

Gardens



Small gardens

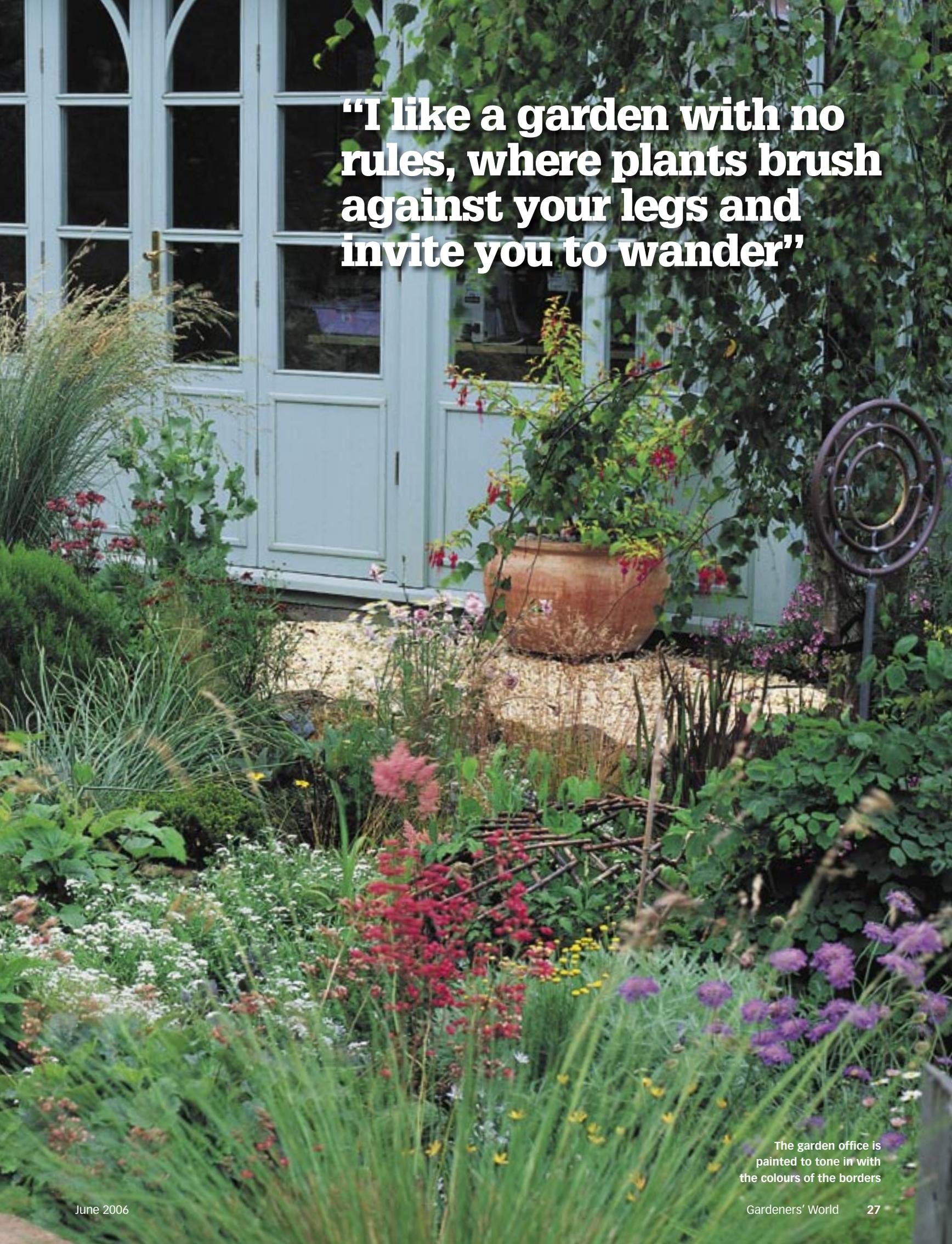
Creating a beautiful and mature-looking garden doesn't have to take decades, reveals **Kevin Smith**. Photos by Neil Hepworth

It's very hard to believe that this beautiful garden is only two years old, but it's not surprising that the tale started some years before. In 2002, once their children had flown the nest, Jan and Mike Foster decided to downsize. They cut their large garden in two, selling one half with the house and keeping the other as a building plot for their new home. So, what did this radical change mean for the gardens, old and new?

