



Strong structure in Rhiannedd Brooke's Kent garden, from hornbeam columns, box topiary and purple pitosporum.

# GOING THE *Extra Mile*

Rhiannedd Brooke uses her own elegant garden in Kent to test new ideas, repurposing areas and experimenting with levels and planting, enabling her to go beyond her clients' design briefs and give them that little bit more.

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**Above** Breezy fennel, *Foeniculum vulgare*, prettily self-seeds to create repetition.

**Below right** *Verbena bonariensis*, like fennel, adds lofty, airy charm.

**Below left** Rhiannedd's 'fondant fancy'-shaped box topiary punctuates the paths and rounds off each bed to perfection.

Rhiannedd was working as a financial PR consultant in the City at the time, so she engaged garden designer Penny Smith to start redesigning the garden with her before she and Andy had even started on the house. "Gardens take longer than a house to develop," Rhiannedd explains. She became increasingly involved with the process, so when she left her City job five years ago, she took the RHS horticultural exams and a garden design diploma with The English Gardening School at the Chelsea Physic Garden. What started off as helping neighbours to redesign their gardens eventually evolved into a new career as a garden designer.

After clearing the rhododendrons, Rhiannedd decided the first step was to give the garden some structure and sort out the planting. "I wanted it to be environmentally friendly and naturalistic, but underpinned with really strong bones and good proportion and scale," she explains. "With a big garden, it's about drawing people deeper into it." She did this by creating zones for different activities and adding hard landscaping. "People mainly live on terraces in gardens," she says. "They just walk across lawns. If you only have a terrace by the house, there's no reason to go further into the garden." So by creating new seating areas and new planted areas, there are now reasons to spend time in different parts of the garden and also to enjoy views back to the house.

"It sounds counter-intuitive but adding more hard landscaping makes the garden feel bigger."

Now the drive from the gate to the house is edged with clipped yew

*"If you only have a terrace by the house, there's no reason to go further into the garden"*

**Above** The driveway sweeps around the house, edged with white hydrangeas on one side, and beds of swishing perennials on the other. **Right** Behind the house, terraces cut into the slope accommodate different seating areas.

