

## All things bright and beautiful

Ulting Wick, Maldon, Essex Leslie Geddes-Brown finds spring magnificently celebrated around the attractive barns and house of an old Essex farm Photographs by Jerry Harpur



HEN Philippa Burrough and her husband moved from London to Ulting Wick in Essex in 1996, she had never had a garden. Sixteen years later, her four acres of garden and three acres of woodland are open under the National Gardens Scheme (NGS), and she works all hours in it, with their full-time professional gardener, Chris Horsfall, who started work in 2009, having recently completed a head-gardener apprenticeship at the renowned Cambo gardens in Fife. Better still, she's full of enthusiasm. 'It's all such fun,' she keeps repeating.

She was clearly born to be a gardener. 'When I went on holiday to friends in Dorset as a child, I would weed their beds—I love weeding. Also as a child, I remember asking "Have you seen clematis wilt?". Friends thought I was talking about another girl. My parents had a garden in Suffolk and I had a Dutch godmother, which perhaps is where I get my love of tulips. My husband isn't really interested, although he does love the trees and our woodland.'

No one but a novice gardener would have taken on Ulting Wick. Its soil—a mixture of gravel with patches of clay—is, by turns, incredibly dry and regularly flooded; the River Chelmer runs nearby and periodically covers the large lawn at the back of the house. It's in the dip of a slight valley, so vistas are hard to come by, and a local farmer dubbed it 'hot land' because of the gravel base.

The main, 16th-century house is a typical Essex farmhouse, surrounded by a series of listed barns, some 17th-century and some 18th, along with an earlier cottage. But when the Burroughs bought the property, it was a rundown farm with chunks of concrete under the surface and the usual assortment of outbuildings, overhead wires and a garden that Mrs Burrough recalls as being 'somewhat unsympathetically planted'.

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To cope with the unpromising soil, Mrs Burrough has made the unusual, but highly sensible, decision to concentrate on two very separate displays: one in spring and one in late summer, forsaking the traditional delights of June in an English garden of perennial flowers.

This is a garden planted for the impact of colour, its series of barns and small cottage being of painted black clapboard, which makes a marvellous foil for vibrant planting. So in spring, there's a tremendous show of tulips and, from late summer, regiments of dahlias. The formal beds, often edged in box with box topiary highlights, are bordered with gravel paths; terracotta tiles, laid on edge in the Lutyens manner, are used to circle eyecatchers, such as a huge old copper, handsomely aged to a subtle verdigris. Other permanent fixtures include sculptures—a large stone shape by Dominic Welch at the far end of the nearlyhidden swimming pool and a sinister black barn owl in the woods.

The year begins with snowdrops. The Burroughs plant about 1,000 a year under the new woodland which, when they bought the land, was dreary set-aside. It's a longterm project, which not only increases the extent of the gardens, but also blocks the noise from a nearby road. Then, across the pond and its stream, bordered by mature willows, they've planted daffodils—nothing too fancy—which can be seen mirrored in the water.

Then, it's tulip time. 'Essentially, it's a riot of colour. We've planted thousands.' Last year, there were 39 different varieties; 5,000 bulbs have been planted for this spring. 'Along the stream, we have greens,



yellows and oranges—Ballerina, Spring Green and Westpoint. There's a pink garden, where we've put Barcelona, Queen of Night, Maureen (almost white), China Pink and Menton, and there's a white garden, using White Triumphator, Spring Green, White Parrot and Elegant Lady—I just love that tulip.' This is a soft cream with the palest pink edges to petals that are curved out like all lily-flowering tulips. It lives up to its name. So, although the tulip beds are colour-themed, Mrs Burrough isn't too purist about it: the flowers have subtle variations of shade and shape. Every year, she and Mr Horsfall plan their new purchases of tulips and dahlias—'all except species tulips, which are too expensive. Some I buy are the same each year. Others are fresh, such as Dolls' Minuet, which I'm trying out.' This has strong red petals with a purple stripe and green base.

The intervening weeks of midsummer, between tulip time and dahlia time, are used to improve the soil. 'Chris and I spend three weeks plotting where to plant—we take notes every autumn, so we don't mind if something doesn't work or is over the top. Every other year, we add farmyard manure and leaf mould, which we make ourselves it's terrifically labour-intensive. When everything flowers in September, it never looks the same. We get lots of comments about that, too.'

Indoors, there's a *capriccio* painting of the house and garden by Catriona Hall with, in the foreground, exact likenesses of the favoured tulips. Mrs Burrough ends as she began: 'It's such fun. I love it.'

Ulting Wick, Maldon, Essex (01245 380216; www.ultingwickgarden.co.uk). Spring displays open for the NGS charities on Sunday, April 29, 2pm–5pm. Visitors and groups also welcome by appointment