Jan had tended the garden for more than 16 years: "It broke my heart to cut the old garden in two,"

she says. "But I dug up plants I wanted to save from the half we were selling and, once the fence went up, I didn't look back. Our half soon became a full-scale building site – not ideal for cultivating plants – so keeping things alive, with builders all over the place, was a bigger challenge."

She decided that the best approach was to surround all the plants she wanted to keep with chicken wire and tell the builders they would face her wrath if anything happened to them! This clearly made an impression,



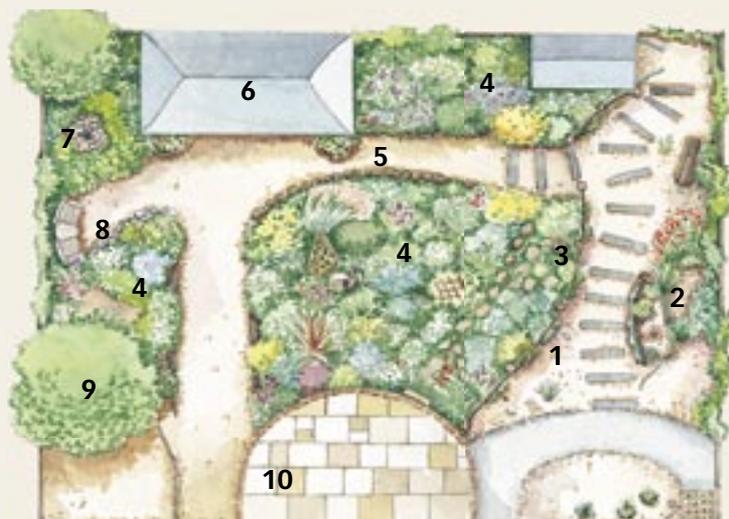
“I like a garden with no rules, where plants brush against your legs and invite you to wander”

The garden office is painted to tone in with the colours of the borders

The plan

The gravel path weaves its way between wide borders, revealing the garden gradually as you progress.

- | | |
|----|---------------------|
| 1 | Seaside area |
| 2 | Planted dinghy |
| 3 | Rockery |
| 4 | Flower beds |
| 5 | Gravel path |
| 6 | Office |
| 7 | Pebble fountain |
| 8 | Seat |
| 9 | Multi-stemmed birch |
| 10 | Patio |



LEFT A small toadstool fountain brings in the gentle splash of water
RIGHT A secluded seating area nestles among bright geum-strewn borders
FAR RIGHT The beached dinghy is awash with flowing grasses



as nothing was damaged and many of her original plants survive today, unscathed by nine months of building work.

With the house complete, in the summer of 2003 Jan turned her attention to the garden. Like any good gardener, she knew that the secret to horticultural success lay beneath her feet. "The soil was in a terrible state," she recalls. "Months of building work and trampling feet meant new plants wouldn't survive in it unless I did something drastic."

And that's exactly what she did. Removing the worst of the rubble by hand, she put down 21 tonnes of topsoil and mushroom compost to boost the soil quality. "It was the only way," she laughs. "Although, if I'm honest, I did wonder if I'd overdone it when it was all tipped off the lorry."

Jan now faced another challenge: her husband Mike's outdoor office. Worried about the impact of a large building in the garden (especially as it was to sit directly opposite the French doors at the back of the

house), she opted for an attractive structure that she painted a soft green, making it a feature rather than an eyesore. "We chose a building with a lovely lead roof and added copper lights," she explains. "These match the guttering and downpipes on the house. So the office works with the garden, not against it."

Next Jan had to make space for the family's two rather large dogs (she's rarely seen without one at her side). "I adore my dogs," she laughs. "But they're a bit boisterous and just wouldn't mix well with delicate flowers. So I made a separate area for them to the side of the house, divided from my flowers by a discreet fence."

With all the family catered for, it was time to get on with designing. Jan was keen for the garden to be a place for meandering and making discoveries, rather than a large open area. "I like a garden with no rules, a place where plants brush against your legs and invite you to wander."

She created a boardwalk through the beds, using up scaffolding planks

left over from the building work. "I used a lot of materials I already had to lay out the bones of the garden," she explains. "Leftover oak timbers from the building, linked with rope, became posts to line the paths, while sandstone I'd brought from the old garden became border edging, and a few railway sleepers I'd been holding on to were used to outline the walk down to the office."

The garden was now ready for planting, and the first thing Jan thought about was trees and shrubs. She missed the large trees she'd had in her old garden, so for instant impact she decided to bite the bullet and buy some large trees, including a multi-stemmed birch and an acer. They were pretty pricey, she admits, with the birch being the most expensive at £350. They were also more difficult to plant than smaller trees, but they're one of the main reasons the garden looks so established at such a young age.

