

ESSEX PROMISE



Right: Planting near the house includes *Santolina chamaecyparissus* and *Anthemis tinctoria* 'E.C. Buxton'. Hornbeams sit on a plinth of lavender.

Below: Three images of hard detailing: (from top) decking, flagstone paving and a gravel/railway sleeper/grass combination.



Stephen Anderton reviews a garden with stunning views over the Essex landscape, that responds to the client's wishes — to be a place used by all the family. Photography by Fiona McLeod

What an opportunity it is to design a garden of two hectares on a westward-sloping field with a panoramic view. In the case of Charlesdale House that panorama is the gentle clay slopes of north Essex, and the design-and-build was undertaken by The Garden Design Company (comprising Paul Shaw design, Rob Jones project management and Jane Thomas planting design).

The clients' brief was feature-led. The main requirement was for the garden to be an entertaining space, but it had to include a new terrace, wildlife pond, suitable space for both football and the regular erection of a 30m marquee, a tennis court, play area for the clients' two young children, and at the front of the house a new drive and turning circle. In addition, positions for a 'breeze-house' (which the clients added as an after-thought) and an existing stainless-steel armillary sundial had to be included.

WORKING WITH THE LAND

In many ways the site is a gift. The house, long and thin, lies at the bottom of a slope 50m from a quiet, if fast, country road. Most of the garden is at the back of the house, the land dropping away to rolling arable hillsides dotted with farms, and the sky scored by (remarkably quiet) aeroplanes dropping down to Stansted. Geographically, it is a miniature and more rustic version of such great terraced landscapes as Harewood House, Leeds, or Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire.

But the proportion of house to garden, as well as the scale, is different. At Charlesdale, no matter where you stand in the garden to admire the view, when you turn around to face uphill the red roof of the pale yellow house dominates the skyline. Tricky. Yet the house fails to live up to its dominant position: its façade (one-and-a-half storeys high, dormered) is far from formal, being a sequence of irregular bays and projections, none of which is more dramatically significant than another, excepting perhaps the large white conservatory. Again, tricky. To the left of the outward view, and impinging on what would otherwise be a 180-degree green prospect, is a new, beautifully crafted garage block, partially sunk into the hillside.



The newly-created pond in this Essex garden is a stunning addition to the garden. Planting around the edge, which includes *Phragmites australis*, *Butomus umbellatus* and *Lythrum salicaria*, creates a natural, organic feel and centres the water into the surrounding landscape.



Above right: Decking on one side of the pond.

Below: Three images of planting, including (from top)

Persicaria polymorpha, *Salvia x superba* 'May Night' and *Anthemis tinctoria* 'E.C. Buxton', and *Zantedeschia aethiopica*.



PLANNING FOR PLANTING

The kernel of Shaw's design has been the creation of a generous curvilinear terrace in front of the house, partly given over to curving formal lawns and, closer to the house, a mixture of rectilinear beds and paved areas which follow the ins-and-outs of the façade. To break up the weak rhythm of the façade, a raised pool (with sundial at its centre) was set outside the drawing room windows, surrounded by a large semicircle of boxed hornbeam on two-metre high trunks, allowing an attractive 'roofed' view across the pool to the garden and landscape beyond. The hornbeams sit on a plinth of lavender.

The planting along the front of the house varies in character. Around the drawing room it is quite traditional, with formal dwarf box hedging, lavenders, grey artemisias and so on. It progresses through an area of more Mediterranean planting (fennels, anthesis, santolinas, salvias) until at the opposite end of the house it is a contemporary mix of exotica — bamboos, palms, ferns, canna lilies and so on.

All of this is quite a feat. The soil at Charlesdale is the cruellest of clays, sodden in winter and baked by the dry East Anglian summer, and the whole site is exposed to all but the east winds. Contractors DW Clark, who also undertook the earthworks, was asked to install drainage across the whole site. Some of Thomas's planting, particularly the woody planting, has struggled to cope with the clay; *Prunus serrula* and yew being successfully replaced by *Betula nigra* and *Thuja plicata*. Advice on improving the heavy clay was sought from Beth Chatto. Areas for more intensive planting were heavily enriched with



Above: Through soft perennial planting, the 'breeze house' has extensive views over the landscape.



Above: The new, large garage complex, made from oak and brown tiles, is a dominant feature in the garden.

