

# SIBLING HARMONY

*The Hertfordshire gardens of landscape designer Tom Stuart-Smith and his sister Kate are the spectacular result of their family's passion for planting*

Framed by the surrounding woodland, the garden at Serge Hill is filled with a rich tapestry of plants; their huge variety reflects the tastes of two generations of Stuart-Smiths, working together in harmony

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LEFT The walled garden at Serge Hill is dissected by gravel paths; wide borders allow for large blocks of planting including *Anthemis* 'Susanna Mitchell' and the indigo spires of *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna'. RIGHT FROM TOP There is still a productive vegetable patch, but its size is much reduced. The garden's makers sit in its midst: from left, Murray, Joan, Tom, Sue and Kate Stuart-Smith. Part of the appeal of the garden is the mix of old and new: here delphiniums, foxgloves, verbascum and *Campanula lactiflora* tower over *Geranium psilostemon* and nepeta, which lines a path leading up to an arch of *Rosa* 'Paul's Himalayan Musk'



This is a tale of two gardens. The garden of Kate Stuart-Smith, who shares her Hertfordshire childhood home with her husband David Docherty, their two children and her parents, Joan and Murray Stuart-Smith. And the garden of her brother, Tom Stuart-Smith, the internationally renowned landscape designer, who lives across the lane in a converted barn with his psychiatrist wife Sue, a fabulous gardener.

This is a family who grew up with gardening as a normal part of life. Joan wanted the children to know 'how lucky they were to live here and show their appreciation, so, for an hour each day in the summer holidays, they helped me in the garden'. Those hours spent nestled within the walled garden of Serge Hill, surrounded by 250 acres of woodland, park, shrubberies and rolling pasture only 40 minutes from Oxford Circus, sowed the seeds of spectacular horticultural talent.

The six Stuart-Smith children born in six consecutive years picked strawberries and tomatoes, disbudded chrysanthemums, hoed between rows of freesias, weeded and deadheaded. For a while in the Sixties, the bowler-hatted barrister Murray, whose legal career earned him not one but two knighthoods, would drive surplus produce, picked into punnets by the children, to the market in Spitalfields.

Joan was a sensational propagator and the greenhouse was like a baker's oven, yielding trays of treasures Kate remembers her mother handing out for the children to plant 'wherever you want'.

This generosity of spirit and freedom to experiment are what Kate credits with easing the transition of making her mother's garden very much her own, and providing Tom with the foundation of his career in landscape design. It is Kate, herself a graduate of garden design, who is conducting the latest renaissance of the garden that Joan set on course 60 years ago.

'I have this fabulous and well-primed canvas on to which I am placing my own patterns and pictures,' explains Kate. In the walled garden, Kate has reduced the amount of vegetables and carved the space into manageable-size beds surrounded by wide mixed borders with larger groups of her favourite perennials. Swathes of purple sage and *Salvia sclarea* 'Turkestanica' weave through the lower end of the garden. 'I have a passion for anything that lasts a long time so there is also a lot of cosmos,' she says.

There is a transition taking place in the colouring, with the palette veering to more of Kate's blues, with ribbons, not patches, of towering delphiniums, but Kate is keeping many of Joan's beloved reds, including *Geum* 'Mrs J Bradshaw' and *Paeonia* 'Sir Edward Elgar'. 'Those with the richest red flowers are definitive plants of our mother's,' she says. Kate has also added 'sharp pinks among the cardoons; I found that without the contrast the abundance of grey was too draining'.

The horticultural banter flows easily in this family with the odd disagreement. 'Kate loves *Geranium psilostemon*,' says Joan, before adding, 'It's a dirty shade of pink and seeds everywhere.' But these are minor quibbles. 'I am so profoundly happy; I gasp in admiration at all that Kate has done,' she says.

The garden at Serge Hill is an interesting hybrid of Joan and Kate, with a few trademark additions made by Tom before he moved across the lane to The Barn in 1986. Metal arbours and gates have Tom's signature, as does the outdoor theatre with a backdrop and wings of yew suggested by Tom to define the view from the front door that tailed off down a track.

