

Menu *du Jour*

This delectable West Sussex prairie garden has evolved to make best use of ingenious plant ingredients to repel a voracious local rabbit population

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When Toby and Zoe Billington moved into their new house in West Sussex in 2012, they knew what kind of garden they wanted to create. “Zoe was keen to have a cottage garden around the house – blue agapanthus, purple nepeta and whites – and I wanted a prairie garden,” Toby recalls. The couple had applied for planning permission to convert half of the property’s adjoining field into garden, and this was where Toby envisaged having swathes of loose, naturalistic planting inspired by visits to Sussex Prairie Garden and his admiration of designer Piet Oudolf’s work.

What Toby hadn’t banked on, however, was the plague of rabbits that would do their utmost to undo his and garden designer Alex Bell’s plans. “We are *infested* by rabbits,” Toby laments. But, as a result of their predation over the years, he has now come up with a fairly rabbit-proof version of the prairie-planting style. Gone are the rudbeckia he envisaged – “I planted 500 rudbeckia I’d grown from bareroots over winter and the rabbits ate all but two in one night” – and in their place are *Inula magnifica*. “They’re pretty much the same colour, although the flowers aren’t quite as good,” he admits, with the forbearance of a gardener who has had to become philosophical in the face of adversity.

Toby and Zoe had seen photos of Alex Bell’s work online and enlisted his help soon after moving in. “Toby’s a keen gardener but he needed help with the design layout and getting a cohesive planting scheme together,” says Alex. “They’d done a lot of work on the house, and we did the first phase of work around the

Wide curving grass paths weave enticingly through the frosted prairie planting at Toby and Zoe Billington’s West Sussex home.





house in spring 2017, and the bit at the bottom of the garden the following year. It was pretty much a blank canvas – an empty field rather than anything else. We created something a little more formal close to the house, and further out into the garden, there’s a more naturalistic planting style.”

That informal style takes the form of a wide central grass path with great swathes of planting on either side and paths branching off here and there to cut through the planting in sweeping, immersive curves. Every so often there are sets of wavy hornbeam hedges that provide contrasting structure for the stands of grasses and perennials. “They’ve still got a bit of growing to do,” says Alex, “but you’re getting the idea. That formal and rigid backdrop against the very soft flowing planting works so well.” An especially nice detail is the way the curved tops of the hedges echo the curved ‘eyelid’ roof of the cottage.

At this time of year the garden is reduced to a frosty minimalism: those rusty-brown hornbeam hedges, drooping seedheads of *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Adagio’ and ‘Gracillimus’ and bundles of bolt-

Above The garden was designed to include nods to the cottage, with the curved tops of the hedges echoing the property’s ‘eyelid’ roof.

upright calamagrostis stems. There are the brown faded flowers of *Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’ and ghostly white stems of *Perovskia* ‘Blue Spire’. All have proved mercifully resistant to the attentions of the rabbits. “I did rabbit-fence the entire perimeter,” explains Toby, “but the badgers dig under it, and then the rabbits follow.”

Realising he was fighting a losing battle, he continued to focus on plants rabbits are less likely to eat. “Dahlias are a no-no. Dahlias and rudbeckias – and I’ve given up trying to grow prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*). But there are things they won’t eat. They don’t seem to like penstemons, which are a favourite of mine because they flower for so long. Rabbits also dislike geums, agapanthus, sedums and alliums, although the downside of the alliums is that the deer enjoy those – annoyingly they just eat the heads. Salvias are another brilliant plants that rabbits don’t like. We’ve also got daylilies, crocosmia and verbenas, and they won’t touch the miscanthus either, or the peonies around the house.”

A newer addition is *Althaea cannabina*, with its small pink flowers held on wiry stems. “The rabbits



Above left Fluffy frosted ceratostigma seedheads. **Above right** Darkly alluring sambucus foliage, now smartly trimmed with silver. **Right** Ice crystals appear in filigree detail on spent heads of *Hydrangea arborescens* ‘Annabelle’. **This image** Ice-rimed miscanthus seedheads.





Glaucous blue euphorbia, biscuity old hydrangea flowerheads and glowing tree foliage combine in textured layers.



are a curse on one level, but they do make me grow plants I wouldn't necessarily have considered myself. I found the althaea while searching online for rabbit-proof plants – we've planted it amid the verbena and it's fantastic – I definitely want to add more of it." Since dahlias are out of the question, Toby's growing red 'Blazing Sunset' geums from seed to use as substitute for the 'Bishop of Llandaff' dahlias the rabbits won't let him grow.

Unfortunately, a lot of the initial planting was lost before these hard lessons in what Sussex's rabbits will and won't eat were learned. "We did plant it with rabbits in mind, but they can be so destructive, scratching around the roots and still causing real damage," says Alex. Many of the original plants that survived that initial period have been split to fill the gaps the rabbits left, and Toby is a keen propagator, filling his greenhouse with seedlings, cuttings and perennials he buys in bulk as bareroot plants. Some of the plants need no help, self-seeding around enthusiastically like the aforementioned *Inula magnifica*. "It's all over the place to the point where I'm now digging it up," confirms Toby. "The

Above Fountaining grasses, their seedheads still intact, appear frozen in time, glazed with a frost on a sublimely clear winter's day.

Verbena bonariensis we planted is quite aggressive, too. It really likes the garden and it's quite a battle to keep that under control," adds Alex.

Toby does a lot of the gardening himself, with help one day a week from a gardener. Mulching the beds every year makes it easier to keep on top of weeds, while improving the heavy clay soil. "We used to use mushroom compost but I can't get hold of it now, so for the past two years I've used Strulch," says Toby. "It lasts for ages and, provided you add a good thick layer, it also prevents weeds. It's good for repelling slugs and snails, too, and it's very easy to spread."

When the frost glistens on skeletal shrubs and makes the mounds of grasses look like frozen fountains, it's clear to see that Toby and Alex have managed to achieve the garden Toby envisaged – despite the rabbits' determination to prevent it. "The grasses are the best in winter, and that effect is precisely why I've grown them," says Toby. "It's absolutely beautiful on a frosty winter's morning." ■

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