

IN BRIEF

What Garden around a barn conversion on re-purposed farmland.

Where Oxfordshire.

Size One and a half acres.

Soil Clay based.

Climate Temperate, with wind coming off the lake and flooding due to high water table.

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

A wilderness of grassy meadow and wildflowers comes up to the house before being restrained with hard landscaping and sharp hornbeam hedges. Structured clearing, in which trees of value were retained, opened up the site for a clear view of the wetlands to the southeast.

Mood music

Surrounding a barn conversion in Oxfordshire, designer Angus Thompson has created a rhythmical garden that offers subtle variations on a textural theme

WORDS KENDRA WILSON PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS



Etched into a big-sky landscape of marsh, meadow and neatly clipped lawn, the setting could be mistaken for East Hampton, on New York's Long Island. Teeming with birds, the reeds and willows of the nearby lake merge into a fluffy yet robust meadow, bisected with winding paths. Closer to the house, flowers that are bolder and brighter stand tall against the super-sized volumes of the new build. This is not the USA but Oxfordshire, the sequestered house hidden on land that is post-agricultural, with a view that is post-industrial. The core of the building, a former dairy barn listed in the Domesday Book, makes a T-junction with the larger addition: while it looks uncompromisingly modern, the new house is anchored on English land that has been farmed for millennia. The soil here is clay based, yet wonderfully free-draining, which explains the presence of the nearby gravel pit – that was only recently filled with water and restored to the natural landscape as a reserve.

Having endured a brief spell as commercial units, the old barn was requisitioned by the farm-owning family, and a re-imagined structure was built in tandem with its garden. Architects WGP called in Oxford-based landscape designer Angus Thompson, with whom they have had several happy collaborations. Angus is sanguine in recalling the building process; the clients were decisive and the project progressed with a notable alacrity, given the complications of the site.

The first challenge was rabbits. As the garden relaxes in the half light of dawn or dusk, 30 to 40 white tails can be seen at a glance, while a rear guard of squirrels makes sure that the dream of spring bulbs under trees will never be realised. In response, Angus designed flower beds, secured behind barriers of Corten steel, sunk into underground shoulders of concrete. The high-security fencing is topped with a rusted steel mesh that reaches to knee height. Abundant perennials disguise their underpinnings as the season progresses. The rabbits should be acknowledged for their part in the garden's layout; the rectangular beds, bursting with texture and spots of intense colour, extend the axis from the house toward the swimming pool. Although the uncompromising lines of the

To continue turn to page 38

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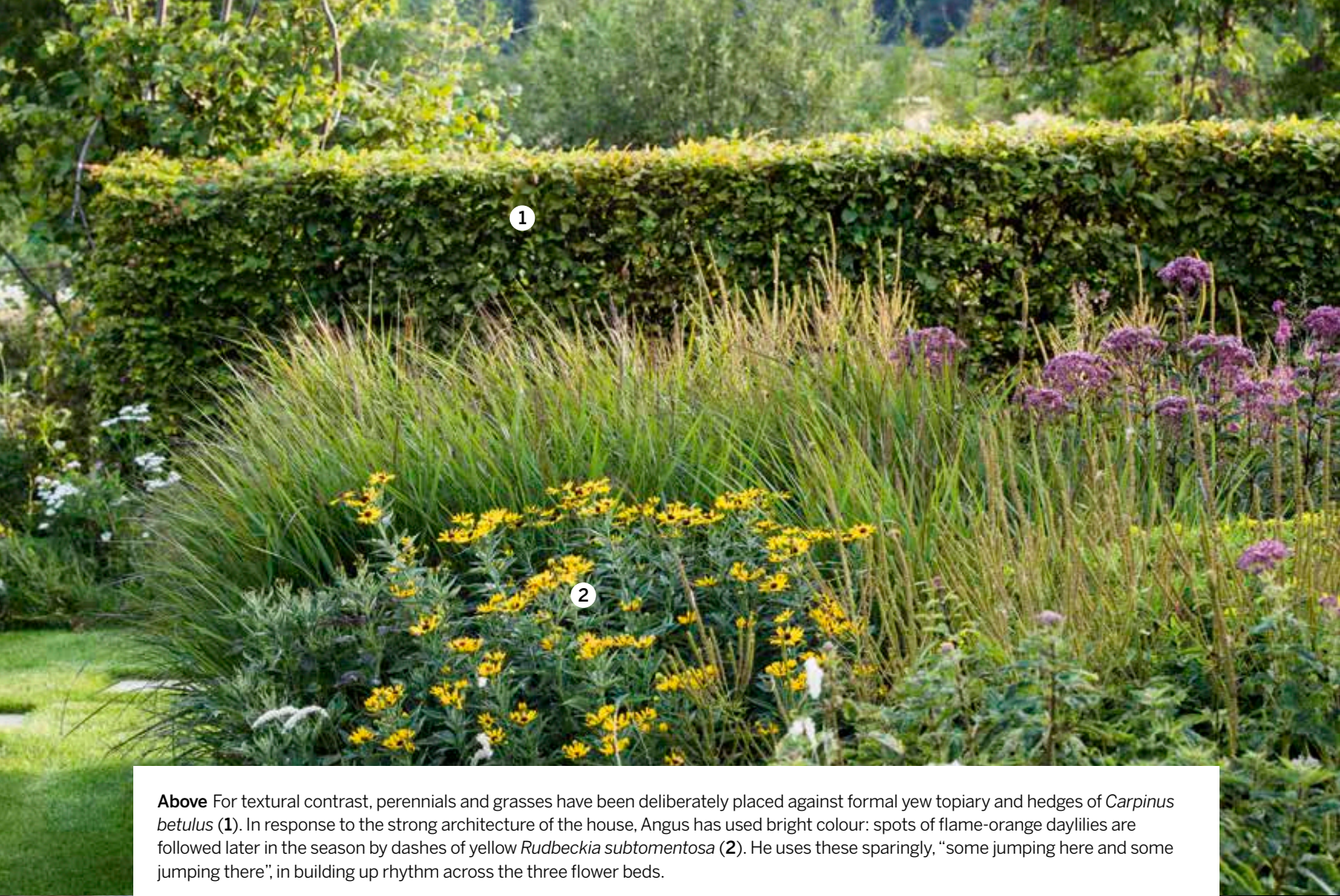
Lines of perspective direct the eye from three
flowing rectangles of perennials towards the
swimming pool and an identically sized
rectangle beyond. This contains a simple
planting of *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln'
and one of three river birches (*Betula nigra*)
that Angus was excited to add to the site.