'It's a typical Tom stroke of genius,' says Kate. Nor is it just a cunning

RIGHT Tom's own courtyard garden wraps around his converted barn, across the lane from the house in which he grew up. It encapsulates his style - there are structural raised walkways and a reflective rill surrounded by swathes of naturalistic planting, with masses of grasses interspersed with perennial accents, including *Salvia nemorosa* 'Amethyst' and *Astrantia major* 'Claret'





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The Irish yew, *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata', provides vertical accents in a more formal area of The Barn Garden. Structural planting anchors the looser elements: here, hornbeam hedges and several towering *Populus nigra* 'Italica' provide form among the loose long grass of the meadow. The courtyard planting builds in a crescendo of layers, culminating in an enormous *Hydrangea petiolaris* entwined with *Rosa* 'Cooper's Burmese' on one end of the house. Rabbit the Jack Russell enjoys the view from the barn's deck

device for a focal point – the theatre is put to use by the extended Stuart-Smith tribe for Murray's annual Shakespeare production in July. 'I start planning the moment one is over and a rotating member of the family is guest director,' explains Murray. This year, Sue will present *The Winter's Tale*.

There is an atmosphere of timelessness and ease at Serge Hill, an outdoor equivalent of shabby chic, where old and new plantings jostle with consummate ease, such as the Seventies, seed-grown magnolias underplanted with drifts of the latest perennials from Orchard Dene Nurseries in Oxfordshire. It takes a deft eye to make these combinations work, and it seems that all the Stuart-Smiths have inherited their parents' particular blend of intelligence, creativity and generosity of spirit. Tom acknowledges these qualities with gratitude when he looks back on his early gardening experiences, and his howlers – such as when he was given free rein as a teenager to 'plant leylandii all around the tennis court'. They have since been removed.

'Tom was manipulating space from an early age,' says Joan. 'While the others were collecting firewood or coppicing in the woods, Tom was making clearings to see how the light fell.' His powers of observation stored up a mine of images and knowledge that forged into place when, as a student at Cambridge, he met Lanning Roper and Geoffrey Jellicoe. 'I was captivated by them, and their enthusiasm,' he says. The foundations had been assembling in solid layers and when Tom and Sue moved out of London, he began the transformation of the farmyard and field into The Barn Garden as it is today. His original framework of hedged enclosures, wide borders, mazes of towering perennials and columns of evergreens, courtyards and meadows remain, but the boundaries are ever expanding and the ingredients ever changing.

Each year heralds an innovative and inspiring addition, most recently his masterful prairie, but the garden never loses its fundamentally restful atmosphere. The garden echoes Tom's soft and solid presence. Clipped sentinels often rise serenely from clouds of perennial planting in Tom compositions – here Irish yew is the anchor for sequential explosions of sweet rocket, eremurus, euphorbia and epilobium. From snowdrops in spring to snowfall in winter, the succession that started from a 'childhood delight at the crude but beautiful unfurling of rhubarb' oscillates through a kaleidoscope of form and colour.

Back across the lane from The Barn, taking up a large part of a long wall in Joan and Murray's dining room, is an aerial view done in pencil by Tom for his parent's fiftieth wedding anniversary in 2003. In outline, Serge Hill remains much the same as it was when Joan's father bought 250 Elysian acres in the Twenties. In detail, Tom tells a very different story. This landscape is a biography of a family passionately engaged in the nurture of nature since the fateful fortnight in the Fifties that Murray went abroad for work, leaving Joan thinking she 'had better get on and do something about the bindweed and the brambles'. That neglected post-war garden differs from the one today in that there are more hedges planted, more woodlands maturing, more meadows humming with insects, more gardens and – most extraordinarily – a lot more gardeners. We haven't even talked about Jeremy, the eldest of the six, who lives up the lane with his wife Bella, a garden designer. But that is yet another Stuart-Smith garden story □

*Tom Stuart-Smith: 020-7253 2100; www.tomstuartsmith.co.uk | The gardens at Serge Hill and The Barn will be open on behalf of the Garden Museum on May 12, July 14 and September 15. 020-7401 8865; www.gardenmuseum.org.uk*