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IN BRIEF

What A contemporary garden in a traditional setting.

Where West Sussex.

Size Three acres.

Soil Heavy clay.

Climate Temperate.

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

Clumps of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light' set the tone for the cool, restrained planting around the 17th-century farmhouse. Closer to the house, this gives way to more traditional, cottage garden-style planting, with pleached hornbeam hedges screening the kitchen garden beyond.

History lessons

Around a 17th-century farmhouse in West Sussex, designer Chris Moss has created a contemporary garden that builds on the house's past

WORDS RORY DUSOIR PHOTOGRAPHS EVA NEMETH



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challenge was to make it even more so



The context of a site is the starting point for all garden design. In taking on the commission to reshape the landscape of a farmhouse on the Weald in West Sussex, Chris Moss arrived at a garden with multiple blessings. First, the scenery: whichever way you look, the view is unblemished, with fields rolling on to woodlands and barely a building in sight. Blackdown, once a favourite haunt of the poet Tennyson, and one of the highest points in southeast England, rises invitingly to the west of the house. At the centre of this sits a modest but picturesque 17th-century farmhouse built in the local vernacular, with a remarkably tall chimney stack. The old farm buildings now form part of the living quarters. The barn flanking the north side of the old farmyard has been connected to the original house and contains a large kitchen and living area, while an outhouse across the drive from the main house is now a lodging for guests.

The place seemed idyllic when Chris arrived on the scene – the challenge was to make it even more so, taking a bold hand with the design while remaining responsive to the intrinsic charm of the site and the heritage of its buildings. It fell to him to filter out the good from the bad. “When I arrived the drive still ran its original course straight to the farmyard,” says Chris. “With the result that one of the main living areas was habitually filled with parked cars. I felt that by diverting the drive I could turn this into a much more usable space.” Now the drive passes in a longer sweep to a discrete area, and the farmyard, planted boldly with clipped yew, box and grasses, becomes a wonderful surprise to anyone who visits the property, and a usable outdoor space. On the other side of the house, the owners had already taken down a large fence that was obstructing the property’s glorious view of Blackdown. Chris additionally removed shrubs to reveal more of the magnificent vista and constructed a ha-ha.

While the garden on the north side of the house celebrates the open view as it rolls down to the north, on the southern side there are a series of partially enclosed spaces with subtly modulated planting. The tarred, wooden façades of the buildings surrounding the farmyard lend themselves to a restrained, contemporary style of planting – rectangular blocks of yew

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This image In the kitchen garden, the golden hue of the moor grass *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* ‘Transparent’ contrasts with the dark foliage of clipped box. The rill is one of several axial gestures, none of which are overly grand or imposing.

Facing page A pair of clipped, table-top crab apple *Malus* ‘Evereste’ create an entrance to what was originally the front door of the farmhouse, which dates from the 17th century and is Grade II listed.

The tarred, wooden façades of the buildings lend themselves to a restrained, contemporary style of planting



Changing spaces

One of the principal elements of the challenge in laying out this new garden was to create something contemporary and attuned to the uses of its owners, without jarring against the strong character of the existing structures, all glorious relics of the rural West Sussex vernacular. One contrivance that has helped Chris achieve this is the partial division of the garden into separate spaces. This staple of English domestic garden design was used perhaps most famously at Sissinghurst, where the subdivision of the garden allowed Vita Sackville-West to create gardens of different characters and colour themes. The old farmyard here is a case in point. The black timber cladding of the buildings, although traditional, encouraged Chris to re-imagine the space with a modern planting palette. Abstract rectangular blocks of yew dominate the planting and enhance the shimmering lightness of grasses, such as *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light' and *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln'. Colour is restricted to green or white. It is a fine example of how a planting can create or enhance the 'mood' in a given area – and how radically the mood can shift in response to the context within one garden.



This image Planting to the north of the house is restrained, creating a sense of open space that supports the magnificent view. Beech topiary pieces about the generously proportioned terrace, which catches the early evening light.

Facing page To the east of the house a meandering line of clipped, box is both bold and subtle. Beyond this an apple walk leads into the fields beyond, to the north a low-key allée of clipped hornbeam.

▷ populate the space and form a strong visual relationship with the buildings. There is not much colour, with the flower palette restricted to green and white, but the silver foliage of four weeping pears (*Pyrus salicifolia*), trained and pruned to form a canopy, exert a strong leavening effect, as does the wonderfully pale and slender-leaved *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light' and the shimmering sward of *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln'.

In the area surrounding the front door of the house, there is less coolness and restraint in the choice of herbaceous flora. "I felt that so close to a traditional farmhouse like this the planting should more closely resemble that of a traditional cottage garden," says Chris. In the adjoining space, a small ornamental potager, features a contemporary rill and a planting that owes much to the New Perennial Movement with plentiful grasses, including *Molinia caerulea* 'Heidebraut', *M. caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Transparent', *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', and one of Chris's favourite plants, the almost shrub-like perennial *Amsonia tabernaemontana*. Late colour here comes from heleniums, rudbeckias, and the long-lasting contribution of *Persicaria x fennica* 'Johanniswolke' (much of its colour deriving from the post-floral display of ripening seed). Late in the season, herbaceous growth is tall; the feeling of being immersed in planting is enhanced by the level change as you step down at the threshold of the garden.

Although each area has its distinct character, the transitions never jar. The partial seclusion of each area helps in this, but Chris has also worked hard to create a subtle sense of continuity. A meandering line of clipped box, equally at home in contemporary plantings as in the more traditional planting around the house, snakes its way through both areas and fosters a feeling of unity. Topiary pieces are used in all three areas and are the most visible elements from afar. Pleached hornbeam hedges help to enclose the kitchen garden, but their forms are also echoed in the rectangular blocks of yew found in the farmyard, and in the clipped *Malus* 'Evereste' that greet visitors at the garden gate.

The sense of enclosure on this side of the garden whets the appetite for the panoramic view that greets you on the other side of the house. Although a degree of geometry is gently imposed in the form of low-key allées, and a group of four topiary hornbeam specimens, the broad vista is allowed to take centre stage, with one's vision unobstructed. The site is indeed blessed; but with Chris's strong vision and deft hand, its blessings have been multiplied. ◻

Turn the page for more planting ideas. ▷

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Chris's work at chrismossgardens.com

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This image A *Rosa rugosa* 'Alba' heavy with hips and loosely clipped box lead the eye to two lines of espaliered apple trees *Malus domestica* 'Red Belle de Boskoop' and *M. domestica* 'Royal Gala' underplanted with *Erigeron karvinskianus*, to form what is known as the apple walk.

Facing page The faded heads of *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle' add rich autumnal colour in front of the guest house. The brick pavers were reclaimed from the original farmyard, although they've been re-laid in a different orientation with their narrow face uppermost.