



Don't worry, be happy

Sally Oyler and Patrick Gammell's shared enthusiasm brings a relaxed yet innovative feel to the grounds around their East Lothian manse

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For me, creating the garden is very like creating a painting," says Sally Oyler. "I spend a long time thinking about what goes into them; they are a combination of interesting shapes and forms with colour and texture, sometimes with repetition. When translated into this garden, the quirky individuals from my paintings can be seen in the spiral mound overlooking the garden and the moon gate at the far end." We are standing in the studio Sally and her husband Patrick Gammell built in the walled garden that sits in the glen below their manse in Haddington, East Lothian. The garden's "balloon shape" is loosely dictated by the kirk and the burn that flows outside the walls.

On the easel is a painting of black grouse set against a vibrant orange background; the painting that will appear on the front cover of the catalogue of her 30th anniversary exhibition in Edinburgh next month. Sally points out the different textures

created by leaving tiny areas of the canvas blank, different paint applications, use of colour and light reflection. "I use the same techniques while designing the garden. I identify plants with good colour, shape and texture and find the right place for them. The main difference is that we like fragrance in the garden." Philadelphus, azaleas, climbing roses, honeysuckle and lavender are important in this respect.

The third-of-an-acre walled garden features a design composed of five circles richly planted with roses, flowering shrubs and small trees. The best place to view it is from the grass mound at the side of the rose-framed entrance door. From this vantage point there is a spectacular view of the kirk just outside the wall – the renovated potting shed was once the kirk's mortuary – north towards Berwick Law and south up the glen where the burn runs into the garden.

The five circles radiate from the central circle composed of rustic, rose festooned arches: fragrant, white *Rosa Madame*



“You have more control over a painting than over your garden”



Hardy, pink Gertrude Jekyll, Albertine and Madame Alfred Carriere on a north wall are all included. This, Sally says, was the first circle that spawned four more, including a stone paved circle at the garden entrance, a second paved circle home to a large terracotta pot and the mound itself. “They form the line of a gentle visual curve which runs from the entrance through the centre to the far end,” she says.

The last, and only upright circle, is the spectacular moon gate, a drystone arch eight feet in diameter, recently built on the east side of the garden by Borders-based stonemason Neil Moffat to frame the view in both directions. “The arch was built without using any mortar and is held up by only gravity and friction,” Patrick says. “It was built using a wooden form which was later removed.”

The main planting aim was to keep the garden as low maintenance as possible, hence the narrow perimeter borders – “deep borders need too much weeding” – and the abundance of shrubs. “Last year we softened the planting and made it more cottagey at the request of our daughter Tess, who was married here.” This was done by the addition of white foxgloves, allium and white, lacy Ammi majus threaded through stands of Astrantia. The wall and enclosed trees, shrubs and box hedging are home to many robins, blue tits, wrens, goldfinches, chaffinches, wagtails and blackbirds. Another low maintenance technique involves planting small, eye-catching areas, and corners in particular: just outside the walled garden a shady corner is planted with ferns, Primula and Tiarella.

Equally important to Sally is the landscape, and connecting the house and garden to its rural setting was key. Perched on the top of the hill overlooking the glen, the early 19th-century manse is approached down a single track road that threads through farmland. A short distance east of the house is the balcony, a raised wooden platform that overlooks the wild garden and arboretum; from here the eye is drawn up and over the walled garden, over the focal point of a columnar copper beech towards Traprain Law.

The tapestry of foliage below is reached

via the wooden staircase that skims the side of the hill. “Planting this area was key to linking the house to the garden,” Patrick says, adding that the choice of shrubs and small trees was dictated by a desire to create “an amazing, crazy patchwork of colour. Beech, Birch and Prunus grow naturally here.”

In the main, the couple have planted varieties of these trees, although there are plenty more chosen for their shape and colour of foliage, including Maroon Berberis, scarlet Acer palmatum ‘Deshojo’, rhododendron, wild roses, a spectacular Cornus controversa, Persian ironwood, Acer Griseum and White beam.

The second arboretum on the far side of the hill is reached via wooden steps that zig-zag through white-stemmed Betula, colourful acers and yakushimanum rhododendrons before reaching an open paddock with grazing sheep. At the far end of the glen a wooden bridge crosses the river and a path leads on to Sally’s most recent project, the dragon’s eyrie decorated with strings of red, yellow, blue and green Himalayan prayer flags and which offers a spectacular view down the glen and on up over the kirk towards Berwick Law. Elsewhere there are Prunus Shirotae, Betula Ermanii, Betula Tristis, different sorbus and Atlantic Blue Cedar, Cornus, Eddie’s White Wonder, Acer Chitoseyama and Orange Dream.

The path leads back down by the side of the river where a large group of stones offers impromptu seating for riverside barbecues. “This was last year’s project,” Patrick says. “Every year Sally promises this will be the last project.” Their shared enthusiasm and mutual support brings a relaxed yet innovative feel to the garden. “You have more control over a painting than over your garden,” Sally says. “Maybe this is why I am so relaxed about the garden. Sometimes you just have to laugh and not worry.”

Sally Oyler’s 30th Anniversary Exhibition will be at the Dundas Street Gallery, 6 Dundas Street, Edinburgh, 4-8 October. It will feature her recent paintings of Scottish wildlife and others from her journeys to Burma, Botswana and China. www.sallyoyler.com



From top: the moon gate; the arched bridge; Sally Oyler at work; a honeysuckle arch; the walled garden and house. Previous page: view from a bank overlooking the garden and kirk



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