

In late summer, golden coloured grasses sway above sedums and other perennials in the gravel garden beside the house. Earlier, alliums and poppies provide drama. The area blends into the open fields beyond (below)

From border to bouquet

In the elegant Northamptonshire market town of Oundle is a fine garden that is both attractive and provides a living for its owner. MERRIEL GARDINER meets florist Tracey Mathieson who has set up her own business, largely using material she grows in the garden of her family home

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM SANDALL



GARDEN PROFILE



WORKING FROM HOME

Tracey Mathieson (left) sells bouquets made almost entirely from material she cuts from her Northamptonshire garden. It has an informal style, lending a relaxed feel, where many plants such as poppies self-seed freely (below)



FROM PLOT TO PLATE' is a familiar term, used with regard to home-grown vegetables and fruit. This same sustainable ethos is seldom considered for the production of cut flowers, and yet growing requirements and customer expectations are comparable.

On the edge of the pretty market town of Oundle in Northamptonshire is a beautiful garden that supplies cutting material for a rural flower-arranging business, run by owner Tracey Mathieson. Here flowers are grown, arranged and sold – on site – from border to bouquet, all in the same day.

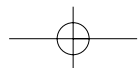
Family roots

Tracey lives in and works from the house in which she was born and brought up in as a child. After studying at art college, she worked on a herb farm where her love of plants was fuelled. She then became a self-employed gardener, often picking bunches

of flowers from gardens where she worked, and using these to make bouquets for family and friends. These arrangements soon became so popular that Tracey decided to share a stand with a friend at the local farmers' market. It was from here that her business, Flower Passion, was born.

As with many places that have been lived in by the same family for years, Tracey's home has a comfortable, almost timeless atmosphere; the stone cottage and adjoining courtyard with old barns of mellow golden stone hail from a peaceful, less-hurried era. The site is embellished by the garden, transformed by Tracey from a once-overgrown smallholding some 18 years ago.

'As a child I used to spend hours playing in the tangled garden, imagining how it would look one day. I have been lucky enough to see my ideas become reality,' she says. 'Where the side garden is now, there was a pigsty complete with pigs, and where the



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main flower garden is now was originally straggly old lawn, a huge apple tree casting plenty of shade, and lots of chickens.'

The garden today

To one side of the house is a sunny, gravelled, south-facing garden. This relatively small, open space melds into the backdrop of the green fields beyond, making it feel larger. The only visible separation from the countryside is a low metal fence and a tangle of nettles on the other side. Generally, weeds from the fields struggle to penetrate the garden; planting is dense yet relaxed, almost naturalistic in style with rustling mounds of evergreen *Carex*, or taller *Stipa* with its fluffy flowerheads, both punctuated by the bobbing flowers of *Papaver somniferum* and earlier, *P. orientale*, in reds, pinks and peach. Poppies are a favourite, after which Tracey's daughter has been named – and of course the attractive seedheads that follow feature in some of her floral arrangements.

Starry globes of pink *Allium cristophii* and vivid blues of *Centaurea cyanus* (cornflower) grow alongside lime-green *Euphorbia*. Other flowers from the onion family, such as *Nectaroscordum siculum* with its downward-facing purplish bells, also grow in profusion. A woven-willow dragonfly provides a fleeting visual resting point alongside a green metal seat, a quiet place to sit and contemplate the countryside. Columnar golden yews

THISTLES AND TIGERS A biennial thistle, *Silybum marianum* (below) makes an attractive rosette of white-veined foliage in its first year, flowering in the second. It enjoys a sunny, open spot. *Lilium lancifolium* 'Flore Pleno' (right) is a double-flowered tiger lily for moist, fertile soil