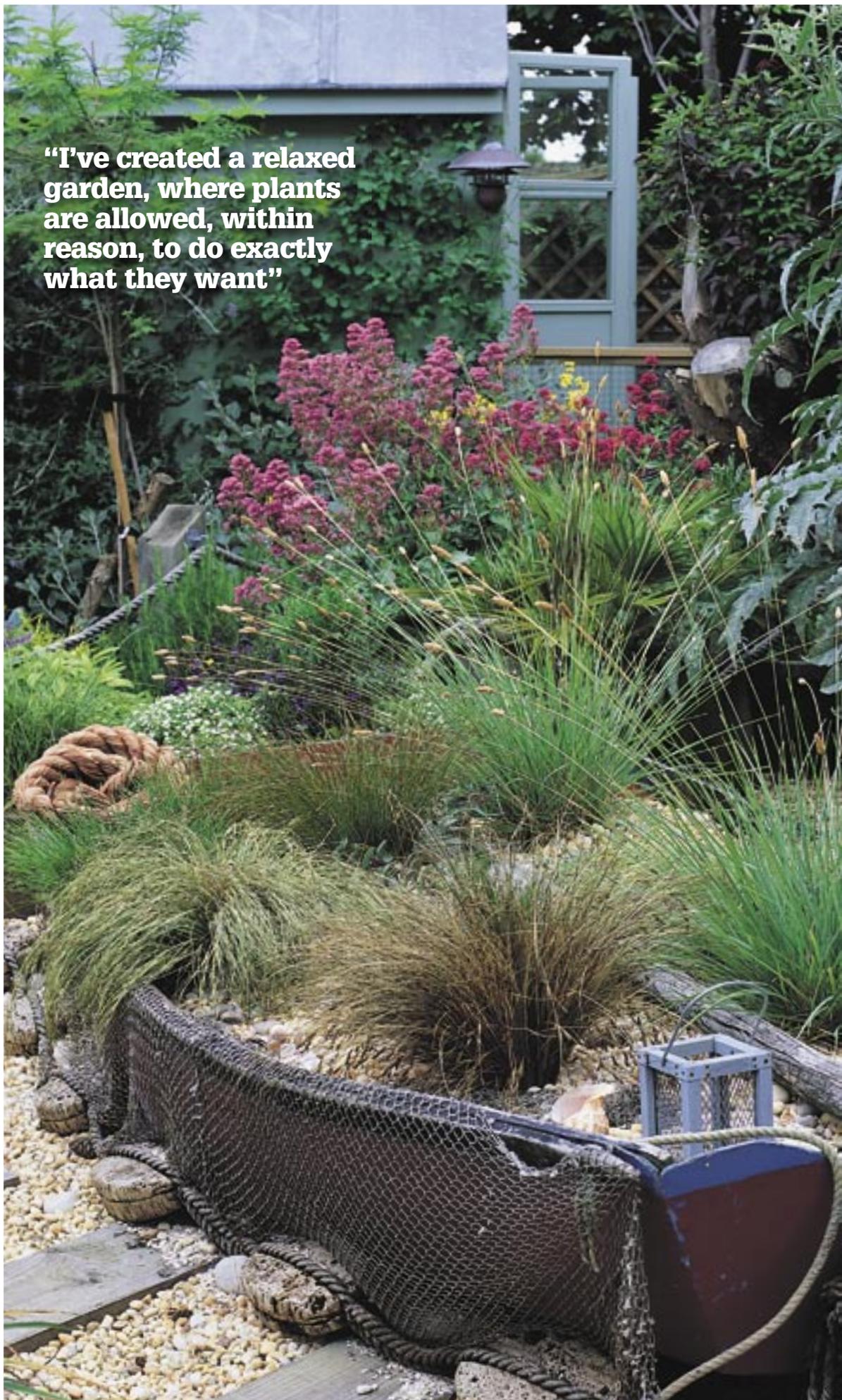
The rest of the planting consists largely of herbaceous perennials



