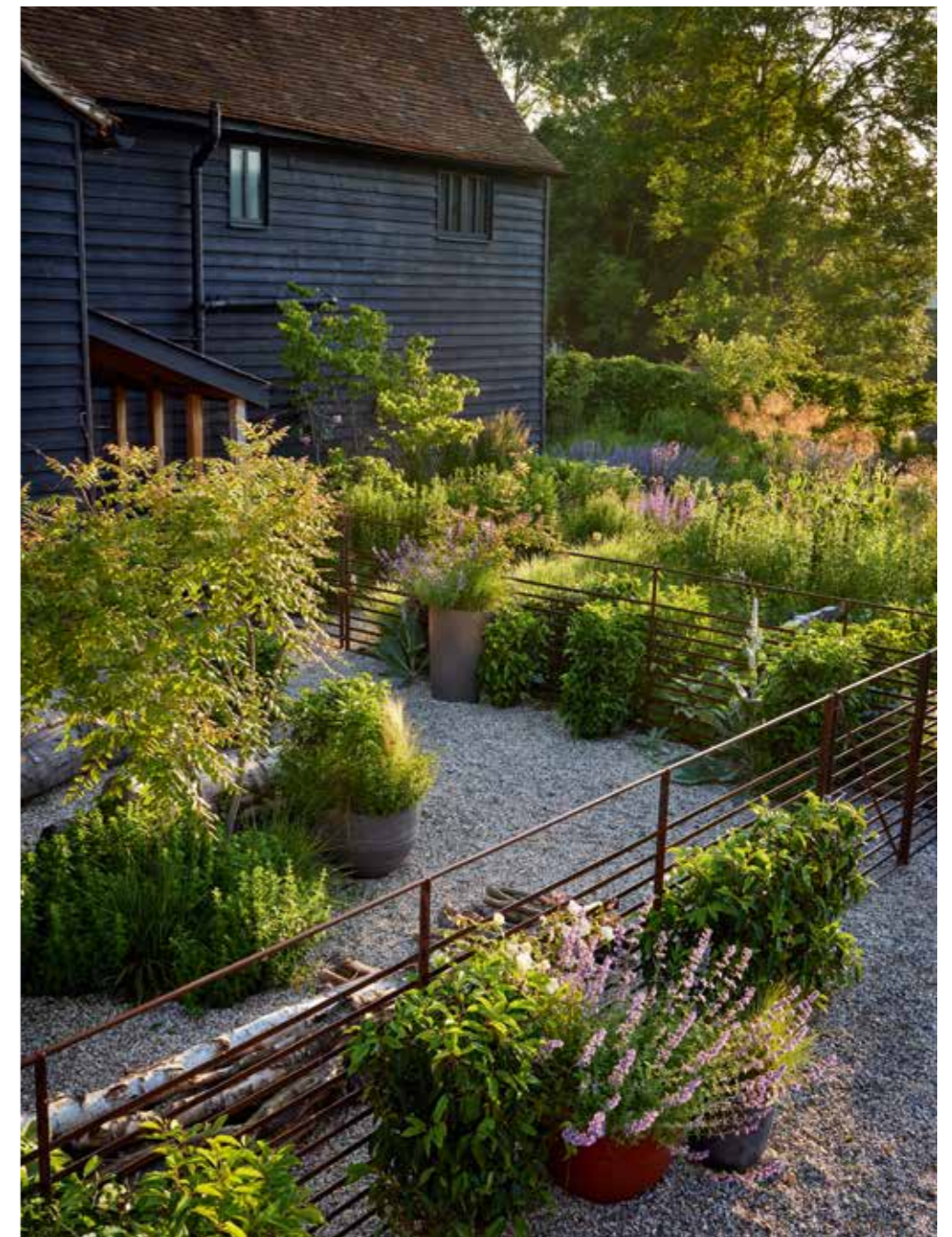


**IN BRIEF**

Name Church Barn.
What A naturalistic, low-maintenance garden in full sun.
Where Essex.
Size 700 square metres.
Soil Clay.
Climate Warm, temperate, low rainfall, dry in summer.
Hardiness zone USDA 8b.



Mixed blessings

In a quiet corner of Essex, designer Stefano Marinaz has replaced a lawn and parking space with a naturalistic garden of mixed planting that offers interest all year

WORDS MATTHEW BIGGS PHOTOGRAPHS ALISTER THORPE

When landscape architect Stefano Marinaz first arrived at this barn conversion next to an ancient village church, he found an extensive lawn and patio, and disproportionately large parking space that was completely out of context with the site. Luckily, the owners weren't wedded to the lawn and were happy to embrace Stefano's ideas for the area. "My portfolio appealed to them but they couldn't imagine my gardens in their space," says Stefano. "It wasn't until I visited to explain our vision that their new garden was born."

