

Parterre Par EXCELLENCE

A newly created walled garden at Broughton Grange in Oxfordshire is anything but traditional, with a terraced layout and planting scheme masterminded by landscape designer Tom Stuart-Smith

WORDS JACKY HOBBS PHOTOGRAPHS CLIVE NICHOLS

With its curvaceous box hedges, the tulip parterre on the lower terrace at Broughton Grange is truly distinctive.



Above Knobbly skeletons of *Tilia x europaea* 'Pallida' remain stark while other spring plants burst into life.

THE AMOEBIC FINGERS OF TOM Stuart-Smith's box parterre encase a profusion of brightly lacquered tulips, which peer over their irregular box ramparts. This contemporary interpretation of a classical parterre is one of several ingenious design departures showcased in the Walled Garden at Broughton Grange, Oxfordshire.

It is impossible to extract a stand-alone element from Tom Stuart-Smith's inextricably linked design. In spring, the seemingly random, sprawling ribbons of low-cut box compartments, aflame with licks of glossy tulips, are hypnotic. But their brilliance is heightened by the relative starkness of the surrounding, unawakened garden, the tulips providing the only loud shout of vibrancy and colour. In pockets of searing reds, burnt orange, smouldering charcoal, mustard yellow and saturated magenta, solid, striped, picotee and seemingly dip-

dyed, this tulip extravaganza is riotous. The bolt of colour draws the eye through the garden, west to east across the width of the lower terrace and north to south down the terraces, before falling sharply away southwards towards herds of wobbly yews teetering off into the open countryside.

Stuart-Smith, engaged by Stephen Hester to create an enclosed walled garden on his Oxfordshire estate, masterminded this new-century garden, which has been amplified by maturity since its inception in 2000. The more traditional gardens encircling the manor house were to remain but Tom was to forge anew on a sloping, arable site detached from the dwelling but embraced by open countryside.

Unconventionally, Tom elected to enclose only two sides of the garden, butting a brick-built wall at right angles to a pre-existing boundary wall. The southern perimeter, beyond the parterre, melts progressively into the natural landscape, while the eastern edge



is veiled with tunnels of beech. These afford glimpses of the outlying countryside and send dramatic shafts of filtered sunlight streaking across the terraces.

Tom expands on his design concept:

"Stephen's original idea was to have an enclosed garden, but I'm glad he was persuaded to leave two sides open, so that the garden could become about its relationship with the land around it. The garden is defined, like a character in a narrative, partly by its intrinsic qualities and complexities but perhaps primarily by its relationship to the world around it."

The sloping space was stepped to create three, level, distinct 20m x 60m terraces, again uncommon within traditional walled gardens, connected by walkways. Each terrace is defined by signature Stuart-Smith plantings which loosely advance with the season as one descends down the slope. The upper terrace peaks in early summer, suffused with fragrant roses, towering foxgloves, bearded irises and geraniums. The middle terrace is dominated by water: a reflective, clean-cut, rectangular pool dissects it, the hard landscaping softened by later summer, prairie-style planting. "Having water at the centre of this garden gives it both a stillness and a sense that nature and natural process is the centrepiece," says Tom.

The garden plummets down to a third terrace, adorned with the lavishly embroidered parterre, its fall cushioned by clouds of lime green *Euphorbia* and startling blue *Camassia*.

Above A border of *Camassia* and *Euphorbia* contrasts with the formal yet organic lines of the parterre and the jewel-like colours of the tulips within its beds.
Left Striped tulip 'Synaeda King'.
Below Tulip 'Black Jack' offers deep, dark colour.





