



The terraces in November, now awaiting replanting in spring

BE CLEVER WITH SHRUBS

In 20 years many shrubs can outgrow their original space.

To allow more light into shady areas, try removing some of the lower stems of larger shrubs to turn them into small trees. Also remove any crossing or overcrowded branches.



The exposed soil beneath shrubs can be used for long-lasting, ground-covering perennials such as the variegated *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Jack Frost', blue-flowering *Pulmonaria* 'Diana Clare' (above), the purple-flowered *Liriope muscari*, plus many ferns and early flowering bulbs.

What to do about box blight? For many years box (*Buxus sempervirens*) has been the mainstay for many gardeners, but box blight and the box caterpillar affect the foliage and are difficult to eradicate. Nothing can ever quite replace tightly clipped *Buxus*, but there are a few alternatives.



Try using *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Golf Ball' (above) which grows into a ball quickly but needs regular clipping, or the more upright *Euonymus japonicus* 'Green Hedger'. I plant the latter in groups of four and clip them together as cubes.

20 years on, it's time for some big changes

With no garden visitors, and no RHS judging to occupy her, lockdown was the ideal chance for Rosemary Alexander to revamp her borders

It is now more than 20 years since I moved to Sandhill Farm House, near Petersfield in Hampshire. I was immediately attracted to the one-acre property, divided into two halves, as it had the potential of being turned into several different spaces.

Sandhill is my fourth real garden. Having been a tenant of a National Trust property – Stoneacre in Kent – for 11 years, I wanted a change and the freedom to create a new, smaller garden that would need less maintenance. The thin, sandy soil would be easier to work than heavy Kent clay and I imagined that the garden could be managed in about two days per week.

Trained as a landscape architect and, as an avid plant addict, I wanted to create several different spaces for varied planting, each one with its own identity. The south-facing front garden was terraced, partly wooded and bounded by a beech hedge, while the contrasting north-facing rear garden was more open, with long views to the surrounding fields.

Over the first year I tried to get to know the site and to be patient and see



what emerged. In the second year, along with my gardener and friend Tina Woodward, we moved many of the existing herbaceous plants into a holding bed so that we could see the tree and shrub structure more clearly.

Although the soil was easier to work than the heavy clay of my previous property, many plants had been starved of nutrients, so for the past 20 years we have heavily mulched each bed and as a result the soil is now greatly improved.

In March 2020, when Covid struck, I realised I was facing a long period with no visitors coming to see the garden – nor would I be involved with my usual RHS show judging. Tina encouraged me to take this as an opportunity to rethink the garden and update the less successful areas.

I've picked out three borders where I have ambitious plans for the next few months – which just shows that lockdown can be put to good use.

Rosemary Alexander VMM (RHS) is principal of the English Gardening School (englishgardeningchool.co.uk). Sandhill is usually open for the NGS (ngs.org.uk).

◀ Rosemary Alexander, teacher and writer, is author of *The Essential Garden Design Workbook*

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THE FRONT TERRACES

When I arrived at Sandhill, I was determined to grow roses on either side of the porch. They hated it – poor flowering and black spot prevailed thanks to the poor soil – but, undeterred by common sense, three years ago we removed soil to a depth of 1m with a mechanical digger and tried again. Michael Marriott of David Austin roses recommended Olivia Rose Austin and James Austin, plus various perennials. All did badly.

However, on the walls, the recurrent pink climbing rose 'Pierre de Ronsard', which I brought back from France, did well, as did *Trachelospermum jasminoides* and an existing wisteria. I also decided to keep the cloud-pruned box trees opposite the porch as they are now both 1.5m tall.

A ROSE REVAMP

At the start of the lockdown last March we removed all the shrub roses and put them into the rear garden where the soil

is better. The terrace beds opposite the porch were also overgrown so we removed all the plants there too and added many inches of our own compost, to be allowed to settle until replanting this April.

Totally new planting for all four now-naked beds was suggested by Chris Marchant, previously of Orchard Dene Nurseries, who is well known for her inspired planting on many a Chelsea show garden. Her suggestions for a low maintenance but flowery border include stipa, veronicastrum, geranium, euphorbia, sanguisorba, eryngium and *Aster 'frbarsii' 'Monch'* – with compact evergreen *Pittosporum tobira* 'Nanum' replacing two sickly box balls on either side of the porch.

So, no more roses but a whole new look and the plants should be happy and easy to maintain. I cannot believe I fought against nature, persisting with shrub roses for so long!



▲ The porch, where roses refused to climb, despite a major change of soil



◀ The red border, at its peak in summer, took its colour theme from the brick wall; *Tulipa* 'Prinses Irene' below

When I first moved into Sandhill, this orth-east-facing border in the rear garden contained little of interest – but a hange in the roof line was very visible between the nearby cottage buildings. The late Christopher Lloyd, from nearby Great Dixter, and Ed Flint, one of his gardeners, came for a rather liquid lunch and we agreed that I should dig out a large existing fastigate yew (*Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata') and replant it in a spot where it would distract the eye from the roof pitches.

