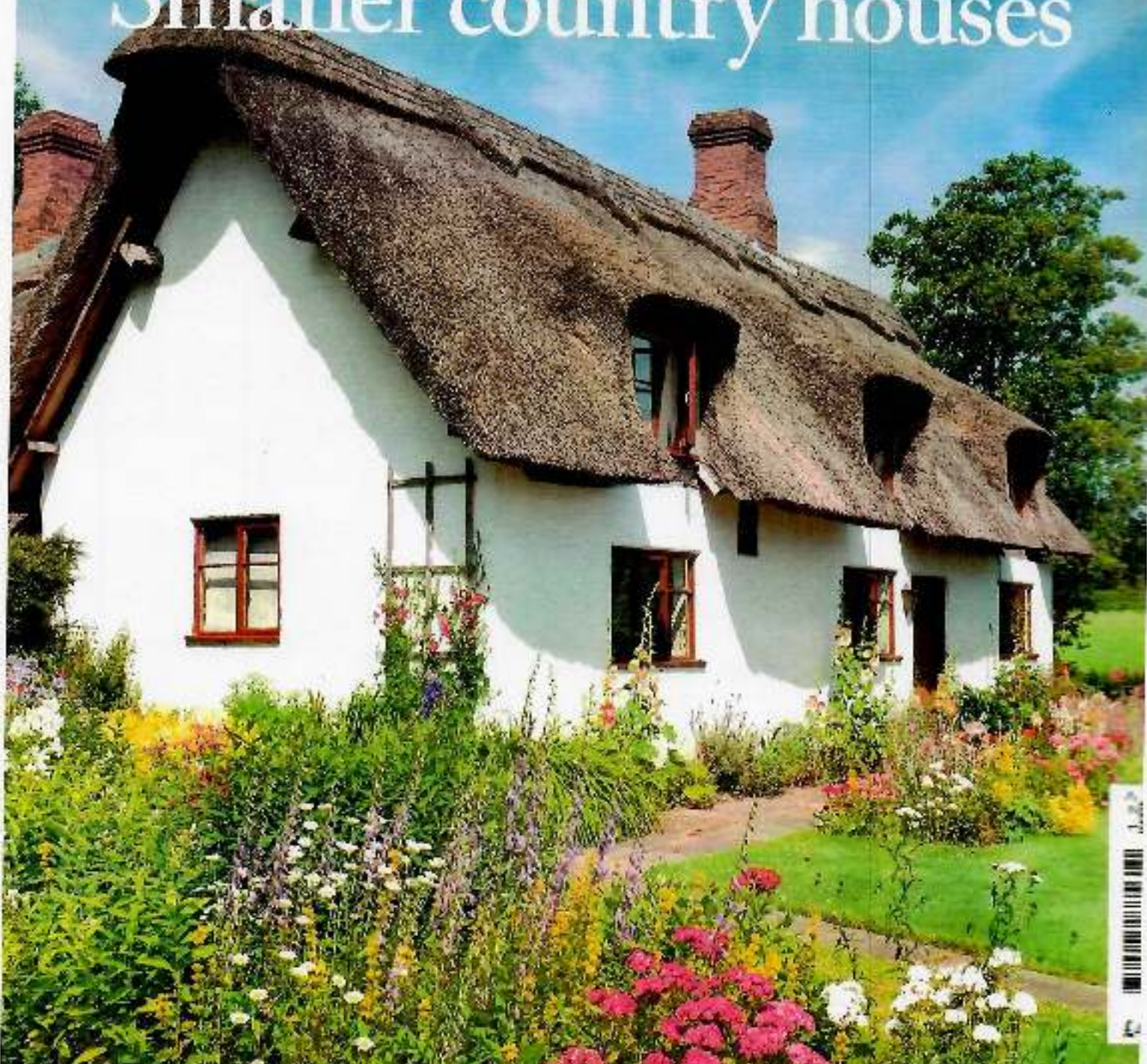


COUNTRY LIFE

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EVERY WEEK | MARCH 18, 20

Smaller country houses



The ingredients for the perfect kitchen
Tom Parker Bowles's best mussels recipe
Rosemary Alexander's beautiful garden

A lush garden scene featuring a stone wall, manicured bushes, and a brick house in the background. The garden is filled with various plants, including a large green bush in the foreground and several rounded, yellow-green bushes along the stone wall. A brick house with white window frames is visible behind the garden. The overall atmosphere is serene and well-maintained.

