



country garden

Golden touch

Gina Price tells us the secrets of the sensational planting that has made her garden one of the most exciting in Britain

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In brief

NAME Pettifers.

WHAT Private garden developed since 1987.

WHERE North Oxfordshire.

SIZE 1.5 acres.

SOIL Clay, heavily enriched with organic matter over the years.

CONDITIONS A north-facing slope, relatively sheltered from frost.

SPECIAL FEATURES Parterre, mixed borders, successional planting.

GARDEN PLAN See page 35.

The bright, tiered foliage of a wedding cake tree, *Cornus controversa* 'Variegata', glows among a swathe of red poppies (*Papaver orientale* Goliath Group 'Beauty of Livermere') and white *Allium stipitatum* 'Mount Everest' in the Klimt Border.





Frothy white *Filipendula vulgaris* 'Multiplex' edges a border crowded with early summer perennials and bulbs, including *Allium cristophii*.

We see many gardens on these pages: some old, some modern, some grand, some humble. Almost all are beautiful, but the ones that keep drawing you back are the gardens where you can see the passion: these are the gardens that one will remember for ever.

Gina Price (pictured right) came to this pretty Oxfordshire village with her husband James 23 years ago. The house is tight to the road but at the back, the garden rolls away almost seamlessly into open countryside. Gina remembers "walking through this place and thinking 'I can make something of this,' in spite of the fact that I knew nothing at all."

Like many of the best instinctive gardeners, Gina picked it up as she went along, helped by friends who gave advice, in particular Diany Binney (chatelaine of Kiftsgate Court in Gloucestershire) and her sister Betsy Muir, who visited twice a year in the early days. "She did not hold back with her opinions. She stood by one border and pronounced, 'What a damn dull border: just a lot of aquilegias, and not even special ones.' It was upsetting, but she was usually right."

As well as bravely enduring such things, Gina visited a lot of gardens and is happy to

point out little influences scattered through the garden. The main path owes something to York Gate near Leeds. The narrow, winding paths through some of the borders were inspired by Margery Fish. The barn doors are modelled on a palace in Wurzburg, Bavaria; "Not many people guess that one."

The garden faces north, which could be seen as a mild disadvantage, but actually



matters not one whit. A central path leads through deep, shady borders held back by old stone walls. It is not a wide garden, and is bounded to the west by a low stone barn and to the east by a smartly clipped yew hedge.

"When we arrived this garden was mostly one big lawn with three big yews, a couple of narrow borders and truly appalling soil," says Gina. Things have changed immeasurably since then, as years and years of regular mulching has transformed the soil and the borders are now not only generously proportioned but stuffed with layer upon layer of well-chosen and perfectly matched plants.

Heaven on a hill

From the lawn, the ground falls steeply away and it is not until you reach the edge of this slope, next to a set of steps that garden designer Arabella Lennox-Boyd once described as "very ugly" (ivy now conceals the offending stonework) that you realise that this garden just keeps getting better and better. At the foot of the slope is a small lawn that in spring is transformed by fritillaries and narcissi and more deep,

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Rosa nutkana 'Plena' frames the view down the slope, along a winding, mown-grass path to the yew flasks of the parterre.

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Combining plants

Gina Price's planting style varies from subtle combinations of similar colours to bold and vivid contrasts



1 CONTRASTING SHAPES

The pale pinks of *Allium cristophii* and *Persicaria affinis* 'Superba' are similar, but the tubular flowers of the bistort and the distinct starriness of the *Allium* make a satisfying contrast.



2 SOPHISTICATED COLOURS

Achillea 'Terracotta' makes a subtle pairing with *Delphinium* 'Rosemary Brock', which has an interesting and unusual pink-mauve colour. Sadly achilleas are quite short-lived but while they are happy they are unforgettable.



3 NATURAL SIMPLICITY

Kniphofia 'Tawny King' – probably the best mid season poker – combines with the ever-faithful and always upright grass, *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', in a simple combination that seems to mimic nature.



4 VIBRANT CONTRAST

The marsh spurge, *Euphorbia palustris*, makes a classic combination of sour greenish yellow and warm sweet purple with *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation', one of the key plants for early summer at Pettifers.