Rather than look to the imposing 18th-century barn for inspiration, Stefano took his cue from the surrounding countryside. "The idea was to create a structure using woody plants and hedges, and add grasses and perennials for texture and colour," he explains. His design is based around interconnecting informal paths that help to divide the garden and lead to three organically shaped open areas – one for sunbathing, another focused around a firepit and the third, a sunny spot where the owners enjoy their morning coffee.

To keep hard landscaping to a minimum, as well as to maximise planting space and unify the garden, Stefano used the light gravel that had covered the parking space. The terrace by the barn was enclosed with rusted-metal estate fencing, increasing the space ▷

Above left A carefully curated mix of woody plants interspersed with naturalistic grasses and perennials helps to ground the striking black barn conversion in its surroundings. Stefano has added new trees including the multi-stemmed *Koelreuteria paniculata*, to the right, along with a framework of *Prunus lusitanica* hedging.

Above The former car-parking area has been transformed into a stylish courtyard filled with pots from Atelier Vierkant holding plants including *Stipa tenuissima*, with its constantly moving stems trailing *Geranium Rozanne* (= 'Gerwat'); and stiff-stemmed *Limonium platyphyllum*. The area is bordered by bespoke rust-coloured, mild steel estate fencing that takes its inspiration from the horizontal feather-edge cladding of the barn.



Above Stefano's design is based around a series of interconnecting gravel paths that gently meander through a matrix of grasses and perennials, including *Phlomis russeliana* and *Salvia x sylvestris* 'Dear Anja'. This is supplemented throughout the year with annuals, such as *Nigella damascena*, and a range of bulbs that flower at different times of the year, including *Allium angulosum* 'Summer Beauty'. Structure and long-season interest is provided by *Prunus lusitanica* hedges and multi-stem trees including *Cercis siliquastrum*, *Koeleruteria paniculata*, *Magnolia x loebneri* 'Merrill' and *Amelanchier x lamarckii*.

▷ available for entertaining. A new front courtyard created a sense of arrival. Finally, a tall brick wall was demolished, linking the new courtyard and existing terrace.

"I wanted to create a low-maintenance garden to maximise biodiversity and sustainability," says Stefano. "It is easier to celebrate plant diversity in smaller spaces by using informal plantings, so plants, especially grasses, can express themselves through their shape, form and colour." This has resulted in a design that is delightfully understated and full of contrasting textures. *Sesleria autumnalis* and *Sporobolus heterolepis* create the matrix covering half of the ground, infilled with five different kinds of grasses, 30 forms of perennials and 16 different types of bulbs.

Spring is ushered in with drifts of snowdrops, yellow *Eranthis hyemalis*, blue *Iris reticulata*, and the chequerboard purple of *Fritillaria meleagris*, with a wealth of alliums, including *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' and white *Allium stipitatum* 'Mount Everest' to follow. Drought-tolerant herbaceous plants, among them *Salvia x sylvestris* 'Dear Anja' with its spikes of blue and purple, and the slender, magenta-flowered wands of *Dianthus carthusianorum*, emerge through the matrix of grasses. In summer, the grasses begin to flower. *Sporobolus heterolepis* becomes coriander scented in late July, while upright *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' acts a feathery backcloth and screen. *Stipa ichu* and a *Prunus lusitanica* hedge are planted in lines running parallel

to the barn, with the wispy plumes of the grass a softer reflection of the hedge. *Echinops bannaticus* adds spheres of silvery blue and *Eryngium yuccifolium* spectacular spiny architecture, while gorgeous *Hylotelephium* 'José Aubergine' blooms in dark maroon.

Having contributed blue flowers in spring, the stems of *Amsonia hubrichtii* turn golden yellow in autumn and *Schizachyrium scoparium* 'Ha Ha Tonka', with its feathery edges and tones of grey, green and red, captures the low light. Inflated seedpods of *Nigella damascena* and brown candelabra seedheads of *Phlomis russeliana* remain through the winter, complementing the grasses, which turn beige, bronze and brown.