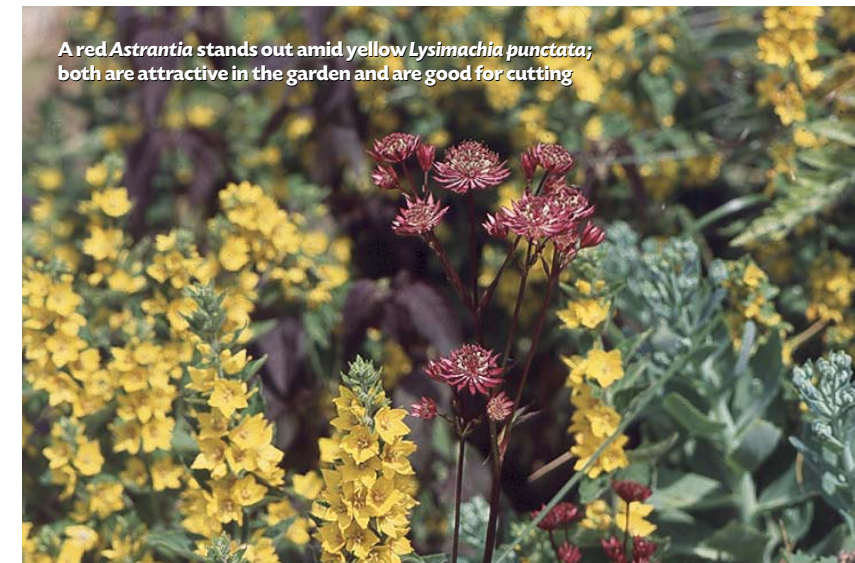
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Seedheads become more telling towards the end of the season; Tracey values these for her arrangements



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A red *Astrantia* stands out amid yellow *Lysimachia punctata*; both are attractive in the garden and are good for cutting



FOCUSING ATTENTION The flowers of *Nectaroscordum siculum* (above) retain interest long after they fade; their pods turn skywards as seeds inside ripen.

A woven-willow dragonfly (left) provides an effective focal point above cornflowers and *Nigella* in the gravel garden

(*Taxus baccata* Fastigiata Aurea Group) provide structure, while seedheads of *Eryngium* and *Achillea millefolium* (yarrow) add soft beige and russet tones and also help to extend the season of interest. Here and there, dancing *Briza maxima* (quaking oats) provide constant movement in the garden; these too are often used in arrangements for their simple appeal and long vase life.

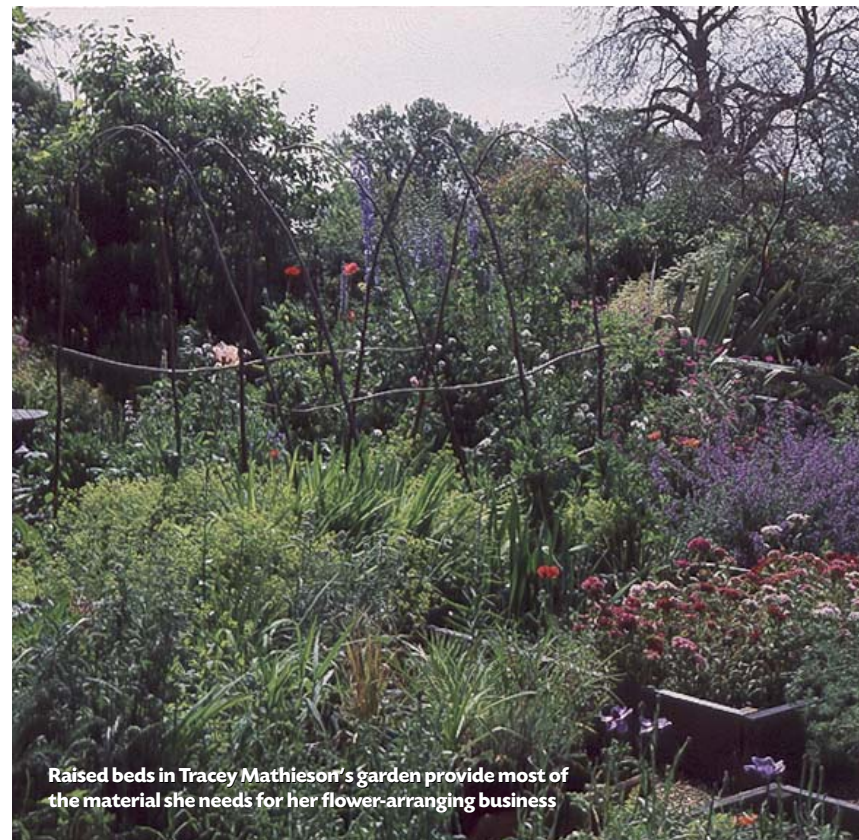
Resisting drought

The gravel serves both as paving, and as a mulch helping to conserve moisture. 'I refuse to water the garden,' Tracey says, 'and so this year has been difficult for the plants – we have had precious little rainfall, but if they don't survive they're not worth growing.' The soil in the garden is enriched with home-made compost made in large heaps. This also helps the soil hold onto moisture.

In the garden last year Tracey was able to grow all of the plants she needed for her spring and summer floral arrangements, but she admits that lack of rain this year has meant having to buy in a few extra blooms.