A complete education

Sandhill Farm House, Peterstown, River Suir

As one might expect from the founder of the English Gardening School, Rosemary Alexander's garden is packed with the lessons learned from a lifetime in horticulture, says Tilly Ware

Photographs by Mimi Connolly



CERTAIN gardens provoke frantic scribbling on the list of Things to Copy. Sandhill Farm, the Sussex home of Rosemary Alexander, has this effect in spades. 'Line of *Polystichum polyblepharum* with *Narcissus Tête-à-tête*: PLANT' shouts a line in my notebook. '*Sarcococca hookeriana*, NOT *confusa*' commands another, followed by sketches with, triple-underlined, 'DO THIS' alongside.

Mrs Alexander is the principal and founder of the English Gardening School (EGS), 'the best school in the world for amateurs', as she describes it, 'and what I wish I'd had when I started'. She grew up in Scotland, married at 18 and was in charge of 20 acres near Dunblane by the age of 21. Her landscaper thoughtfully agreed not only to redesign the garden, but also to explain the process along the way—it was a complete education, added to by visiting anywhere with labels.

‘I knew immediately I could turn it into eight interesting spaces’

She worked as a landscape architect in Glasgow before an Inchbald design course introduced her to tutors John Brookes and Anthony du Gard Pasley. Both became lifelong influences: du Gard Pasley was the first to support her idea for a school that combined design principles with practical skill and plant knowledge. 'All there was at the time,' says Mrs Alexander, who was awarded the prestigious Veitch Memorial Medal in 2011, 'was basic gardening advice or the academic rigours of Kew or Wisley.'

The internationally renowned EGS is now 37 years old, with alumni that include Rachel de Thame, Jo Thompson and Cleve West. Courses are practical, hands-on, meticulously organised and executed with an outstanding level of horticultural expertise. That is Mrs Alexander's style.

Sandhill is compact, far smaller than her previous home, Stoneacre, a 10-acre National Trust garden she nurtured for more than a decade. The brick-and-flint farmhouse sits in one acre, nearly bisecting it into a front and a back garden of half an acre each. Mrs Alexander worked out the design to a grid that stems from the house and breaks the area into sections: 'I knew immediately I could turn it into eight interesting spaces.' You enter through a tall beech hedge. A wide gravel axis path—'the motorway'—runs the full length of the garden, with a sunny terrace on the house side and shady woodland set slightly lower on the other, bordering a country lane. ➤

Magnolia Galaxy frames the view from the woodland garden to the house

The landscaping is flawless, employing shallow step risers, generous paths and level changes in local stone. There is not one inch of wasted space; each area works like a Trojan to maximum effect. A green-and-white border greets friends arriving for supper. Cloud-pruned box, Irish yew columns and pleached *Elaeagnus* give structure, softened with *Lampyracynus spectabilis* Alba, *Tulipa* Spring Green and Maureen, *Galanthus* S. Irrott, silver-edged hostas and white narcissi. They are followed by *Cosmos* Purity, *Rosa* Cooper's Burmese, *Nicotiana glauca*, white *gapanthus* and *Arenaria* Honorine Jobert. It is successional planting in a nutshell.