Several multi-stem trees, including *Amelanchier x lamarckii*, *Magnolia x loebneri* 'Merrill', *Cercis siliquastrum* and *Koeleruteria paniculata* help to anchor the planting and give the garden and courtyard structure. Stefano especially loves the *Koeleruteria paniculata*. "It offers so much," he says, "yellow flowers, unique pink-tinted, inflated seedpods and yellow autumn colour. And they are extremely drought resistant, which is important in this area of low rainfall. I also use *Rosa rugosa*. It is robust, produces large, red hips, providing food for wildlife, has good autumn colour and looks like a wild rose."

Maintenance in the garden is kept to a minimum. Two gardeners visit for just four days a year, reducing the disturbance for the owners and their neighbour. "Perennials and grasses are cut back in late February or early March, shredded, and then recycled ▷

Above Two gravel paths merge at a secluded seating area cocooned by tall grasses, including *Stipa gigantea* and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'. In early summer, colour comes from dark-purple *Cerintho major* 'Purpurascens' and the delicate, star-shaped, pale-blue flowers of *Amsonia hubrichtii*, while the emerging silvery spikes of *Verbascum bombyciferum* will add bright-yellow tones later in summer. Within the planting, piles of logs create habitats for insects. Beyond the garden stands the old village church and churchyard, which features ancient lime trees that Stefano has 'borrowed' for the garden's outlook.



Above Trees such as the Judas tree, *Cercis siliquastrum*, which has leguminous, cerise flowers that hang directly from the stems in spring and bright-yellow foliage in autumn, act as anchors that unite the different spaces. Beneath each one, Stefano has used a variety of textures from herbaceous plants, such as salvias and *Pycnanthemum muticum*, in a matrix of *Sesleria autumnalis* and *Sporobolus heterolepis*.

▷ straight back on to the borders as a mulch.” They visit again in May to weed bare areas, which gradually reduce in size as the plants begin to spread. Then in July or August the *Prunus lusitanica* hedging is trimmed and the irrigation checked.

Although the base layer of grasses remains much the same, other plantings are more dynamic. “Self-seeding perennials and grasses are allowed to fill gaps to prevent spaces being colonised by weeds,” says Stefano. “Vigorous *Pycnanthemum muticum*, with its spreading rhizomes, and *Phlomis russeliana* are edited annually to prevent them from dominating and maintain a balance. My aim was to create plant communities within the matrix of *Sesleria autumnalis* and *Sporobolus heterolepis* so the garden is a harmonious composition, providing beauty through the seasons, whether viewed from indoors or out.” Beautiful it certainly is, and offers far more interest than an expanse of lawn ever could. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Stefano’s work at stefanomarinaz.com
Join Stefano for a tour of Church Barn on 10 June, 10am-12.30pm, price £25. Stefano will also be leading two further tours on 13 September and 18 November. Follow Stefano on Instagram (@stefano.marinaz) or see his website for further details.



Creating plant communities

Stefano has ensured a long season of interest by using a wide range of different plant groups – bulbs, annuals, grasses, perennials, shrubs and trees – that work together as a community. For this to be successful, it’s important to choose plants that have similar growth rates and habits so there is balance within the plant community. “Combining plants with different seasonal growth is also useful,” says Stefano, “as this allows plants to flower and go dormant while others start showing new growth. And by doing this they hide the foliage of the plants going dormant.”

The key to success is ensuring around 30-40 per cent of the plants used are grasses, as this will help blend the mix of perennials and bulbs in a naturalistic way. This grass matrix should comprise clump-forming grasses that are ideally no taller than around 30-50cm, to avoid overwhelming the tall perennials. Grasses and perennials with narrow leaves are useful, so emerging plants don’t get shaded out. Plant the perennials in groups of 10-12 minimum, and in long, weavy layouts rather than blocks. Self-seeders such as nigella, honesty and California poppies will help fill any gaps in newly planted schemes, rather than leaving them open to weeds.

In this garden, Stefano has used the low-growing, clump-forming grass *Sesleria autumnalis*, with a mix of annuals and perennials including *Nigella damascena*, *Gillenia trifoliata*, *Amsonia hubrichtii*, *Nepeta racemosa* ‘Walker’s Low’ and *Salvia x sylvestris* ‘Dear Anya’.

Above Stefano designed the bespoke furniture for this fire pit area close to the barn, which is surrounded by shades of green and subtle hues of blue in the form of *Salvia x sylvestris* ‘Dear Anya’, growing in pots, and *Nepeta racemosa* ‘Walker’s Low’ mingling with the paler shades of *Nigella damascena* and *Gillenia trifoliata*. Close to the black-painted barn is a pop of pink from *Rosa rugosa* while white *Rosa Claire Austin* (=‘Ausprior’) is beginning to climb the black wall.