

Icing on the cake

Designer Andy Sturgeon faced major challenges when trying to add to the wonderful gardens at Brynbella

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Below *Anthemis tinctoria* 'EC Buxton' creates a foreground for Andy Sturgeon's *Stamens*, a sculpture that brought designer and garden owners together in a cooperative design process.

Right The bold flower of a *Yucca gloriosa* towers over a complex tapestry of plants, where the startling pink blooms of *Dierama* 'Puck' create a focal point.



In brief

Name Brynbella.

What A gravel garden designed by Andy Sturgeon.

Where Denbighshire, North Wales.

Size 1/3 acre in a 9-acre garden.

Climate A Gulf Stream garden with a typically mild climate and high rainfall.

Soil Neutral.

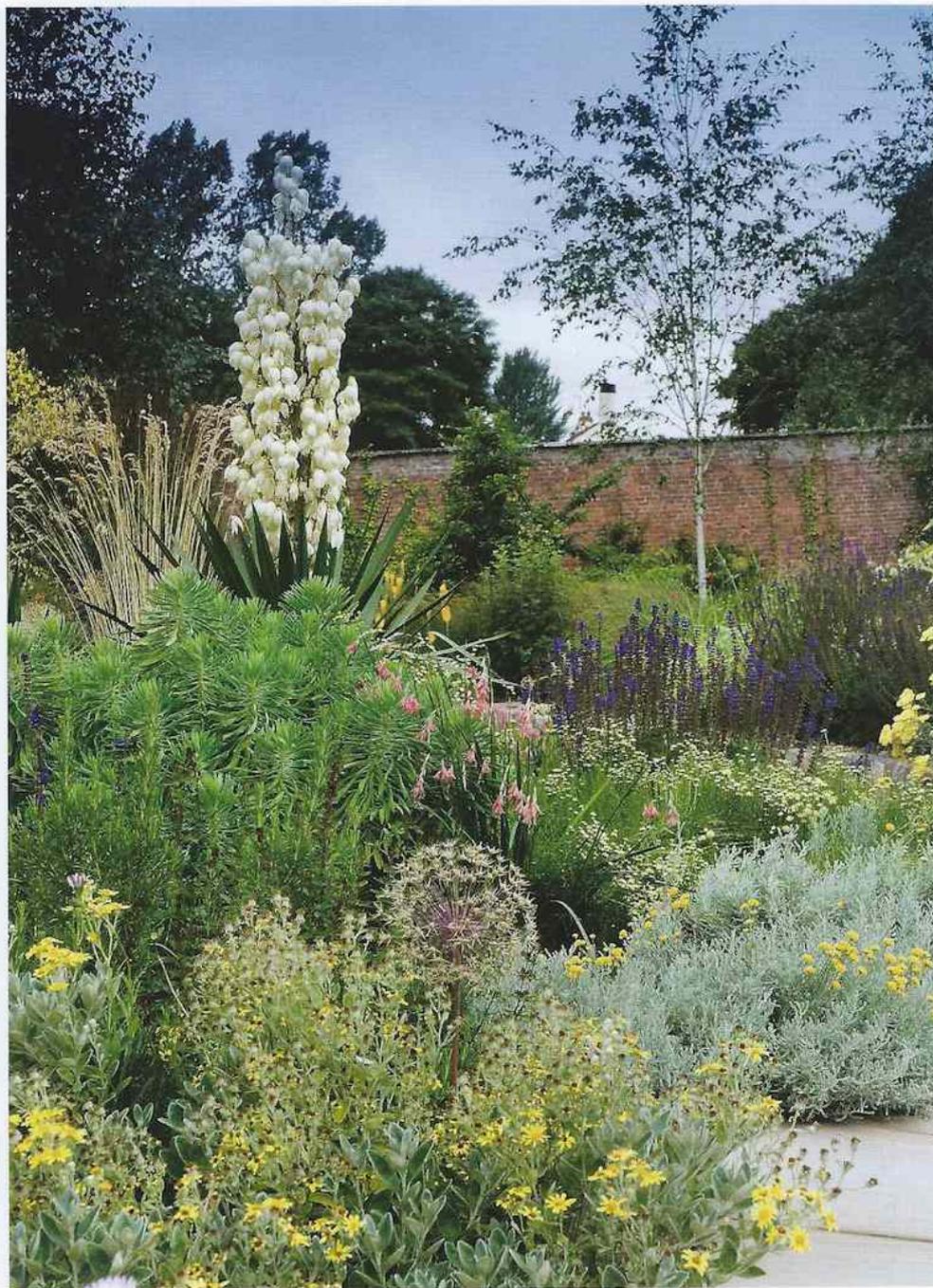
Points of interest A continuous display from April to September, contemporary sculpture and water feature.