Planting approach

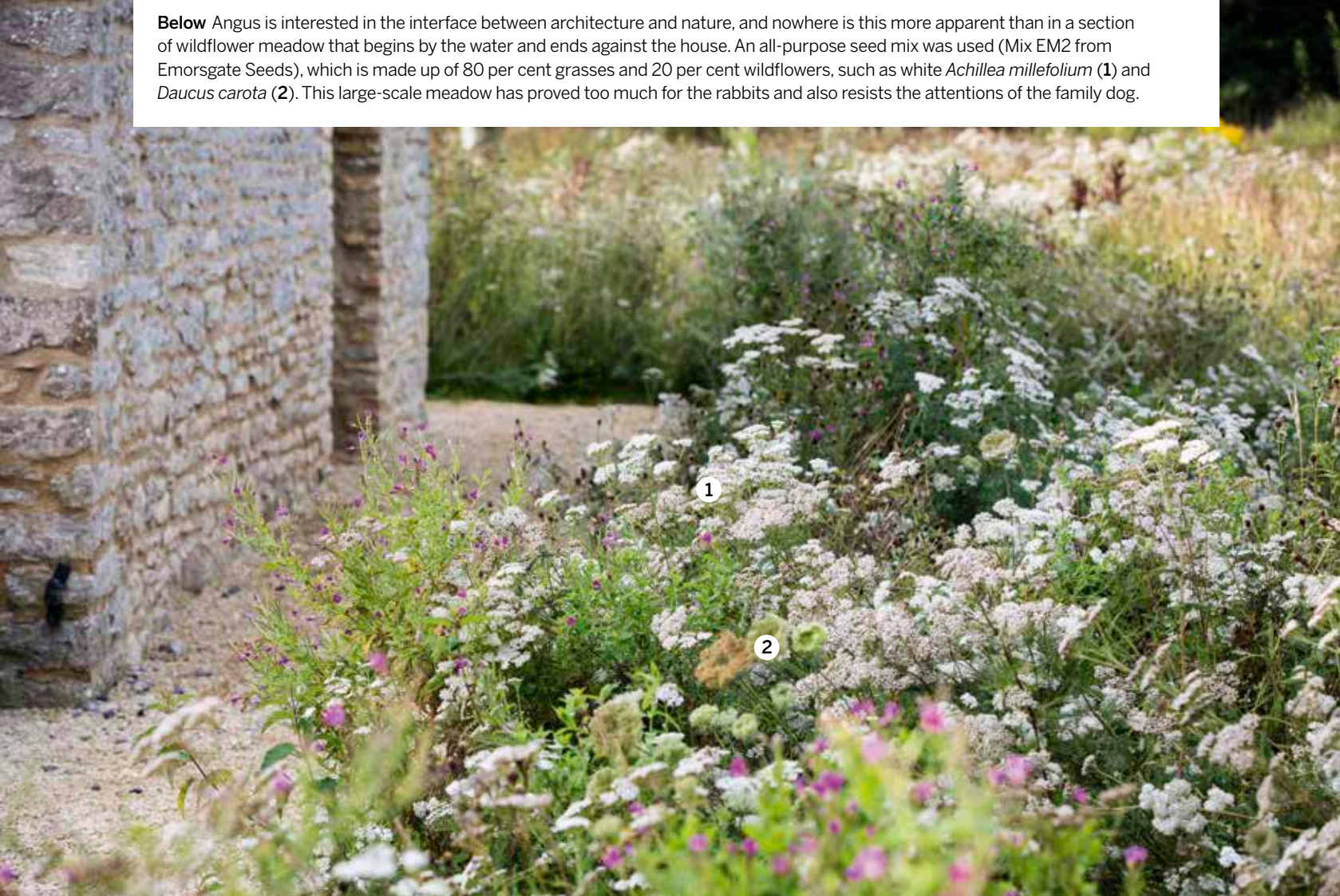
Above Apart from a wildflower meadow along the watery side of the garden, Angus's plant combinations are restricted to three large rectangular beds, fenced in against rabbits To avoid stiffness, key plants are treated like washes, flowing from one bed to the next. Grasses such as *Panicum virgatum* 'Rehbraun' (1) and *Panicum virgatum* 'Heavy Metal' are lifted by bright colour from the *Euphorbia donii* (2). "It's all connected, but as you move from one section to another, the balance changes," says Angus.