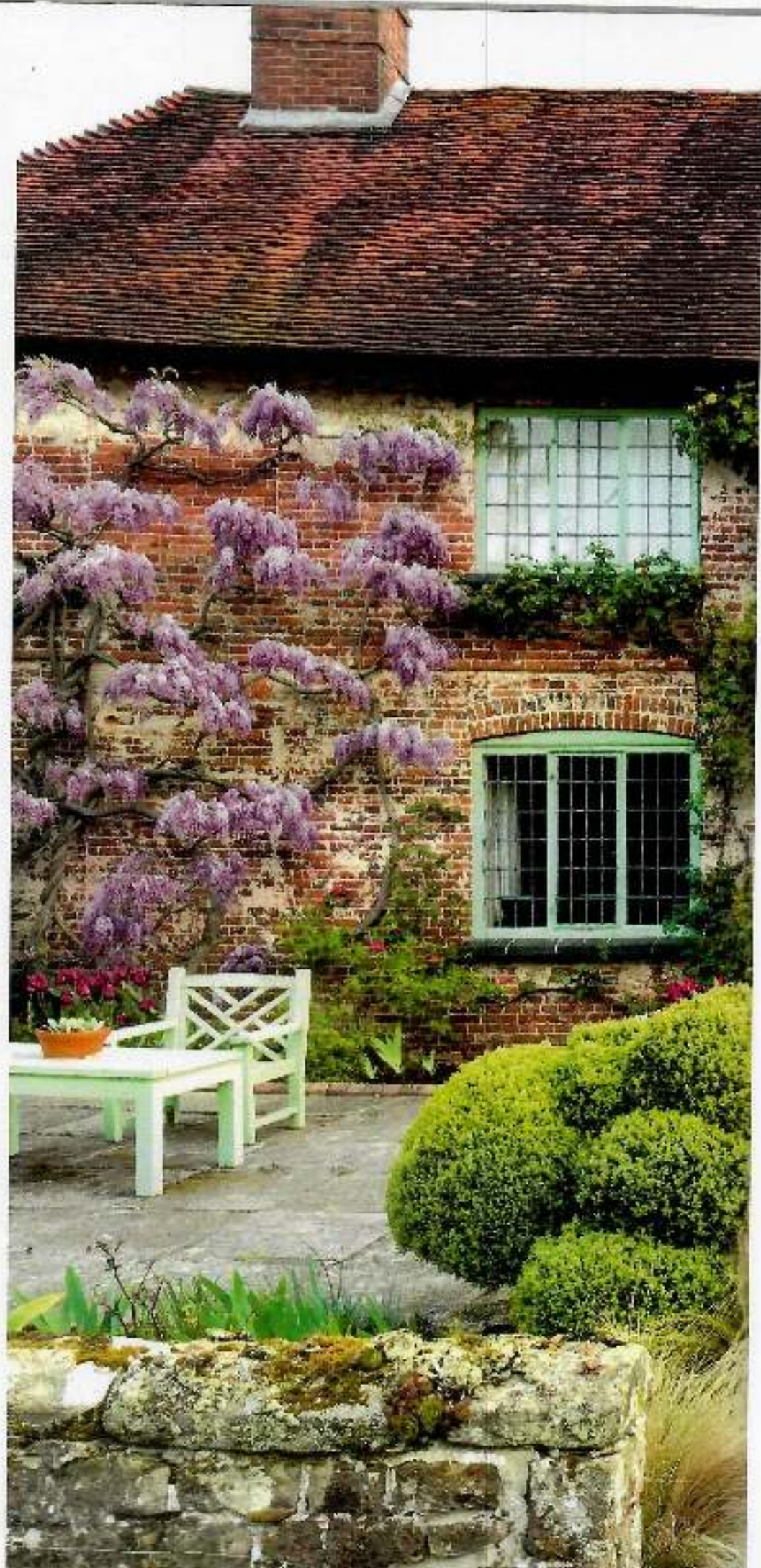
A narrow path snakes southward into the woodland garden where my Things to Copy scribbles come thick and fast. Mrs Alexander removed the original lawn and conifers, but kept an existing path system, raising the beds by three feet using peat blocks, topsoil and mulch to exaggerate the sense of space. With the sandy, thin soil improved, trees and shrubs went in first: *Corylopsis glabrescens*, *Magnolia* Galaxy, *Daphne* *bholua* Jacqueline Postill and handsome *Malus* *transitoria*.