This long border is roughly 2.5m wide and is divided into two halves so that planting can be repeated on each side. The tall red brick wall behind it inspired me to base the mixed tree, shrub and perennials planting on shades of red. And as it is very visible from the outdoor dining area, the border had to peak in summer.

In the centre of the bed I intended to insert a door in the wall flanked by two matching small trees that would lead visitors to the plant sales shed. Pairs of trees rarely behave as intended and we had several false starts. Eventually, in 2010, I succeeded with two standard *Photinia x fraseri* 'Red Robin', which are clipped to a rounded shape. I still

ANNA ANDERKOTT, GAP PHOTOS, ALANAY

Visitors enter the garden through a gate and gap in the beech hedge before walking along a wide gravel path nicknamed "The Motorway". What we call the large leaf border is at the far end and can be seen by everyone who walks along the main path – it has long been an embarrassment. The soil here tends to be dry so we use a leaky hose loosely covered with soil to keep the ground moist.

PROBLEM PLANTS

The inspiration for a large leaf border began with a present of a *Tetrapanax papyrifer*, which grows more than 2m tall with huge leaves; unfortunately it likes to travel and sends up unwelcome shoots everywhere. As it is not completely hardy we cover it in fleece during the winter, so for about seven months of the year it looks unsightly. I decided I need to give up on this.

The bed is backed by a tall coniferous hedge. Against it I planted the golden-

stemmed bamboo, *Phyllostachys aureosulcata* and the darker *P. nigra* – but the black stems of the latter vanish against the conifer. Finally, the flaking bark cherry tree *Prunus serrula*, which I brought with me in a removal van from my previous property, is now dying.

WHAT STAYS, WHAT GOES?

The golden bamboo should stay, as it lights up the shade. The great architectural loquat, *Eriobotrya japonica* (now called *Rhaphiolepis*), with leathery textured dark green leaves 300mm long and 100mm wide, could be the main feature tree, planted in the centre of the bed. I got to know a large loquat tree near a swimming pool in Majorca, where I used to go on holiday, and have always wanted to find a spot in the garden where I could use one.

Concentrating again on large, bold foliage, a *Gunnera manicata* will soon fill in the rear, and several ornamental rhubarb, *Rheum palmatum* 'Red Her-

ald', already do well in this border.

Hostas with enormous foliage, such as 'Sum and Substance' and 'Frances Williams', will infill, to be mulched with Strulch (organic mineralised straw) which keeps the slugs at bay. I've used Strulch for three to four years, ever since my son gave me a bag as a Christmas present. It doesn't disappear too rapidly into the soil, and we just top it up every year.

As this border must perform for most of the growing year, seasonal changes will begin with tulips – I like the graceful lily-flowered orange 'Ballerina' contrasting with the deep violet-burgundy 'Merlot' – then it will move on to later performers, such as *Crocasmia* 'Lucifer', cannas and dahlias.

Red is a colour that always attracts the eye and I have a large pagoda-style bird table painted Chinese red (just visible above) that will form the central focal point from the main gate until the loquat tree grows up.

THE RED BORDER

haven't got around to putting in a door in the wall – perhaps this will be my "30 years on" project.

KEEPERS AND REJECTS

The border is framed with low hedging of the semi evergreen *Berberis f. atropurpurea* 'Dart's Red Lady', which sets the colour theme. A climbing rose – 'Lady Hillingdon' – works well trained on the wall and a corner edging of the amazing *Bergenia* 'Eric Smith', with foliage that colours beetroot red in the



winter, has also earned its place. However, some perennials, such as heuchera and geum, have become less successful over the years, so last November we lifted most of the dahlias and other plants not earning their keep.

A few shrubs are needed to give height so I'm leaving two groups of the fast-growing *Sambucus nigra* 'Black Lace' as a backdrop. With spring interest in mind, last year I split up groups of 'S. Arnott' snowdrops and planted them against the brick wall, to be followed by large groups of red and orange tulips: 'Couleur Cardinal' and 'Prinses Irene'.

Long-lived flowering perennials such as kniphofia, crocosmia, sedums, rheums, plus *Dahlia* 'Bishop of Llandaff', should carry us through the summer. To fill any gaps I'll use plastic pots of the heavily scented *Lilium regale* that can be plunged into the border just before flowering. Matching groups of the exotic dark red-leaved annual *Ricinus communis* 'New Zealand Black' will also go out in May.

I try to grow the ricinus from seed in late October but they are difficult to germinate – Nell Jones, head gardener at the Chelsea Physic Garden, often gives me some of their spares.



The cherry tree will come out of the large leaf border to make way for a loquat