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Denbighshire garden

What can you give the garden that's got everything? Andy Sturgeon has won six gold medals at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show for his garden designs, but even he might have considered this question when he was commissioned to work at Brynbella in North Wales. It had been 12 years since Peter and Maria Neumark bought the Georgian house overlooking the Vale of Clwyd and began to develop the garden. By the time Andy arrived in 2006, the site already encompassed formal, woodland, rose, water and walled gardens. Only a paddock behind the stable block remained untouched, isolated from the rest of the garden by a high wall and a yew hedge. It was this rough scrap of land that Andy was commissioned to develop.

Andy's first challenge was to answer that difficult question, and then he had to find a way of linking the new space to the existing layout. His solution was a low-maintenance gravel garden. This Mediterranean style is popular in the drought-stricken eastern counties of Britain, where Beth Chatto kickstarted the trend in the 1990s with her own gravel garden in Essex. The challenge at Brynbella was to create that gravel-garden feeling of Mediterranean heat and drought in one of the dampest areas of Britain. ▷

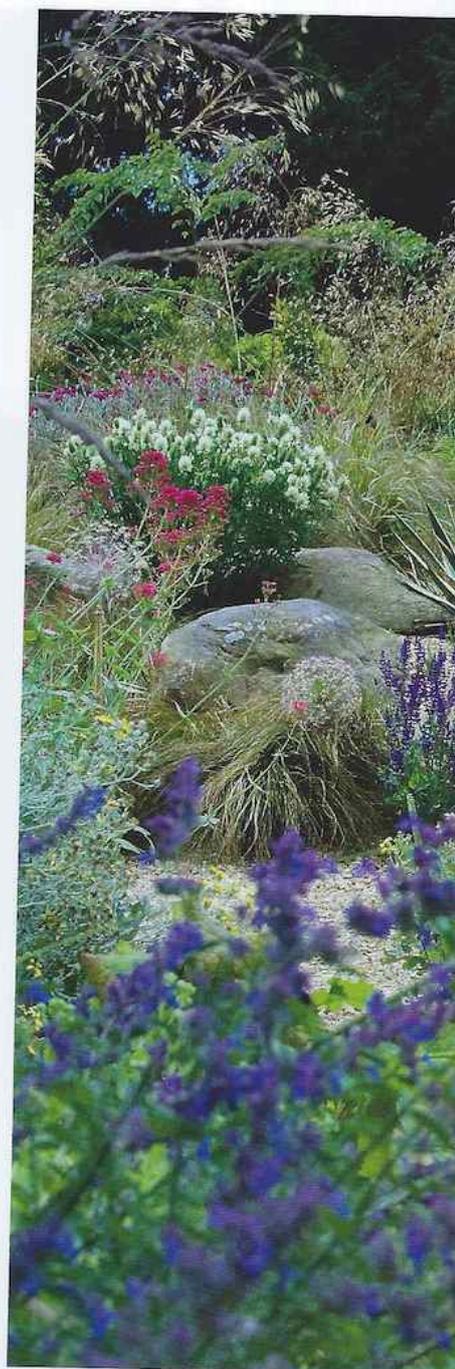
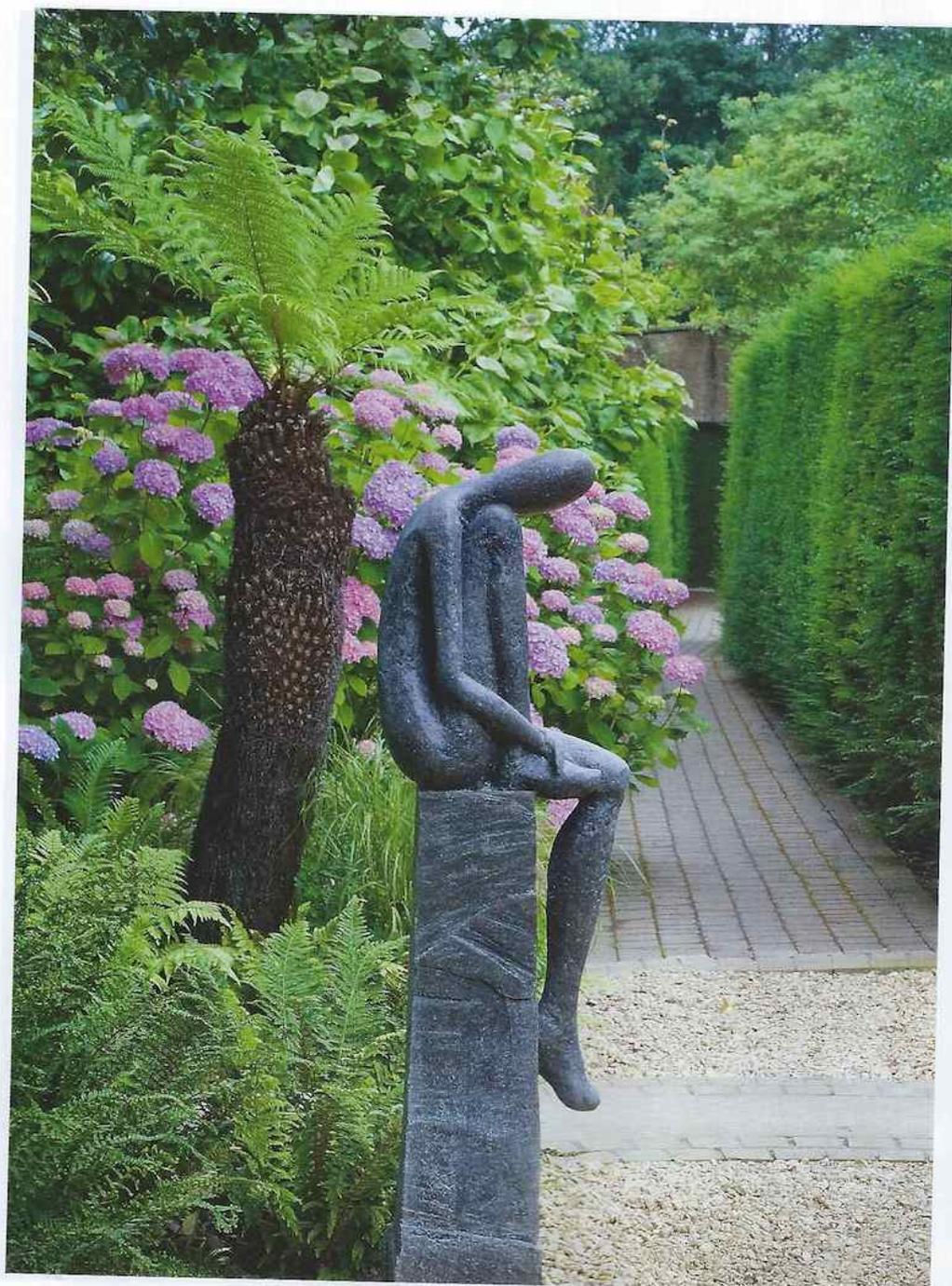