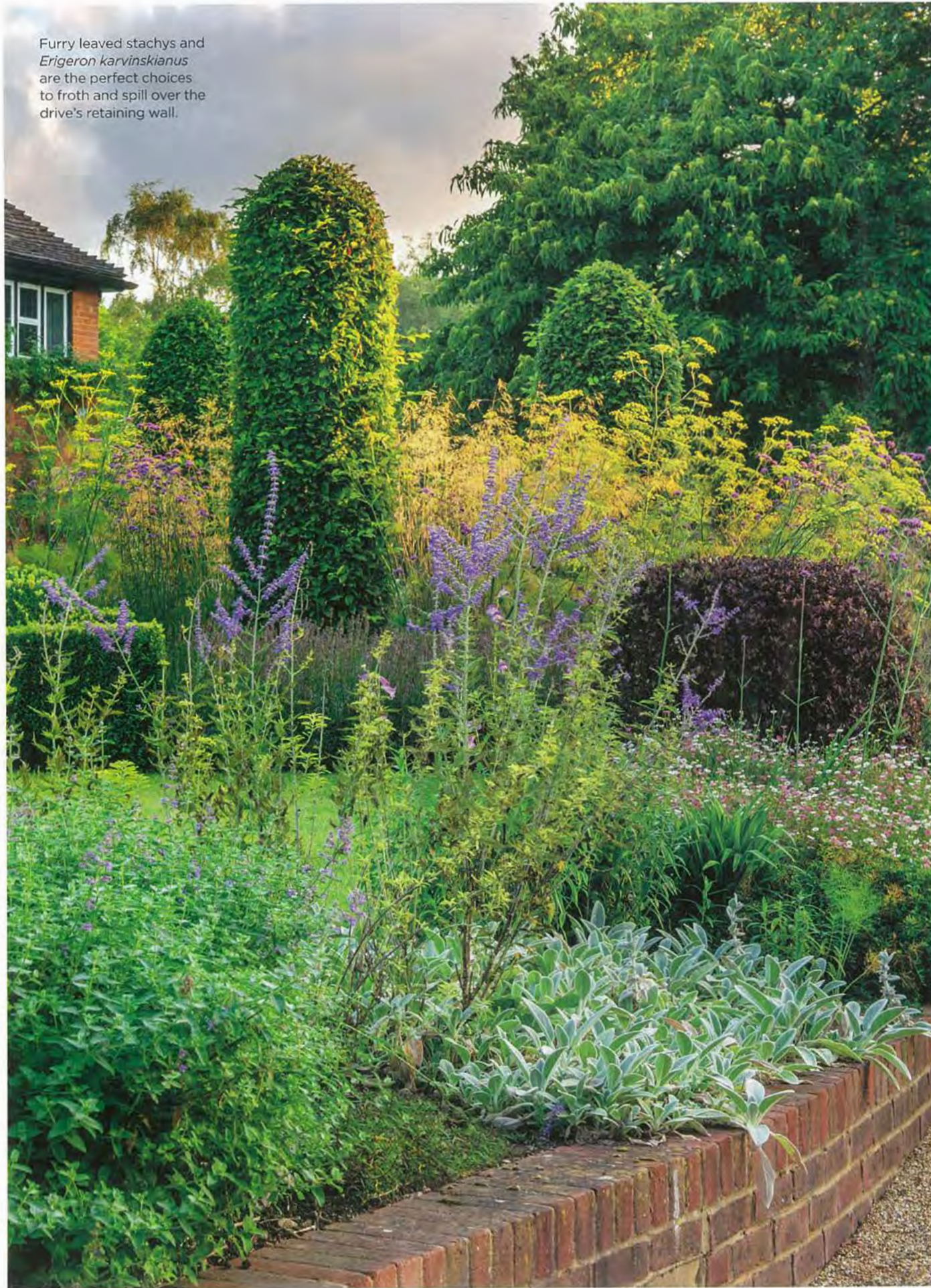
**G**arden designer Rhiannedd Brooke moved into her home near Sevenoaks in Kent, with her husband, Andy, and their two children 12 years ago. Back then, the sloping two and a half acre garden was a mass of overgrown rhododendrons, with narrow concrete paths, crazy paving and a sloping bank down to a tennis court, swimming pool, summerhouse and greenhouse. Rhiannedd's mother, on seeing it, commented that it wasn't so much a home as a holiday camp.

There were no views from the house to the garden and, apart from the rhododendrons, the planting was what Rhiannedd describes as "one of everything": a tangled mess without any kind of a coherent strategy. But what had really attracted the family was the positioning of the house in the centre of the plot, where it was surrounded by the garden on all sides.





Furry leaved stachys and *Erigeron karvinskianus* are the perfect choices to froth and spill over the drive's retaining wall.



**Above** An emerald lawn at the front of the house is bordered by lavender. **Above right** A rusted metal sculpture of diminishing circles adds focus to the lawn. **Left** Soft orange *Geum* 'Prinses Juliana'. **Below** A dining pergola borders the swimming pool and the newly created kitchen area.

*The terrace beside the house is on a lower level so you can see over it into the garden beyond*

hedging, sculptural hornbeam columns, balls of *Pittosporum* 'Tom Thumb' and box cut into a shape Rhiannedd calls 'Fondant Fancies'. In between, she has added a soft mix of perennials, shrubs and grasses. She uses lots of repetition, with a row of *Hydrangea* 'Teller's White' in front of the yew on one side of the drive and a restricted palette of *Salvia* (formerly *Perovskia*) 'Blue Spire', fennel, *Phlomis italica*, peonies, *Hylotelephium* 'José Aubergine', *Erigeron karvinskianus* and *Nepeta* 'Walker's Low' between the sculptural elements on the other. These

are all resilient, unfussy plants capable of surviving difficult weather. Kent has a mild climate with average summer temperatures of around 21°C, but the house is on a hill and can get a surprising amount of snowfall in winter.