Architectural vision and plantsmanship have created a garden full of purpose

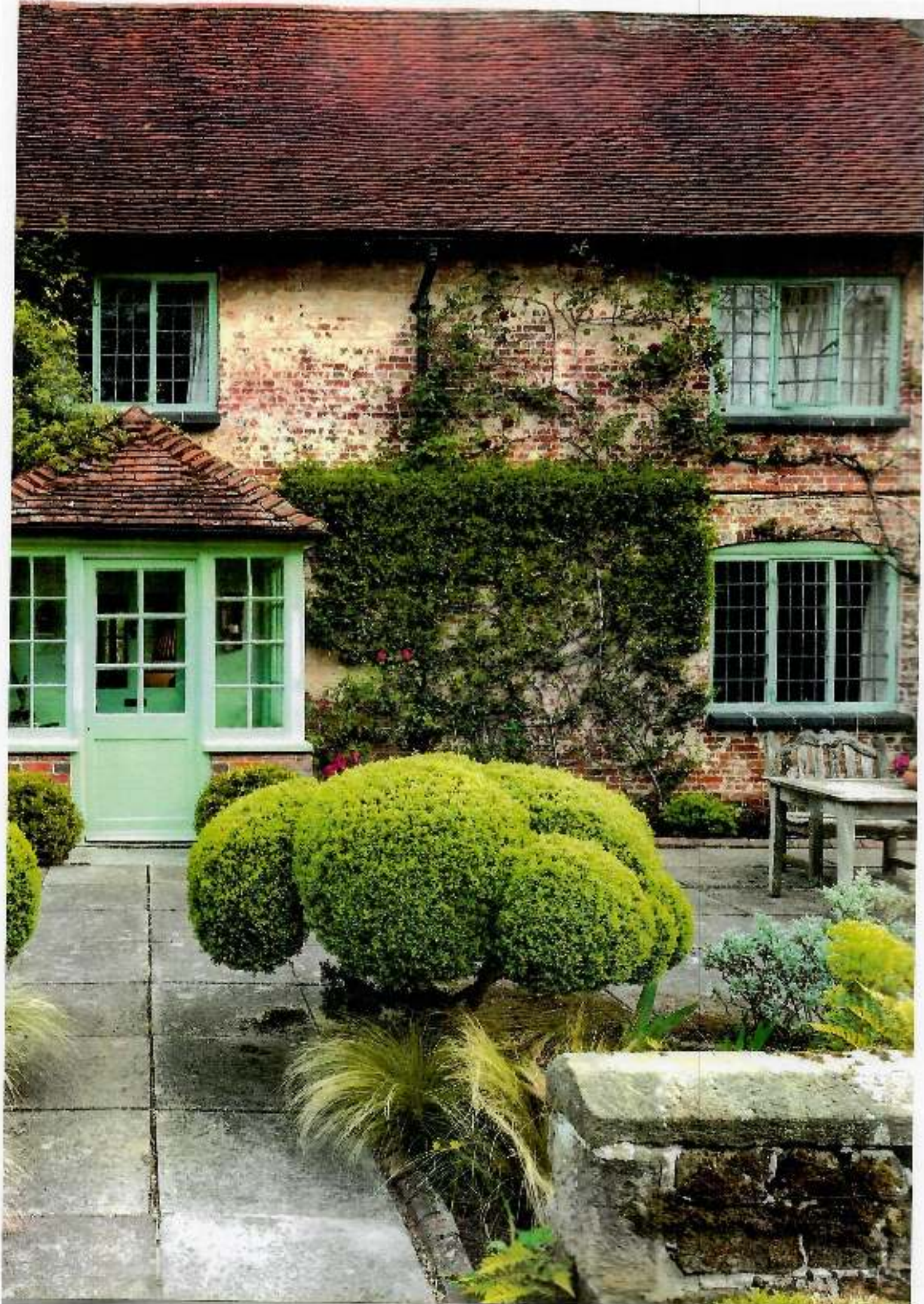
Underneath is a riot of woodlanders, hellebores, *Arim italicum* subsp. *italicum* Marmoratum, *Berberis* Eric Smith, *Brunera* Jack Frost, *Hosta* Halycon and Sum and Substance, pulmonarias including Blue Ensign and Bowles Red, plus a burgeoning collection of ferns with which Mrs Alexander is besotted. *Martynia striatifolia* weaves between *Nectaroscordum siculum* and *Lilium martagon*; *Polystichum setiferum* Pacherrimum Beris has primeval proportions.

It all has a fresh spontaneity that appears effortless—the stumpery is so natural that 'no one notices it'—but is founded on careful underlying order. Every tree is placed in a strategic sightline, every path edged by *Asarum europaeum*, *Saxifraga* *x urbinum* London Pride or *Lérisops muscari*. A beautifully shaped *Ilex aquifolium* Hascombenis—moved from Stoneacre—gives balance to *Rosa* Paul's Himalayan Musk, drifting over the stump of an old *Prunus* *Kanzan*.

Unusual plants are dotted throughout the borders, including snowdrops and gifts from Great Dixter in East Sussex, home of the late Christopher Lloyd, where Mrs >



Cloud-pruned box, christened 'poodle tails' by Christopher Lloyd, with *Trachelospermum jasminoides* on the walls



Alexander is a trustee. The woodland glides into a large leaf border, a cluster of *Ginkgo biloba*, *Rheum Red Herald* and *Magnolia grandiflora* Goliath.