▷ Andy began by having the sodden, sloping site levelled and drained. Hundreds of tons of grit were then dug into the heavy soil by Darren Davies, head gardener, and his two assistants, before it was pushed up into mounds around a series of enormous boulders. This curvaceous, free-draining landscape was covered in a thick layer of gravel. The mounds gave extra height to the plants, so that the frosty verticals of *Eryngium giganteum* 'Silver Ghost', a shimmering screen of *Calamagrostis brachytricha*, achillea and the downy leaves of *Phlomis russeliana* soon towered above plump cushions of *Persicaria affinis* lining the paths, concealing the garden beyond them and creating a sense of mystery. Andy was careful to choose "good smotherers" to suppress the weeds. He's happy to allow self-seeding. "Everything is interchangeable and not formulaic," he explains. And just as he intended, the mounds create the sensation of walking 'among' the exuberant explosion of his colourful planting, rather than simply walking 'through' the garden.

Andy created *Stamens*, a sinuous sculpture made from English oak with lead detailing, to be both the focal point of the garden and the hub of his design. He made a model of the sculpture from malleable lead off-cuts, and then invited Peter and Maria to arrange the 'stamens' as they

Below, left 'Wednesday's Child', a graceful statue by Helen Sinclair, is sited at the end of the water channel.

Below, right Pink-flowered *Persicaria affinis* and silver-leaved *Santolina chamaecyparissus* form low-growing clumps in the foreground.