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Raised beds in Tracey Mathieson's garden provide most of the material she needs for her flower-arranging business

FLOWERS AND FOLIAGE Poppies and delphiniums in early summer enliven a rusty metalwork ornament (top). A shaded terrace, rich in foliage plants, provides a comfortable vantage point (above)

Customer appeal

Many of Tracey's clients are drawn to the 'country feel' of her arrangements. 'Often customers don't know what they want until they see it. They tend to describe textures, feelings and colours and I have to interpret what they say, tweaking until I get it right.'

There are generally two types of request: modern arrangements or old-fashioned displays. Modern-styled bouquets include bold colours; flowers such as yellow *Lysimachia punctata*, orange *Crococsmia*, fiery *Eschscholzia*, burgundy dahlias and green euphorbias. Old-fashioned arrangements tend to use softer forms, and pastel shades.

Clients are mostly local and are encouraged to visit the garden to select plants and

discuss requirements, which are many and varied. 'I had a request for a small bouquet at the farmers' market some time ago – nothing unusual in that – I made up a posy in creams and whites and forgot about it. Weeks later the customer returned, thanking me for the arrangement, she said it had been perfect as her bridal bouquet. The couple had told no-one they were to be married.'

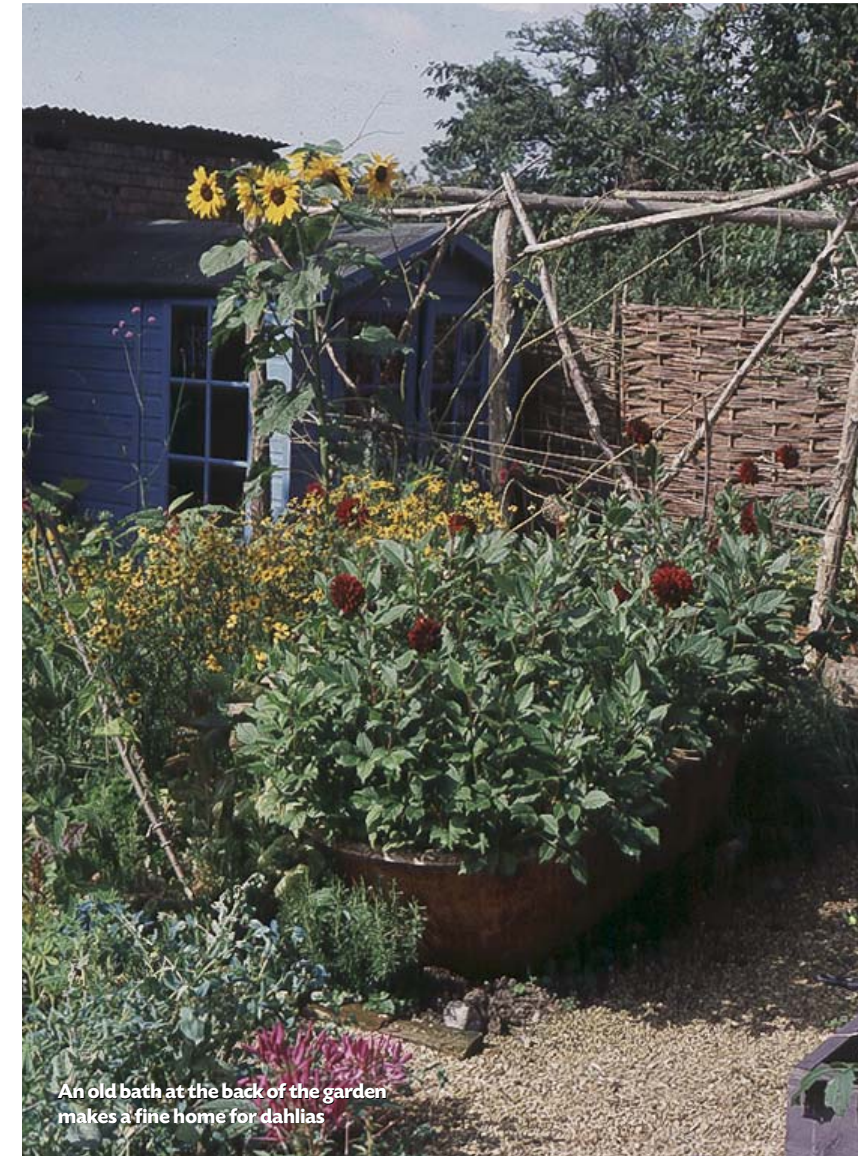
Traditional favourites such as old roses and peonies remain popular. This is evident in the bouquets Tracey is planning for a local wedding: white peonies, roses and cornflowers are combined, but the foliage here is more unconventional. 'I wanted something different and struggled to find the right thing. Then, clearing last year's sweet-pea greenery I noticed how well the tendrils combine, so I've decided to use them in the bouquets,' she says.