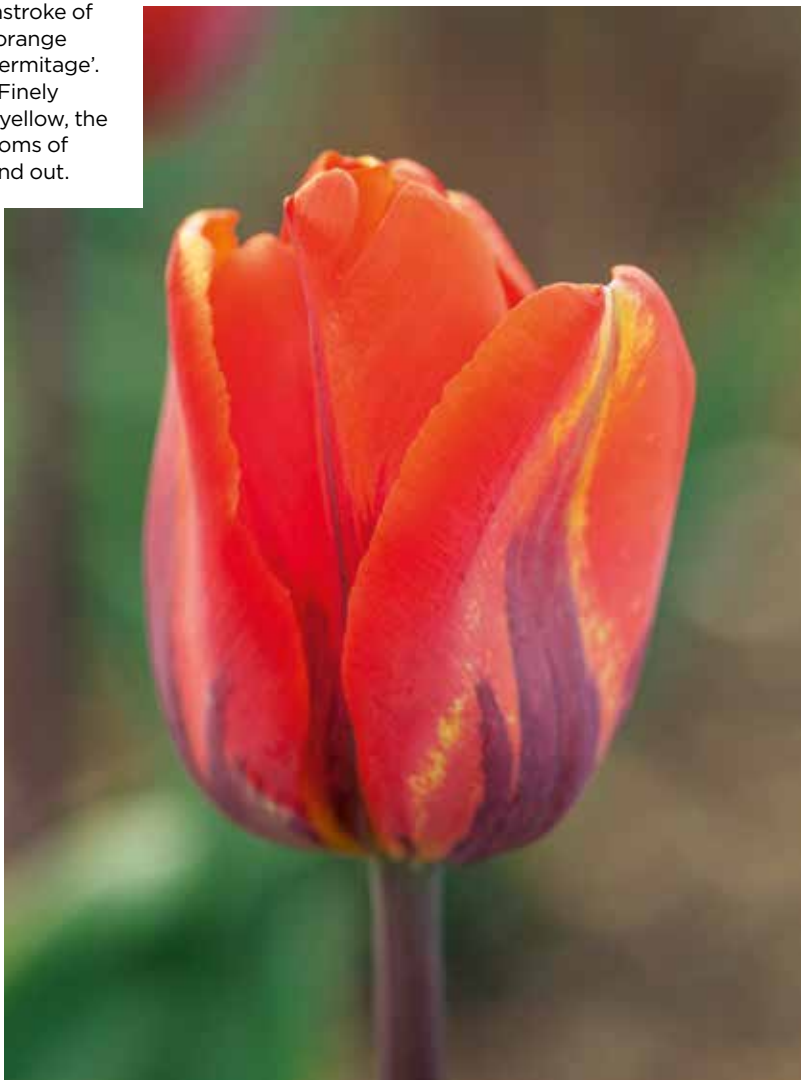
Top left Vibrant, bright pink tulip 'Barcelona'.



Top right The golden petals of 'Helmar' are dramatically stained with dark red.

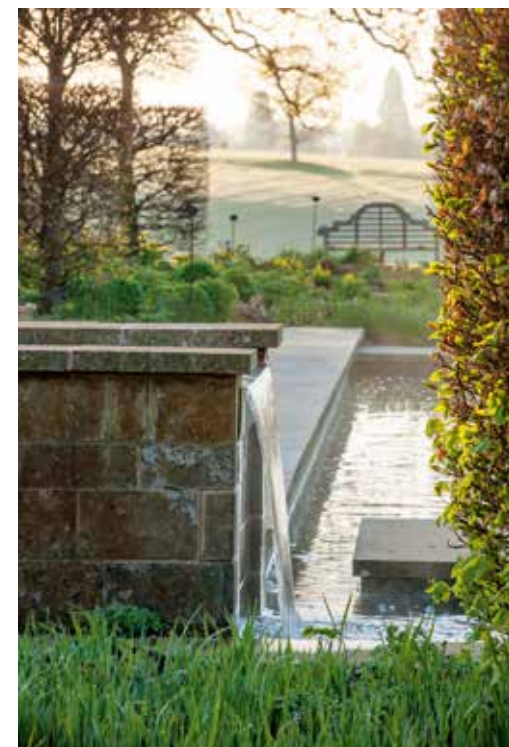
Bottom right Painted with a brushstroke of purple, the orange goblet of 'Hermitage'.

Bottom left Finely edged with yellow, the crimson blooms of 'Gavota' stand out.



Intrinsically decorative, the parterre's folded arms hold caskets of bejewelled tulips in springtime. Once they have faded they are replaced with bold annuals intermixed with edibles with colourful leaves. The low-slung, organic box parterre is inherently eye-catching, even laid bare, frost-rimmed or etched in snow. Designed to be viewed from above, the three seemingly random designs replicate the cell structure of beech, oak and ash leaves magnified 6,000 times. "The leaves, collected on site, were magnified under a scanner and, with a template, the pattern was directly translated onto the ground," says Tom. "The idea of the parterre was to play with ideas of proximity and distance. It occurs at the point where the garden meets the landscape, so one might expect this to be the most naturalistic area. It isn't, but in a way it is," he explains. "We wanted something that was an offering up of nature to nature. The parterre is at once a reflection of the natural world that surrounds it and also an abstraction of it. So it is both a distancing device and something that brings one closer."