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wished. “The beauty of working with Andy,” Maria said, “is that he listened to what we wanted.” A raised channel slick with moving water projects from a bubbling bowl fountain at the foot of the sculpture, resolving Andy’s final problem by punching through the isolating yew hedge and linking the gravel garden to the rest of the site. In 2010 Andy Sturgeon won Best in Show for his gravel garden at Chelsea. It seems likely that Brynbella was a crucible for the ideas that made his crowd-pulling design a winner. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Terneirchion, St Asaph, Clwyd LL17 0UF, Wales.

Opening Brynbella is open to members of the Historic Houses Association on the first two Tuesdays in the month from April to September, 11am-4pm.

Turn the page for more on Andy's design aesthetic ▷



Catching the eye

Why focal points, or 'eyecatchers', are a vital tool in garden design

Definition

Designers of the English Picturesque landscape in the 18th century referred to focal points as 'eyecatchers'. Andy considers 'eyecatcher' a much better term than 'focal point', as it describes exactly what a focal point is trying to do. Statues, urns or ornamental buildings were commonly used as eyecatchers in the 17th-century French garden, and in 18th-century English landscapes.

Placement

People often think that a focal point should still be at the end of a long vista, but Andy believes it can be used at the centre of a garden to give it a heart. At Brynbella the *Stamens* sculpture is both the heart and the hub of the gravel garden, from which all the paths radiate. Andy has also considered the sculpture in the context of the wider landscape, and he sees it as a focal point for the whole garden.

Scale

It is important to consider the scale of the site when designing a focal point. "There is no point putting in something puny," Andy says. "The focal point must relate to the scale and proportions of the place, and be a significant enough structure to do the job." But there's no need to think on an 18th-century scale. It can be equally effective in the reduced spaces of a small garden, where it serves to direct the gaze.



