



### In brief

NAME Summerdale House.

WHAT Stone house and nursery with varied garden.

WHERE South Lakeland.

SIZE 1.5-acre garden with 2.5 acres of pasture and nursery.

CONDITIONS Frosty but sheltered. Often wet.

SOIL Free-draining and just on the acid side of neutral.

FEATURES Formal gardens, woodland garden, orchard, bog garden, spring bulbs, nursery, gravel garden.

GARDEN PLAN See page 36.



# A garden in the Lakeland fields

Surrounded by farmland, the garden of David and Gail Sheals is a sublime blend of pretty planting and effortless style

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS RACHEL WARNE

When David and Gail moved to Summerdale House in 1997, the 18th-century former vicarage had been empty for 20 years and required complete restoration. The southeast-facing front garden is now a simple composition of lawns and borders.





This part of the Lake District is a good place to live. The countryside has a distinct and satisfying shape, with the rearing back of Farleton Fell and a patchwork of sheep-shorn fields. It's beautiful and quiet, but with sharp frosts in winter and regular rain all year, plants need to be either hardy or extremely well looked after to survive. In the hands of David and Gail Sheals, they get the best of both worlds.

When the Sheals moved here in 1997 the house was a wreck and the garden non-existent. "It hadn't been lived in for about 20 years," recalls David, "but there were shadows of what had once been a cared-for garden. There were good trees, a couple of paths and scatterings of metal plant labels that kept turning up in borders."

What there was *not* was any semblance of structure, or nearly enough plants. Today, there is an acre and a half of garden, although it seems much more: the Sheals are exhaustingly industrious and there is not a wasted square foot anywhere.

"The garden was never really designed," explains Gail. "It sort of emerged. Every year we tend to plant a new hedge or lay a new path." More often than not this is a disastrous way to lay out a garden but not in this case: the garden is neatly split and each corner you turn brings a new surprise.

From the front door there is a long herbaceous border – packed with tulips at this time of year – backed against the old stone wall. Parallel to this a wide path dives between two ancient Irish yews to emerge by a natural pond beneath a twisted



Standard hollies (*Ilex x altaclerensis* 'Golden King') and an oak bench by Nottinghamshire firm History in The Making dominate the Knot Garden.

*Magnolia stellata* (pictured on page 36). From there you dart back through a hedge to emerge by the white border. This, like most of the garden, was once dominated by a huge cedar. "It fell down in a storm in 2006," says Gail, "and it took me less than 24 hours to realise what a blessing that particular tragedy was."

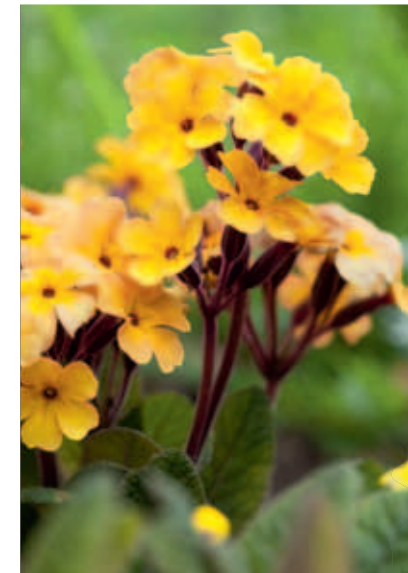
A garden packed with gems On again, past low walls and a renovated summerhouse, to arrive in a relatively young birch grove. The grass beneath the trees is planted with crocuses for early season, fox and cubs (*Pilosella aurantiaca*) for summer, and, as an experiment, herbaceous potentillas. "I saw them growing in grass in India so thought we would give them a try here," says David.

We pass through a formal knot garden planted with the *Stipa gigantea* and *Verbena bonariensis* essential to a modern gravel garden ("Possibly the wettest in the country") to arrive at the foot of the woodland slope. Originally this was part of the old orchard but as the trees succumbed to age and storm they have been replaced and augmented. "Some of the azaleas and a few mirabelle plum trees are original, to which we have added *Betula albosinensis* and some large-leaved rhododendrons. We hope that one day they will be grateful enough to flower." Under the trees is a treasure trove of snowdrops, hellebores, trilliums and other woodland treats.

At the top of the hill you emerge on to a path leading to another summer house ▶



A steel arch on the edge of the garden leads to a small terrace screened from view using stacked logs. From the terrace there are views over pasture to the limestone crags of Farleton Knott. RIGHT An auricula theatre in the courtyard displays the Sheals' collection of dainty primulas.



A path of grey and plum slate leads to the summerhouse, between the tulips of the Long Borders ('Ile de France' and 'Jan Reus'). LEFT Bronze foliage offsets the bright flowers of *Primula* 'Yellow Cowichan'.



Tulips 'Queen of Night', 'Negrita' and 'Pink Diamond' in the herbaceous border.



'Black Parrot' combines with 'Orange Emperor' and 'Princess Irene' above forget-me-nots.