On the terrace, the atmosphere switches to Mediterranean. Sandhill sits in a sheltered lee and rarely gets very cold. Two gargantuan *Euphorbia x pasteurii* John Phillips flank *Choisya ternata* White Dazzler; around the front porch flow salvias, roses and *Tulipa Merlot* under a clipped square of *Trachelospermum jasminoides*. There is exquisite pruning, both on the box beside the steps—'poodle tails, Christo called them'—and on the Japanese wisteria. Shoots are trained to jut out horizontally from the wall.

‘Everything its owner writes about is accomplished here’

The north-facing rear garden has a view of soft arable fields and the South Downs. It is a domestic space, housing an orderly kitchen garden, a dining terrace, a lawn and two distinct borders. One is almost entirely grasses, recommended by Dan Hinkley, with camassia in between; the other, a bold summer punch of fiery reds and dark foliage, such as *Sambucus Black Beauty*, *Heuchera Plum Pudding*, *Physocarpus Diablo* and the castor-oil plant *Ricinus communis*.

Sandhill feels supremely well planned, with a defined home for each plant type. Mrs Alexander, however, does not rest: 'I've been here 18 years; I want to continue to make it a different place.' The beds against the house recently acquired two tons of fresh soil and roses chosen by Michael Marriott and the terrace borders are under development.

Star plants in the woodland garden

***Malanthemum racemosum*, AGM**

A rhizomatous perennial similar to Solomon's Seal, with elegant arching stems and greyish-green elliptical foliage. The flowers, however, are quite different: fluffy, creamy white star-bursts that are deliciously fragrant. It prefers a partially shaded, sheltered spot, on neutral to acid soil. Very hardy. Height 3ft, spread 1ft 6in

Staphylea colchica

White bell-shaped flowers smother this handsome, vigorous shrub. In spring, the common name of which, 'bladdernut', is from its large, greenish-white fruit. Panicles of blossom can be up to 5in long and small of orange blossom. The name derives from Colchis, a kingdom of Georgia, where the buds are traditionally preserved in salt and eaten. 13ft by 13ft

Ilex aquifolium* *Hascombensis

The narrow, finely-toothed, glossy leaves of this holly are tightly knit, responding well to pruning and giving it a refined, columnar silhouette. Stems are a beautiful dark purple. It is slow-growing, but will potentially reach a height of 33ft. 10ft–26ft by 10ft

***Heptacodium miconioides*, AGM**

Bushy and upright with dark-green foliage, this summer-flowering deciduous shrub is stylish all year. The flowers are fragrant, with calyxes that turn red in autumn. In winter, the mature bark is buffed grey; *never* branches are deep crimson. 20ft by 10ft

***Polystichum setiferum* *Pulcherrimum* *Bevis*, AGM**

A ravishing evergreen fern: lance-shaped, gracefully arching dark green fronds with stems coated in soft-brown scales. The pinnae are particularly long and narrow, elegantly arranged in symmetrical arcs towards the tips. Low maintenance, a must for any shaded border. 3ft by 3ft

Fraxinus ornus

The manna ash is a splendid specimen in Mrs Alexander's woodland garden, with smooth, silver bark shining out in winter. It has a dense, oval crown of luxuriant foliage made from pinnate, matte-green leaves that turn yellow to burgundy in autumn. Abundant white-flowering panicles appear in May and are lightly scented. 40ft–50ft in height and spread

'I experimented with a gravel garden,' says Mrs Alexander, 'but it didn't work.'

Box blight is a perpetual presence and she trials alternatives: *Pittosporum Golf Ball* ('fast growing, needs three cuts a year') and *Elaeagnus Green Hodger*. Does she draw planting plans when she sets out? 'Lines go on paper, but planting plans are in my head. I still clock a design first and then how well the planting sets off that design.'

This architectural vision combined with skilled plantsmanship has created a garden full of purpose. Everything its owner writes

about—the importance of scale and intimacy, the rhythm and navigation through a space, the decorative structure of key plants—is accomplished at Sandhill. Students, past and present, descend on the garden for instruction on plant choice and design tricks. They learn vital techniques, but the chief lesson is Mrs Alexander's unstoppable energy, generosity and never-ending desire for knowledge. *Sandhill Farm House, Petersfield, West Sussex, opens on April 25 and 26 (www.ngs.org.uk) Visit www.rosemaryalexander.co.uk; www.englishgardenschool.co.uk*



Left: *Narcissus Pipit*. Middle: New Zealand native *Hebe huffeana*. Right: *Allium triquetrum*, the three-cornered leek that can be invasive