Adaptability

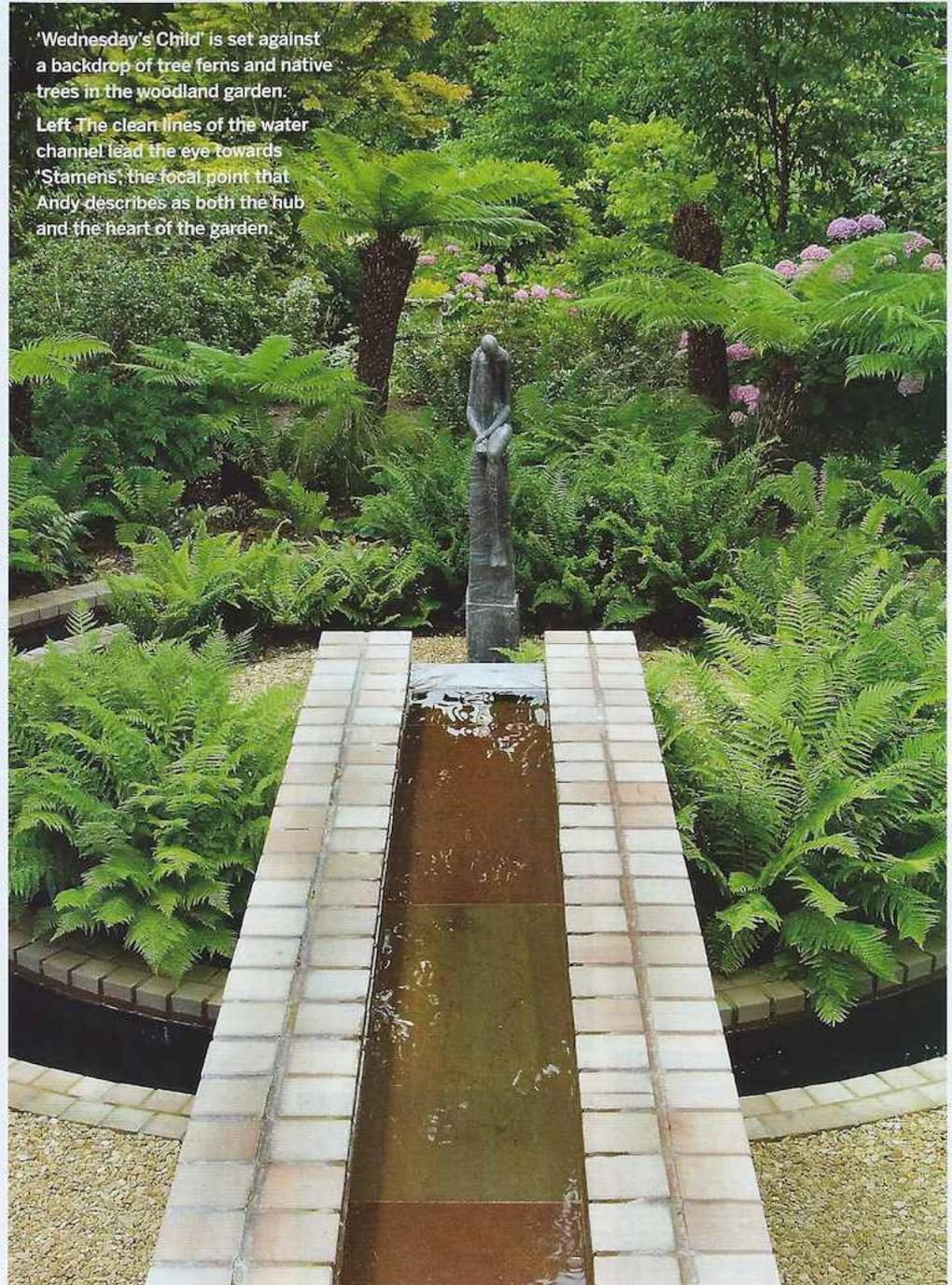
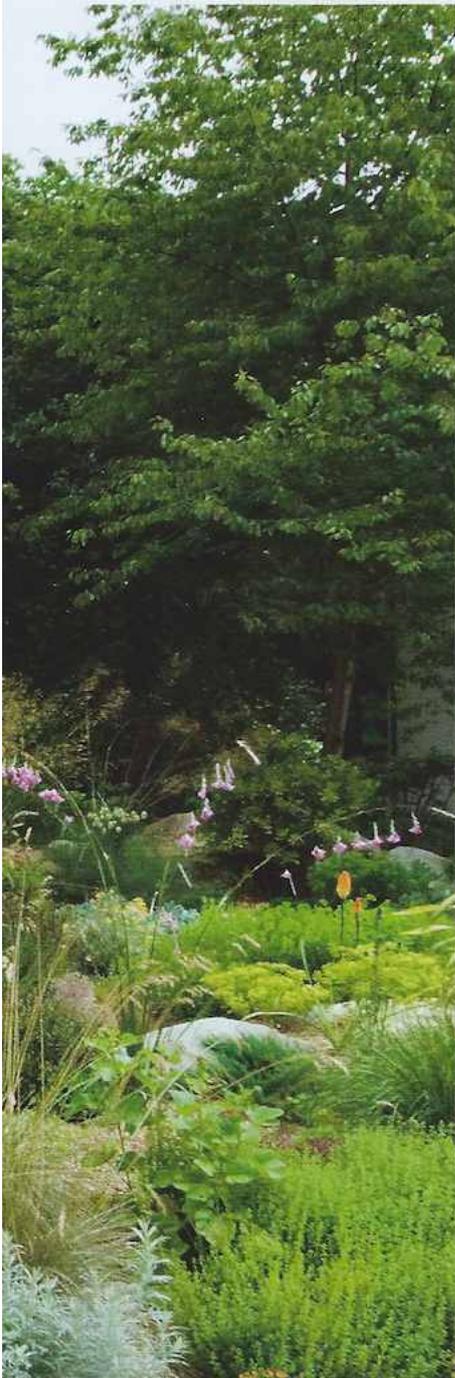
An 18th-century eyecatcher was often used to stop the view at the end of a long avenue. In a contemporary garden the view or vista should be designed at the same time as the focal point that it will frame. Andy points out that the focal point doesn't have to be at the end of a straight path. It can be seen across the top of planting, it can be framed by a single tree or glimpsed at the end of a winding path.

History

Andy has taken inspiration from the 18th-century landscape of Stourhead, where Henry Flitcroft designed a series of classical buildings as eyecatchers on the shores of the lake, each one perfectly framed by trees. Flitcroft's buildings had a symbolic purpose, linking Stourhead to classical myths and pastoral poetry, but they doubled as focal points, the destinations that a walk around the lake would otherwise have lacked.

Inspiration

Flitcroft's eyecatchers spur visitors on today, just as they did in the 18th century, leading them through a series of different atmospheres and sensations, and never leaving them for one moment to their own devices. Andy sees Stourhead as the ultimate lesson in the use of the focal point. "Stourhead is full of surprises," he says. "It constantly raises expectations and then it delivers."



'Wednesday's Child' is set against a backdrop of tree ferns and native trees in the woodland garden.

Left The clean lines of the water channel lead the eye towards 'Stamens', the focal point that Andy describes as both the hub and the heart of the garden.