Ladybirds and other beneficial insects thrive in this organic oasis

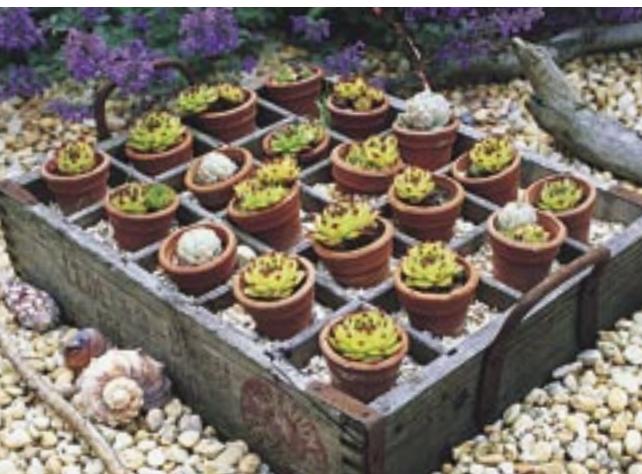


“I’ve created a relaxed garden, where plants are allowed, within reason, to do exactly what they want”



and grasses, with the gaps filled by flowering annuals. Jan packed more plants than normal into the borders, sometimes planting three when one would probably do, but this is another reason why the garden looks so good early on. This might sound like an expensive approach, but she’s a bit of a bargain hunter, rummaging the ‘nearly dead’ section of nurseries and scouring the Plant Mall at BBC Gardeners’ World Live for bargains. She also divides lots of perennials from her old garden, as well as swapping plants with her friends, all of which has saved her a fair amount of money.

Jan admits that she may have over-planted in some areas, and that the garden doesn’t look half as good in winter, because the herbaceous plants die back, leaving quite a bit of bare soil. But she’ll tackle this as and when, she says, revealing her laid-back approach. Last summer she had hundreds of sunflowers, the result of spilt bird food seeds that had germinated. Instead of pulling them



up, she let the whole lot flower. In fact, any plant that self-seeds is always given the chance to grow. "I like to think that I've created a relaxed garden, where plants are allowed – within reason – to do exactly what they want," she says.

It's not just the plants that make her garden a success, it's also her clever use of reclaimed accessories and seaside trinkets. "This garden is inspired by the Wirral coastline," she explains. "So I've incorporated as many beach- and sea-related elements as possible." A wrecked dinghy now planted with grasses, shells used to decorate pots and pathways, plus lots of driftwood, have all been found on the nearby coast. "I regularly walk on the beach and it's amazing what gets washed up. I shouldn't think I'll ever stop picking things up for the garden."

So, does speedy gardening mean lots of hard work? Jan, who only has an hour or two in the evenings to spend in the garden, reckons it more or less looks after itself, although she

does admit struggling to keep up with deadheading in June. She credits her hassle-free space to the fact that she gardens organically, meaning that in the short life of the garden, an eco-system of creepy-crawly friends has established itself. "I don't spray or use slug pellets, and just let the insects do their work," she says. "Ladybirds hibernate in the railway sleepers and I let a few nettles grow because they're so good for butterflies and other insects."

Whatever Jan's methods, they certainly work. It's amazing to witness what can happen naturally if you leave a garden to its own devices. In just two summers it has changed from a building site to a quiet haven, and Jan now loves her new garden more than the old one.

"This garden is my ideal," she explains. "I'm looking forward to seeing how it develops in years to come. We built this house to live in for the rest of our lives and I'm hoping the garden will serve me just as well." □

TOP A meandering path weaves through borders overflowing with colour
ABOVE LEFT Pebbles, shells and other finds add to the seaside feel
ABOVE Rustic supports are soon engulfed by burgeoning growth

Kevin Smith, our commissioning editor, is creating a small coastal garden in Essex

Small garden notebook

Jan's tips for speedy gardening

- » Build your hard landscaping in high summer or mid-winter, so you can plant in spring or autumn, when new additions will get off to a good start.
- » Buy large, established trees and shrubs, but make sure you water them well in their first year. They will cost more, but the effect will be immediate. Jan got hers from a local Wirral nursery, The Bigger Plant Company (0151 632 3532, www.thebiggerplantcompany.co.uk). Others to try include Tendercare (www.tendercare.co.uk, 01895 835544) and Garden Style (01252 735331, www.gardenstyle.co.uk).
- » In the first year, plant herbaceous perennials closer together than is recommended. You'll have to thin them out in



Annuals like cornflowers give speedy results and will self-seed

years to come, but they'll look great initially, rewarding you with lots of growth.

- » Fill bare patches of soil with plenty of colourful annuals.
- » Don't be in too much of a hurry to remove plants that aren't performing. They're filling a space, adding to the overall fullness of your garden, and can be dealt with in the future.