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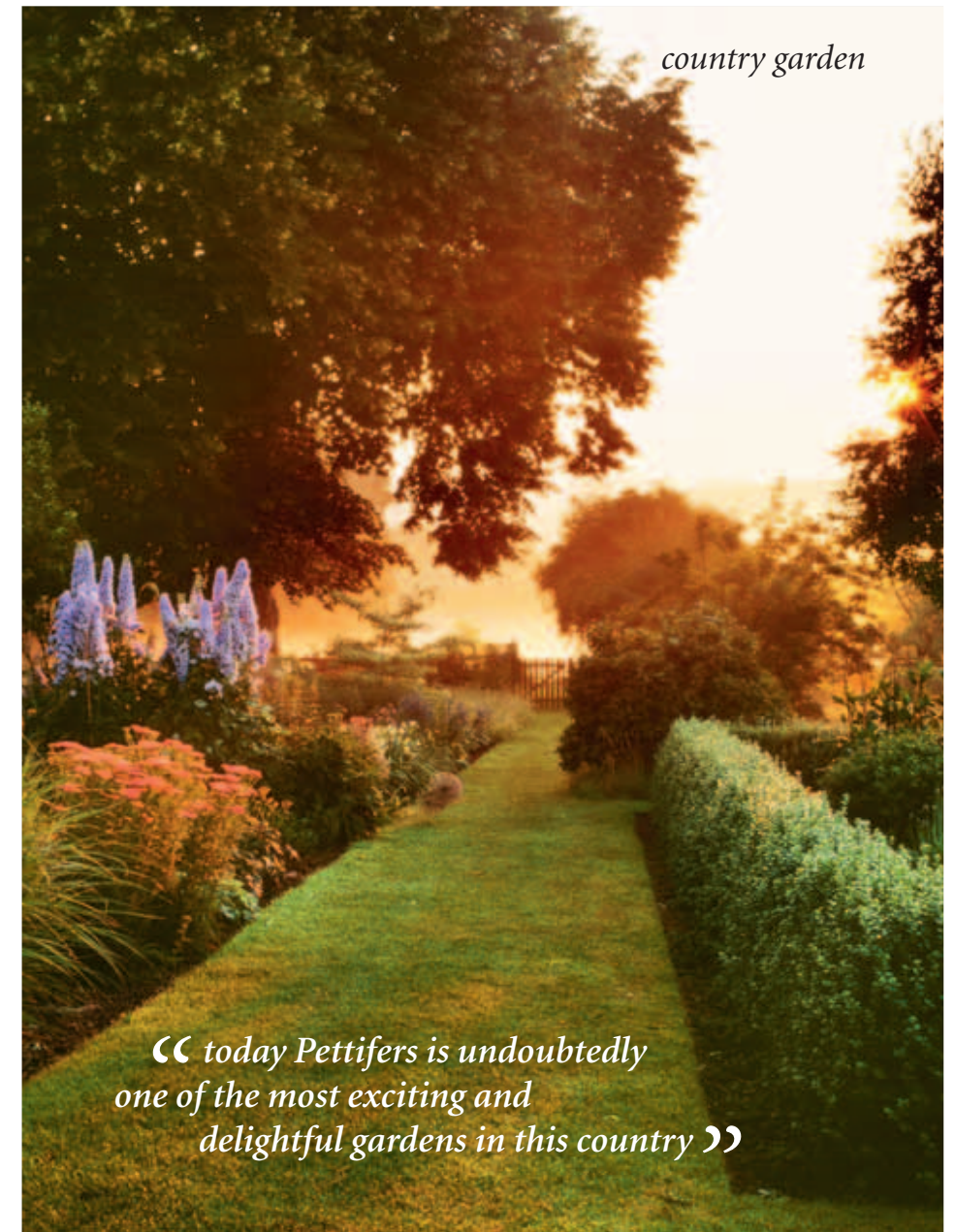
5 COLOUR CO-ORDINATED

Tufts of the grass *Stipa tenuissima* reflect the blonde tones of the fields beyond, while alliums match the crimson-purple of the hedge of *Berberis thunbergii* f. *atropurpurea* 'Rose Glow'. Vivid magenta spikes of *Gladiolus communis* subsp. *byzantinus* grow at the border's edge.





The neatness of the parterre contrasts with the informality on either side of it, including effervescent perennials such as *Dictamnus albus* var. *purpureus*, with pale pink flowers and dark stems. FAR RIGHT A grass path invites you to explore the fields beyond the Klimt borders and parterre.



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▷ luxuriant, borders. These include an autumn border and a burgundy border “which we are still planting”.

Gina’s Klimt Border is inspired by the ‘Golden Phase’ of Austrian artist Gustav Klimt – paintings with colourful, mosaic-like patterns. It starts with the reddest of poppies, *Papaver orientale* Goliath Group ‘Beauty of Livermere’ (pictured on page 28), and crescendos later in the year with grasses, heleniums and asters. These encircle a most remarkable parterre. Four beds edged with brick and box does not sound that exciting; what makes it spectacular is the combination of content and position, following the fall of the hill rather than imposing a formality on the land. “We started planting this about ten years ago,

beginning with the box hedge. We added the four yews because they were left over from the hedge.” The yews (pictured above) have been clipped into a unique shape: a sort of cross between a squarish bottle and a bendy chimney. It is strange details like this that sort the sheep from the goats, had they just been conventional columns then the effect would have been much diluted. This is filled with a combination of clipped *Sarcococca*, variegated box, roses, *Agapanthus* and (seasonally) *Tulipa* ‘Gavota’, *Dahlia* ‘Jescot Julie’ and the appropriately upright *Dahlia* ‘Admiral Rawlings’.

This garden is remarkable for a number of things: the design, the exquisite planting and the quality of care (for which Gina generously gives most of the credit to her

gardener, Polly) for a start. But it is more than that: every plant is chosen with care and intelligence. Once planted they are watched over by the hawkishly discerning eye of Mrs Price, who has the perspicacity to know whether it works and the courage to, as she says, “rip it all out if I thought I had made a mistake”. This garden has grown in stature as its owner grew in experience and confidence: so much so that, and I do not say this lightly, today Pettifers is undoubtedly one of the most exciting and delightful gardens in this country. □
• Pettifers is open to visitors by appointment only – for details see www.pettifers.com

BBC James Alexander-Sinclair is a garden designer who appears regularly on BBC gardening programmes.