### Planting tulips for colour moods

Tulips are simple things: that is why they are so effective. Their jewel-like colours are as refreshing as minty fresh mouthwash on a palate tired of winter brown. They are easy to plant but not so easy to keep. They are prey to mouse attack and some are reluctant to flower in their second season, especially on heavy soils.

Tulips can give different moods to borders. In the herbaceous border (far left) Gail has planted a range of zinging purples and pinks that liven up the emerging greens of young herbaceous plants. In contrast, on the edge of the woodland in the north of the garden she has gone for brighter, more citric colours to contrast with forget-me-nots (left).



Primulas 'Beeches' Pink' and 'Lady Greer' thrive at the edge of the orchard. RIGHT Gail works full time maintaining the garden and nursery while David spends part of his week as a consultant radiologist.





An old *Magnolia stellata* at least 15m tall shelters a bench surrounded by wild garlic.



In the woodland, *Epimedium x perralchicum* 'Frohnleiten' has bright flowers and striking foliage.



An old stable door now serves as a gate, painted in French Grey from Farrow & Ball.

▷ (pictured on page 35), two more ponds and down through an exotic garden (excellent in late summer), with bamboo, gunnera, dahlias and a coppiced *Paulownia tomentosa*) before you return to the house. Phew.

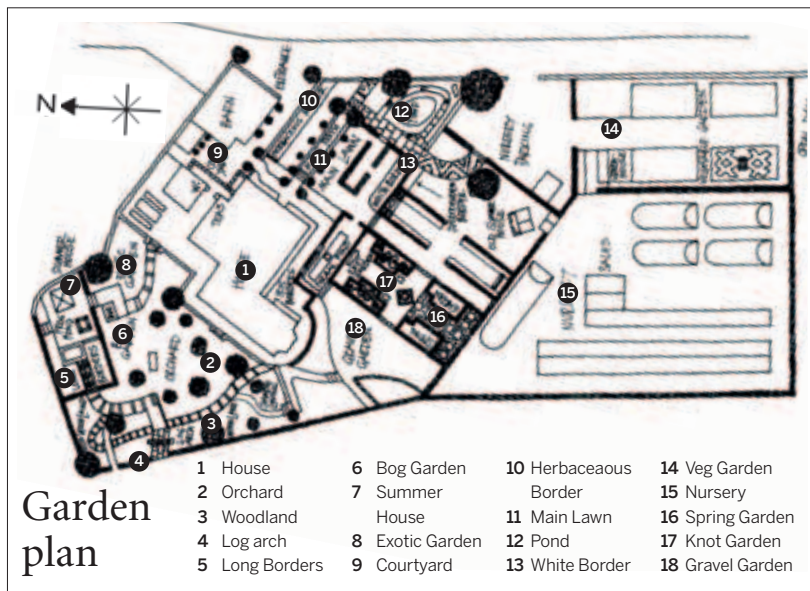
This garden contains plenty to see and many plants to admire, all packed into just over an acre without feeling cramped or claustrophobic. This alone is pretty impressive but it is not over yet: on the edge of the garden is a fully functional nursery offering a wide range of plants, in particular a range of auriculas, which are displayed – as is traditional – in a wooden theatre (pictured on page 35). Gail, who is the driving force behind the nursery, explains: “When we first came here the gardens needed plants so I started growing

“This garden contains plenty to see and many plants to admire, all packed into a single acre without feeling cramped or claustrophobic”

and propagating like mad. I then started selling to friends and then to people who came to open gardens days and it went on from there.” The tipping point was a friend of hers moving house and selling all her nursery stock to Gail including her first Barnhaven primroses (see last issue, page 70). These distinctly coloured plants were developed at a nursery in America in the 1940s before the collection was brought to Cumbria in the 1960s. Later their daughter helped

with the nursery “although now she and her husband, Tom Attwood, have set up Tom and Abi’s Plants at Halecat.” “Don’t give them too much of a plug,” David adds, smiling, “after all, they are the competition now.”

Dotted throughout the garden are lots of little sitting areas. Sheltered terraces, benches under trees, summerhouses, places set to catch the first or last of the sun and others positioned for the best views. However, things are so busy and there is so much going on that I suspect there is precious little sitting. Maybe one day, but at the moment David and Gail are quite happy with things the way they are. After all there are cakes to bake, jam to make and always more plants to propagate. □



**USEFUL INFORMATION**  
 ADDRESS Summerdale House, Cow Brow, near Lupton, Carnforth LA6 1PE.  
 OPEN Nursery open 1 April to 30 September, Thursday to Saturday, 11am to 5pm.  
 Gardens open under the National Gardens Scheme, 11am to 5pm on Fridays in April and May; also 24 April, 15 May, 19 June and 28 August. TEL 01539 567210  
 WEBSITE [www.summerdalegardenplants.co.uk](http://www.summerdalegardenplants.co.uk)

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



Fresh young ferns (*Dryopteris filix-mas*) unfurl among blooming daffodils on the edge of the orchard.