Most flowers used in her bouquets are grown in the productive flower garden,

reached by stooping through an arched doorway set in an old wall. This area is about 2,000sq m in size and is enclosed with high hedging, willow hurdles and walls. Roughly triangular in shape, narrowing almost to a point at the back, this garden contains a series of deep borders filled with a bright mixture of flowers and foliage for cutting, while at the rear, sheltered seedbeds are used to raise young stock.

On her house walls, creamy-white roses entwine with *Lonicera* and *Jasminum officinale* to scramble around the windows. Trailing over a willow arbour is *Rosa* 'William Lobb', its fully double, dark purple blooms deliciously scented. Tracey also grows *R.* 'Tuscany Superb' here for its deep crimson flowers.

In the middle of the garden, a central willow casts gentle shade; below, a spiky phormium pierces through dense underplanting. 'In spring, when the first catkins appear, I climb up with my handsaw, and



An old bath at the back of the garden makes a fine home for dahlias

cut as many as I can; they are so welcome in arrangements,' says Tracey.

Gravel paths wind through this garden leading around a series of loosely planted flowerbeds. 'The garden is always in a state of flux, constantly evolving; that is the joy of it. I have never sat down and drawn a plan. Sometimes I feel it is time for a change, and rip something out or plant something new.'

In the foreground, Tracey has removed an area of turf and replaced it with gravel; she also felled an old laburnum to increase light levels. This has opened up a new planting area that she has filled with 200 dahlias, in shades of burgundy and maroon. Here, too, are thousands of tulip bulbs, squeezed into every available space, it seems.

Annual returns

Much is also raised from seed, nurtured in a series of raised wood-edged beds. Spilling from these are deep purple-blue *Anemone*

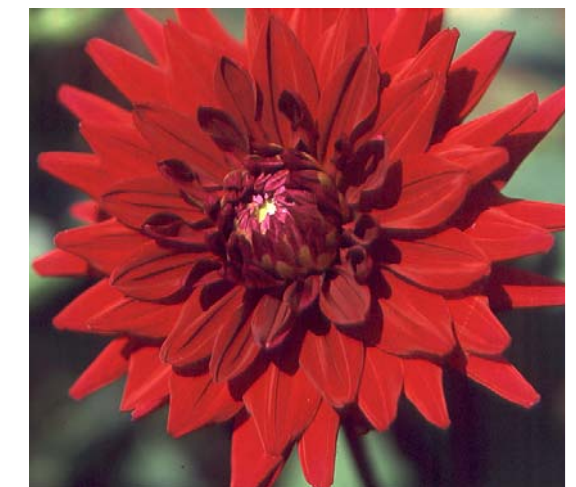


Fresh-cut flowers round off this classic country-garden scene

coronaria 'Lord Lieutenant' and *Cerinthe major* 'Purpurascens' that, happily, the free-range chickens avoid. Tucked at the back of the garden is a small, sky-blue shed, a retreat hidden by foliage and flowers. Bright sunflowers are complemented by the sunset orange of *Calendula*, dark red of *Dahlia*


Flower Passion, 41 South Road, Oundle, Northants PE8 4BP; 01832 274593. Open: 3 Sept 2006, 00am–00pm in aid of Thorpe Hall Hospice and again in May 2007 (date yet to be confirmed). Admission: £00.00

BOLD GESTURES Dahlias (below) are a major constituent of Tracey's late-summer bouquets; she loves their vibrant colours



'Bishop of Llandaff' and speckled orange of double *Lilium lancifolium* 'Flore Pleno'.

New plantings are not the only additions planned at Flower Passion. The conversion of a second barn next to the current flower-arranging studio will create a flower shop. Here the sale of flowers will be combined with woven-willow goods and fruit and vegetables from a local organic grower. Tracey hopes to open for Christmas and anticipates becoming more sustainable, with local flowers delivered by bike and all waste from the shop being recycled.

Tracey proves it is possible to have a flower garden that is at the same time beautiful and productive enough to support a thriving business. She delivers quality using small-scale methods, sharing a piece of her idyllic home with those who buy her bouquets. 

MERIEL GARDINER is a freelance garden writer living in Cornwall