants. The grasses used include the golden oat grass, *Stipa gigantea*, and the smaller pony tail grass, *Stipa tenuissima*, now called *Nassella tenuissima*. The golden oat grass is particularly important as it punctuates the whole planting with silvery, later airy, tall golden, plumes. The ponytail grass is very light, bends and moves in the slightest breeze. All of the grasses used have a light, almost fog-like mistiness. Tufted hair grass, *Deschampsia caespitosa*, is medium-sized and airy too. *Sesleria autumnalis* is low-growing, yellowish, with fine seed-heads. Switch grass, *Panicum virgatum*, has light, diffuse seed-heads, produced late in the season against foliage that colours well. The grasses offer a softness of texture and biscuit-colour against which the flowers stand out.

The dominant flowers, those making the greatest impact are *Veronicastrum virginicum* ‘Fascination’, *Stachys officinalis*, lythrum, *Persicaria ampexicaulis*, astilbe and sedum. The tall, bolt-upright stems of veronicastrum in a violet-purple shade are very dominant and last a long time in flower and as seed-heads. The lower stems of *Stachys officinalis* brings the purple to a lower level, repeated blocks of colour linking separate areas. This variety is ‘Hummelo’, the name of Piet Oudolf’s home nursery and garden in Holland, and the pink form is ‘Rosea’. Varieties of *Salvia*

nemorosa also perform this linking role. The rosy purple of *Lythrum virgatum* is very effective in drifts of about mid-height. *Persicaria* is not so noticeable from a distance but fills large areas with a flowering airiness. Chinese astilbe, later to flower than other astilbes, forms great blocks of intense colour the opposite of soft grasses. A purple-leaved form of sedum also fills blocks of dark colour, both flower heads and dark leaves contributing.

Many other plants have a supporting role and appear as occasionals. Dark ink-blue

agastache pitches in a brooding touch. *Nepeta* is used to give a powder-blue mistiness, as do the plumes of *perovskia*. Echinops or globe thistle contribute round flowers and later seed-heads. Geraniums make great swathes of low colour. *Knautia macedonica* produces clouds of dark wine-coloured pincushion flowers. Carrot-family selenium appears with flat-topped white-green flowers on upright stems here and there. Common *origanum* provides low mats of pink-purple flowers. Sea lavender or *limonium* carries tumbleweed-like heads of tiny blue-purple flowers. Joe Pye weed or *eupatorium* appears here and there, not as much used as might be expected in moist soil, but it might prove perhaps too tall for the scheme, which, overall, is quite low.

Amsonia with blue flowers was used in some places and later it would offer good yellow autumn colour. *Echinacea* or purple cone-flower, normally an essential of these prairie meadows is represented in a few places, but it copes badly with wet conditions. As a rule, the planting uses clump-forming perennials, not strongly spreading



Purple salvia, pink astilbe, blue perovskia and purple veronicastrum and wild purple loosestrife in the background



A view across the wild meadow with purple loosestrife, white meadow sweet, rushes and yellow flag earlier



Wide view of the meadow garden with bird sculptures placed like an entrance and a backdrop of trees

rhizomatus species. This gives the planting design a degree of longevity that it might not otherwise have. Only in places have geraniums and persicaria been over-exuberant, and even these will wither back retreating fully in winter. Self-sowing plants were avoided too.

Interestingly, to one side of the Piet Oudolf garden is a large area of the original wild meadow, full of yellow flag iris, frothy white meadow sweet and the upright purple spires of purple loosestrife, some rushes and meadow buttercup earlier. This is remarkably beautiful in its own right, practically an Irish prairie garden applying the same planting logic. This area is largely self-sown but has been encouraged by lifting and moving wild plants. Only the queen-of-the-prairie, *Filipendula rubra*, like a pink meadow sweet but flowering in early summer, is a non-native plant.

Now there are no more projects planned as the garden has found a balance between garden and nature, maintenance and wilderness. There are sweeping areas of mown grass that meet tree-planted areas and also wild, untouched meadow. The large pond, more like a small lake, is natural and was just dug out of a wet area and the land around drains into it. Trees are chosen to match the soil conditions, alder and willow in wet places, oak and hazel where it is drier. Maintenance will now involve thinning plantings of trees and in some places to maintain the wonderful sea views, which were part of the attraction of the site from the beginning.

While there are some monumental stone sculptures, Michael and Ulrike feel that sculpture can take over a garden. Michael feels that gateways are better because they fill the structural value of sculpture without being too dominant, creating openings and linkages within the garden space, an invitation to walk further. There are a number of large gate pillars in metal with patterns in the metal work, placed at key points and they are certainly welcoming. The sculptor Andy Goldsworthy, who makes art with stones, sticks, leaves, flowers and other natural materials, visited Glenkeen to make some temporary natural sculptures, which leave no trace, except in photographs. Glenkeen is a magical place, a collaborative work, and holds a balanced space between nature and garden. ■



Looking across a planting of purple sedum, airy deschampsia, rosy-purple lythrum and blue perovskia



Layers of purple and pink stachys, tall spires of veronicastrum and spires of purple loosestrife on the left



A large book on Glenkeen, the work of five photographers, has been published by Hirmer Publishers and features the garden, its locale, sky and sea.