Below One of the main structural plants across the beds is *Eupatorium maculatum* Atropurpureum Group (1), which complements and contrasts with all the other planting. Used in groups of five, its muted purple umbels bring out the best in other cooler colours and holds its own in contrast to the verticals of *Veronicastrum* 'Adoration' (2). The plants here, such as *Lythrum virgatum* 'Dropmore Purple' (3), a cultivated version of the common loosestrife that grows naturally by the lake, "feel comfortable" with the outer wetland landscape.



Above For textural contrast, perennials and grasses have been deliberately placed against formal yew topiary and hedges of *Carpinus betulus* (1). In response to the strong architecture of the house, Angus has used bright colour: spots of flame-orange daylilies are followed later in the season by dashes of yellow *Rudbeckia subtomentosa* (2). He uses these sparingly, "some jumping here and some jumping there", in building up rhythm across the three flower beds.

Below Angus is interested in the interface between architecture and nature, and nowhere is this more apparent than in a section of wildflower meadow that begins by the water and ends against the house. An all-purpose seed mix was used (Mix EM2 from Emorsgate Seeds), which is made up of 80 per cent grasses and 20 per cent wildflowers, such as white *Achillea millefolium* (1) and *Daucus carota* (2). This large-scale meadow has proved too much for the rabbits and also resists the attentions of the family dog.



▷ house prompted a strong design response, it is the interplay between architecture and “gardening in the wild” that really interests Angus. “I enjoy bringing in the outside and putting it into a more formal structure,” he says. Angus is able to riff on this dynamic, through his music background. Before enrolling on a garden design course at Inchbald in London, he was a full-time working musician. Angus has found that the two disciplines are not unconnected: “I found that my intuition in music fed into my intuition in gardening,” he says. “I was able to trust that feeling you get when moving from an E minor to a G. It’s the same as three steps up to a space.”

Faced with three large rectangles to fill, Angus began with a base rhythm of grasses, planted in fives. *Panicum virgatum* ‘Rehbraun’ and *Panicum virgatum* ‘Heavy Metal’ provide the structure, placed in ovals that run at 45-degree angles across the whole space. Key players then build on this rhythm; namely *Eupatorium maculatum* Atropurpureum Group and *Sanguisorba* ‘Blackthorn’, planted in threes and fives. Incidentals of *Veronicastrum* ‘Adoration’ are scattered through, like bulbs that have been thrown in the air and planted where they land.

The whole garden is planned along strict lines that Angus has then shifted. Long hornbeam hedges end suddenly, opening up different views and freeing movement, while also providing a sense of enclosure. “I start with something that is very logical and then allow it, like a Catherine wheel, to be disturbed,” Angus says. “I like explosion.” The siting of the swimming pool, in plain view of the house and with uninterrupted views over the landscape, is an explosion in itself. Conventions dictate that pools in the UK should be hidden away – for the sake of privacy and because no one wants to look at them in winter. This one, by contrast, was conceived by designer and client as an “elegant water feature” that would look just as good covered. Surrounded by York stone, the weathered red cedar deck is a smooth plane, balanced on load bearings.

In the end, this is a family garden, in which the safety of the swimming pool (manually opened by a strong adult; impossible for a child) was arguably its most important feature. Enveloped by a meadow that is contained within the minimalism of traditional estate fencing, the garden has become a wild playground for the children who live here, their heads just visible over the tall wildflowers as they cycle around the paths. “To make a space that a family moves around in happily,” says Angus, “is an honour.” □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Angus’s work at angusthompsondesign.com

This image Close to the house, topiary stabilises the looseness of the meadow. The building’s scale demanded large furniture, which the owners sourced from RH Modern, based in the USA.

Facing page A ‘drawbridge’ of red cedar connects garden and lake, uninterrupted by the almost-transparent lines of rusted estate fencing.

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