Meanwhile, inside the house, they knocked through several smaller rooms to create one big living and kitchen space with glass walls facing out over the back garden. The slope offers an advantage here – Rhiannedd has deliberately set the terrace beside the house on a lower level so you can see over it into the garden beyond. Sloping gardens can otherwise present something of a challenge. Rhiannedd and Andy had considered levelling out an area and putting in a huge retaining wall, but that would have proved very expensive. Instead, Rhiannedd has created several different terrace areas spread over different levels that are tucked into the slope and linked by wide steps and paths. Immediately outside the big glass windows is a spacious zone of Indian sandstone with stylish purple outdoor sofas from Indian Ocean. Then there's a dining pergola, with a slatted roof and sides that sits alongside the pool. Below that is a smaller terrace featuring a table, four chairs and a Big Egg







Smartly clipped yew hedging and tall columns of hornbeam line the driveway, softened by pretty perennial planting.



barbecue, and she's added benches and pairs of teak recliners in other spots around the garden.

There are still grassy slopes around these terraces and these can be difficult to mow. So, for the steepest parts of the slope, Rhiannedd sourced a type of turf used for the edges of golf courses. They let it grow long and have it trimmed back twice a year. To make it clear that this is intentional and isn't just a neglected lawn, it's set in clearly defined areas, edged by mown grass on the less steep areas around it. "It gives a softness to the space," says Rhiannedd. "And it creates wildlife corridors – it's a good habitat."

Further away from the house, Rhiannedd has planted an area as a perennial meadow with an orchard of fruit trees. She laid it with a shade-tolerant blend of perennial meadow turf from Wildflower Turf ([wildflowerturf.co.uk](http://wildflowerturf.co.uk)). "The first spring after we planted it was very dry, so we had to keep watering it, which was quite a lot of work," she recalls. "Since then, we've liaised with Wildflower Turf on how to manage it because it can get very leggy and flop over. We've now worked out that it's best to cut it back hard in May. It also looks better if it has some definition, so we mow paths through it and keep the edges clipped short. The perennial meadow is mown once a year, and Rhiannedd has found a specialist landscape management company to do it: "It could take us a



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**Top** Airy molinia and pink-flowered echinacea surround the pergola. **Above right** Chairs wait on another secluded terrace, taking in the view down the slope. **Above left** Grass is left to grow long and meadows have been cultivated on the slopes between the garden's levels.





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flowers from Pictorial Meadows. “It was a good way to deal with such a scrappy area,” she notes.

Designing your own garden is different from doing a client’s, says Rhiannedd. “At home the possibilities are endless, but with a client you spend time defining a cohesive brief. That gives you a framework to start with.” She’s an avid watcher of TV programmes where designers compete to win a project. “I’ve noticed that the designer who exactly meets the brief never wins. The one who wins is the one who fulfils the brief and adds something extra. You have to surprise clients and give them more than they thought they’d get, because they don’t know what the full potential of their garden could be.” ■

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week to do it, but a specialist company has the right equipment to cut it back in just a few hours.”

Rhiannedd uses the garden as an experimental area for her garden design business, and it changes as the children grow up. There used to be a tree house and zip wire, but the children no longer used them and the tree house rotted. Rhiannedd cleared it all away and is using the extra space to experiment with a seed mix of annual meadow

**Top** A riot of golden *Stipa gigantea*, purple *Verbena bonariensis* and yellow fennel.

**Above right** Sunlight filters through the pergola’s slatted roof.

**Above left** A colourful summer combination of eupatorium, persicaria and sunny rudbeckia.