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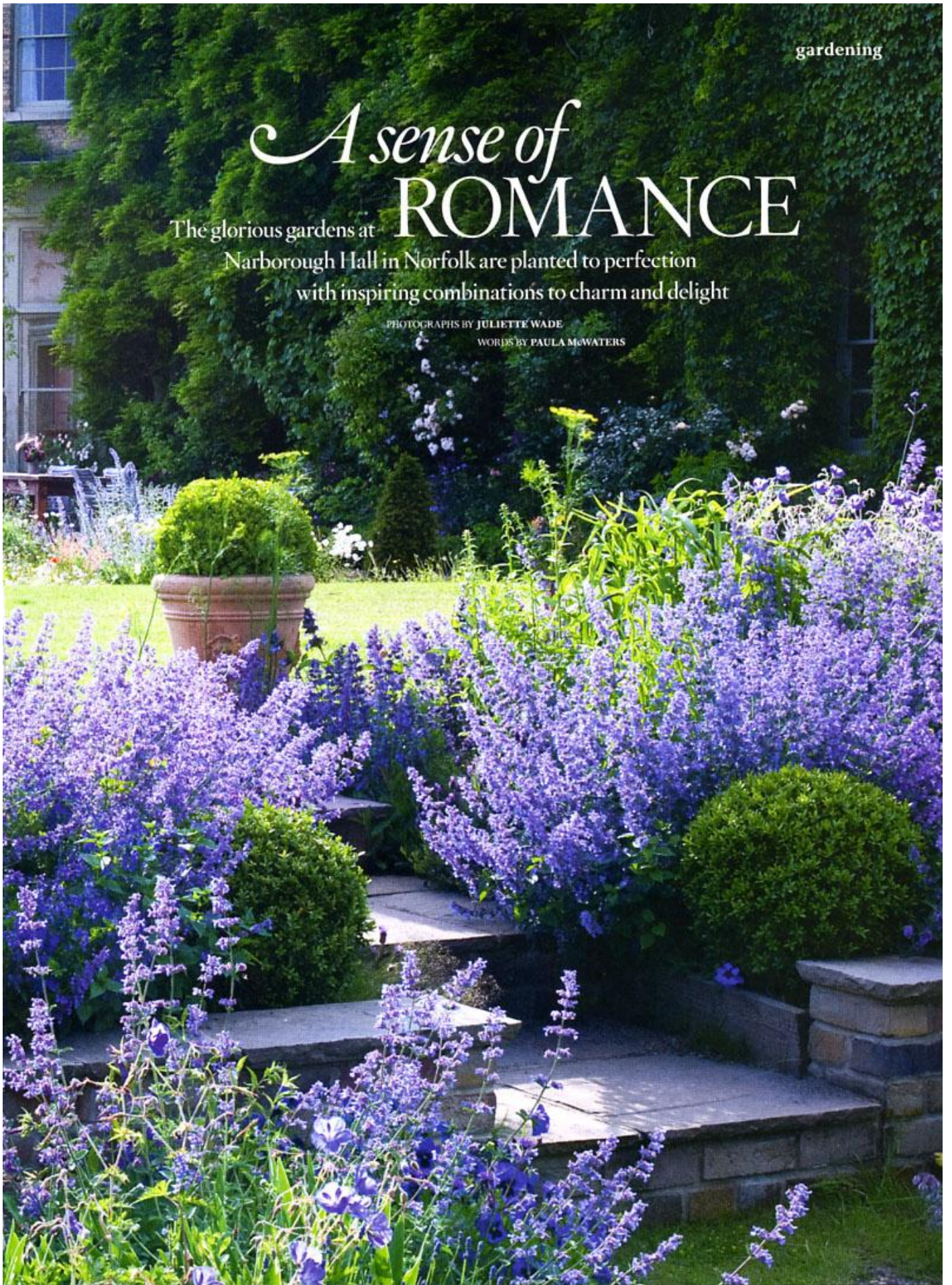
gardening

A sense of **ROMANCE**

The glorious gardens at
Narborough Hall in Norfolk are planted to perfection
with inspiring combinations to charm and delight

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIETTE WADE

WORDS BY PAULA McWATERS





It is hard to believe that such an abundant garden was created virtually from scratch seven years ago.

Joanne Merrison is not a 'put it down on paper' sort of garden designer. In fact, when gardener and television presenter Chris Beardshaw saw her sketch plan for a show garden at the 2008 Sandringham Flower Show (he was a judge), Joanne later learned that he'd deemed it the worst he'd ever seen. "It's embarrassing when I think back," she says. "I had plenty of gardening experience but had never really drawn plans so I just did this quick sketch on a piece of paper – it was incredibly scruffy."

The potential of her design must have shone through, nonetheless, as her working kitchen garden went on to win a gold medal and 'best in show' award. "I wanted to give people a flavour of what we do here at Narborough Hall, so everything in it was edible," she explains. "Coming here is not just about visiting the garden, it's about tasting real food straight from the ground. While the garden is open we run a café, The Perfect Spot, which was my daughter Fen's idea. We started off with afternoon teas with homemade cakes and now we do vegetarian lunches, too, using food that has been picked and cooked that very day."