The intricate design is coloured in with more than 4,000 Dutch tulips, 12-15 cultivars in total, that have been carefully selected for colour, pattern, and performance and flowering time. Andrew Woodall, head gardener, is intuitive in his selections and experienced in judging the appropriate quantities of required bulbs for the irregular design. He weights his order, from Peter Nyssen, favouring dramatic,



Top Yew topiary makes its way down the sloping lawn that leads from the parterre to the garden and landscape beyond.

Above Water dominates the middle terrace of the Walled Garden with a clean cut rectangular water pool.

ANDREW WOODALL'S ADVICE

- Clip box twice a year to keep it trim and compact. In winter delay clipping if there is a risk of frost and avoid summer clipping in scorching sun. Both lead to plant stress and leaf damage. Keep cutting tools sharp.

- Guard against box blight by keeping plants healthy and unstressed. Kept well fed and watered, they will be less prone to the disease. Dwarf holly (*Ilex crenata*) and, in well drained sites, cotton lavender (*Santolina*) and *Lavandula officinalis* 'Hidcote' are good alternatives to regular, blight susceptible box (*Buxus sempervirens*).

- Buy large tulip bulbs from reputable suppliers for an assured tulip display. Ensure they are firm and dry but not desiccated. Consider your planting palette before ordering bulbs to achieve the required harmony or contrast, and vary the amounts to create an orchestrated effect.

- Plant bulbs up to 23cm deep, one per hole in formal geometric, parterre-style designs, or three per hole when informally placed throughout the borders.

- Protect against thieving mice.

BROUGHTON GRANGE NOTEBOOK

Tom Stuart-Smith's design pushes boundaries and offers a wealth of creative possibilities



PACK A PUNCH

Cobalt blue camassias and lime *Euphorbia* enhance a bold spring tulip display, which is made more effective by its bulbs' simultaneous flowering times – and because the cultivars used are tall enough to rise above the parapet.



HIGHS AND LOWS

Punctuate horizontal hard landscaping with year-round vertical accents to achieve balance and add dimension. Stuart-Smith introduces arboreal architecture: beech tunnels, cypress spires and bodies of comely yew.



BORROW THE VIEW

Boundaries are defined and blurred in Tom Stuart-Smith's design here. The garden is enhanced by framed vistas, deliberate breaks in tree lines and hedging, or by allowing the natural contours to flow, barrier free, from the garden to the countryside.



PLEASURE ALL YEAR

Water affords interest all year, mirroring activity in the garden and drawing in the wider land and skyline. Stuart-Smith's broad, rectangular pool is sleek and contemporary, yet it is timeless in its ability to carry scurrying clouds, be fountained with rain or glazed with ice.

bold and reliable performers such as 'Gavota', 'Hermitage', 'Black Jack' and 'Helmar', strikingly

planted against softer, plainer purple backdrops.

Andrew trials smaller quantities of newer bulbs – burgundy-fringed 'Labrador' and 'Barcelona' for example – in less dominant cells. He devises a mind-map of colour associations and ensures a robust, unerring display throughout the parterre, which changes subtly year on year. Once the tulips die down they are lifted, piled into dumpy bags and dry-stored before they are replanted in the informal meadow in autumn. The box parterre is trimmed, with petrol hedge clippers, before and between plantings – October and late May – to avoid damaging plants and compacting the soil. "Clipping takes 200 man-hours, but the organic shape is more forgiving of errors than traditional straight-edged hedging," says Andrew. The box (*Buxus sempervirens*) is fortified by the dual-purpose regime designed mainly to sustain the bedding within. "The soil is enriched annually with organic fertiliser and watering systems ensure the box doesn't desiccate." The thousands of tulips are placed by hand in mechanically drilled holes 23cm deep, then filled in and left over the winter, when the greatest enemy is mice. Tiger, the garden cat, and a plethora of mousetraps ward off disaster, and another brilliant display ensues. ■

Below A classic spring combination of tulip 'Helmar' with pale yellow wallflower 'Treasure Primrose'.

Broughton Grange gardens and nursery opens for the NGS on 30 April, and by appointment April-September. It is open Wednesdays, 10am to 4pm, May-September. Wykham Lane, Broughton, Banbury, Oxfordshire, OX15 5DS. Tel: 07791 747371; broughtongrange.com

