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# Artistic progression

Using a palette inspired by a Bonnard painting, Posy Gentles has introduced colour to complement the original planting that has emerged from the overgrown garden of Thomas Croft's Kentish barn

TEXT STEPHANIE DONALDSON | PHOTOGRAPHS EVA NEMETH



The farmyard garden is flanked in classic Wealden style by the old farmhouse and its converted barn. *Linaria purpurea* edges the repurposed farm pond in the foreground, with the orange daylily *Hemerocallis fulva* lining the other banks





ABOVE The sunken garden with its recently reconstructed brick walls and lily pond. BELOW One of the original crumbling brick terraces that has yet to be restored, where perennial sweet peas, roses, poppies and delphiniums create a colourful display



ABOVE Looking from the sunken garden towards the farmhouse, built of local red brick with a traditional peg-tile roof. BELOW The view across the pond to the topiary garden and Thomas's grandfather's workshop, now a table-tennis pavilion





BELOW The barn's green oak deck, set slightly at an angle to the garden's main axis, is edged with silvery plantings of cardoons and lavender. OPPOSITE *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna' thrives in the sunken garden by steps leading up to the topiary garden

Ideally, when a garden is passed down from one generation to another, it retains echoes from the past, while allowing the current custodians to make their own mark. Some may choose to start again, especially when faced with tumbling walls and bramble thickets, as architect Thomas Croft and his journalist wife Max were. However, the couple knew that they wanted to retain as many existing elements as possible in their Whitstable garden. Formerly a farmyard, it had been laid out by Thomas's grandfather in the Twenties and replanted by his mother in the late Eighties. Fortunately, they found the perfect person to help them with this task – Posy Gentles. Posy specialises in reviving and restoring old gardens, rather than imposing a new design. As she gradually unearths plants lost among weeds, reshapes overgrown shrubs and tames topiary, the gardens are able to emerge, like Sleeping Beauty, from their slumbers.

When Thomas's grandparents bought the timbered farmhouse, it was surrounded by fields with nothing between it and the sea; these days Whitstable nudges up against its seaward boundary. The property has a typical Kentish layout – the farmhouse and barn at right angles to each other on two sides of the farmyard with its original pond. Where laden carts once rolled through double-height central doors on the barn's farmyard side and left empty out of single-height doors on the opposite side are now openings, which frame a view of the garden from the barn. This has become Thomas and Max's home. 'My grandparents lived in the farmhouse until the Sixties but the barn was always empty,' he says. 'I renovated it as a retirement home for my parents, then my mother lived here until her death in 2002. Now we divide our time between here and London.'

'My grandfather did the garden design,' Thomas adds. 'He retired early and certainly laid many of the brick walls and paths himself – bricklaying was a fashionable gentleman's pastime in the Thirties – but the mortar is poor and the standard of bricklaying rather amateur. The walls near the house are a bit better and we haven't had to do much work on them, but the further away he got from the house, the worse their quality.'

'I guess my grandparents must have done a lot of planting, but by the time my parents arrived in the late Eighties, the garden was in a pretty poor state. Some vigorous roses, which may date from the Fifties, have since emerged from the undergrowth. My mother was a keen gardener and undertook a lot of renovation during

the Nineties. Her aim was to "plant a lot of bushy things" and she was out there every day until stopped by illness. After that, nobody did much other than mow the lawns and cut the hedges until 2015, by which time the everlasting sweet peas and brambles had largely taken over.'

Unusually, the garden is bowl shaped, which gives it an inward-facing feel. It is looked down on, particularly from the farmhouse (which no longer belongs to the family), and was not designed to be seen from the barn. 'We recently rebuilt all the walls around the middle of the garden, as they were just a pile of bricks, and this helped to reorientate the focus,' says Thomas. 'Some people would feel overlooked by the farmhouse. But as we mainly live in London, we feel the space around us is private.'

Posy set to work and, once the brambles were cleared, plants started appearing. Some had to go, some were reduced, and some will always be there whatever she

does – the bright pink perennial sweet peas being a case in point. 'Colour has been interesting due to the re-emergent roses,' she says. 'Their bright red, orange and yellow is not typical of this type of garden, so it has been slightly difficult. For example, white does not look good at all with those colours. Then I saw a painting by Pierre Bonnard at an exhibition and it was a great inspiration. He combined a lot of strong vibrant colours with browns and a sort of smeary blue. It brought to mind *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune', which is a perfect softening blue, as is the lilac blue of *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Fascination'. I have also used *Phlomis tuberosa*, which adds a sharp lilac pink, and teamed it

with the brown-leaved *Rodgersia pinnata* 'Chocolate Wing', *Ageratina altissima* 'Chocolate', dwarf bronze phormiums and bronze fennel to avoid a fruit-salad effect. You don't usually think of putting these shades with red, orange and yellow, but they really work.'

'Before Posy came there were lots of nice things about the garden, because it was quite wild,' says Max. 'But there was no colour. It would look gorgeous at the start of July with the sweet peas but, two weeks later, that was it for the rest of the year. What I notice now are the beautiful hues and the way they have given a much more curated and colourful focus to our house, as all the main windows face onto it.' Part horticultural archaeologist, part designer, part gardener, Posy continues to bring new life to this much-loved family garden □

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