Produce comes from the walled kitchen garden – now crammed with every kind of

fruit and vegetable – just one of the areas that Joanne has restored since moving here from London in 2003 with her husband, art dealer Robert Sandelson, and their daughters Fen, 14, and Mermaid, eight, and son Angel, 12. "I had created many small gardens before, both in London and Cambridge, where I'd been lecturing, but this was on a completely different scale. I went from about four square metres to 80 acres," she recalls.

Undaunted, she set about making a garden virtually from scratch and, seven years on, the results are remarkable. "There was nothing much here before – I don't think there was a single flower," she says. "It can be daunting at first, especially when you are marking out new borders with tiny yew hedges but everything grows more quickly than you think it will. Each day I would pack a picnic, put Mermaid in the wheelbarrow and off we'd go. We planted thousands of plants in the first four years." Many plants came from Joanne's family, donated by her mother, aunts and cousins, while many more were raised from seed in the greenhouse. "Getting that back into use was one of the first things I did," she says.

For the layout, Joanne took her cue from the architecture of the house. "The middle is

Tudor and looks quite symmetrical when viewed from the front, while the two wings are 18th century and give a more romantic impression. I wanted to echo that, so the garden is fairly formal in the centre, softening into curves and wildflowers at the side.

"The way I plant is very personal, without any thought to fashion. I choose flowers and shrubs that have resonance for me from my childhood or those that have the names of people I love, so there's angelica for Angel, Mermaid roses for Mermaid and fennel for Fen. The pastel border is pink and frothy because that was the world I was immersed in at the time – little girls and fairy dresses," Joanne says. "The purple border is more sultry, with dusky shades of plum and burgundy, like those of old roses and faded ballgowns." 'Charles de Mills' and 'William Shakespeare' are two of her chosen roses, both sourced from Peter Beales. Interplanted with alliums and wispy bronze fennel, the roses look remarkably well established. One of the borders is inspired by the Gerard Manley Hopkins poem *Pied Beauty* that begins, 'Glory be to God for dappled things' and is full of speckled and freckled varieties.

A sunken blue garden lies to the east of the house, planted with hazy, romantic ▷



The colourful borders provide wonderful displays of cottage-garden favourites while the walled kitchen garden is packed with fruit and vegetables to be used in the café

with many of the plants generously donated by family members, while others have been raised from seed





"The way I plant is very personal and quite self-indulgent, without any thought to fashion. I choose flowers



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The newly restored fishing hut; *Veronica longifolia*; roses in the walled garden. OPPOSITE The beautiful blue garden

drifts of nepeta, veronica, cornflowers, lupins, fennel, delphiniums, hardy geraniums and phlox. "The best time to be there is at 5am on a May morning, when the mist is rising from the lake. It's magical," Joanne enthuses.

The gravel terrace along the south-facing front of the house – once a car park – is now known as Wild at Heart by Joanne and her gardeners Bob Lever and Mandy Silverstone because it is a mass of wildflowers. They sought advice and bought wildflower seeds from Emorsgate Seeds in King's Lynn. "It has established so well," Joanne says. "We have ox-eye daisies, ragged robin, viper's bugloss, buttercups, campion and many more. The wildflowers attract clouds of butterflies and bees – we counted ten types of bumblebee on just one plant last summer. And it barely needs weeding, just a quick going over in March to pull out stray grass." On the front of the house itself are ancient wisterias and grapevines underplanted with 'Ghislaine de Féligonde', 'Buff Beauty' and 'Nuits de Young' roses alongside foxgloves and poppies.

The latest development is the new bridal garden. It has views across the parkland to the village church, to which it will be linked, eventually, by a winding path. "We will be holding wedding receptions here next year

and my plan is to create a romantic white garden with bowers of roses and wisteria and a secret little path to a fountain at the centre, quite hidden, so that the bride and groom can have photographs taken in a private, flower-filled space," Joanne explains.

Weddings are just one of the ventures she is developing at Narborough. "A place as beautiful as this should be shared. I want visitors to come and feel that they can be a part of it and create something themselves. We started with willow-weaving courses, led by Bob, and out of that came the idea of holding art courses; we're also working on a new programme for children with a walk through the walled garden and history trail across the parkland. And we run a small nursery with plants from the gardens and have turned rooms in the house into an art gallery." The ideas just keep on coming. 📍 *Narborough Hall, Narborough, Norfolk (01760 338827; www.narboroughhallgardens.com). The gardens, gallery, café and nursery are open on Tuesdays, from 18 May to 27 July, and on Sunday to Wednesday, from 1 August-29 September. Admission £4; pensioners and students £3; under-12s free. For information on art and craft courses, visit www.narboroughhallgardens.com.*

Tips from Narborough Hall

- Planting fruit gives interest late in the year – it is decorative in itself and crops such as currants and grapes have lovely leaf colour, too.
- Encourage self-seeding annuals as they help fill gaps in the garden.
- Plant a herbal-tea garden with lemon verbena and mint varieties.
- Gather bunches of flowers from your garden and see what goes well together. You can then improve the planting combinations in the borders by moving things around.
- Grow sweet peas up through roses. Put in a couple of sticks to help them, then let them scramble.
- Allow things to go a bit wild and see what happens. When parsnips are left to go over they throw up wonderful structural seedheads.
- To get maximum use from your garden, consider the extra benefits that each plant can bring before you put it in. Ask yourself, 'Can I eat it? Dry it? Is it medicinal?'

and shrubs that have a resonance for me from childhood or those that feature the names of people I love"

