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An Eye for Detail

A second plot of land has made all the difference to the architects behind this Suffolk garden

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Lavenham in Suffolk is one of England's best-preserved medieval villages, known for its thatched cottages and wonky, half-timbered buildings. Nestling among them is a house that simultaneously blends in and stands out: Orange Cottage, designed by architects James Soane and Christopher Ash as their weekend home. The imaginative yet sensitive design references the local medieval features and was shortlisted for the Grand Designs Awards in 2007. And the garden the pair has created is rather special, too.

Orange Cottage stands on what was originally an overgrown plot, sold for development by the previous owner. The house was built in nine months and was finished in 2006. After the build, the land was a quagmire, and riddled with ground elder: "We had to double-dig for a year to get rid of it," says James. The only aspect of the garden worth preserving was a beautiful old apple tree, part of a former orchard. Other scrappy, self-seeded trees and Leyland cypress were pulled out.

James and Christopher spent a lot of time thinking about how to deal with the slopes of the garden near the house. "Then the builder came in with a digger, and leveled it in a morning," laughs James. A lawn was laid, a long border planted, some vegetable beds

put in, and some fishermen's huts built for storage. And that was that – or so the couple thought.

"Then came phase two," continues James. In 2010, some neighbours were looking to sell off part of their garden, so James and Christopher stepped in and bought two thirds of it. At that point, they decided to come up with a proper design for their newly enlarged plot. "We realised that the garden had four rooms, and we needed to give each one a character. We wanted it to be attractive and productive – and we wanted to be able to garden it ourselves at weekends."

The original lawn was squared off and steps were put in down to a new, more sunny potager. A summerhouse and decked area were created, overlooking fat privet balls set in gravel. The couple decided to keep the inherited shrubbery, which was planted in the 1970s and had some interesting clipped specimens. James and Christopher pruned it back into shape and an unusual domed magnolia now sits proudly at the edge of the oval lawn. It is flanked by a new prairie-style bed of grasses.

The different spaces are connected by routes and paths. "In a garden, you have to make journeys, and connect things – as you do in a house," says James. "It pays to create formal routes, but not to make them feel formal. One of the first paths we made

Clockwise from right
Large globes of privet set in gravel outside the summerhouse; *Rosa 'Félicité Perpétue'* clothes the boundary wall; fishermen's huts provide storage; a rose-clad arch draws the eye along a garden path.



FACT FILE

■ **Garden design** by James Soane and Christopher Ash, both at Project Orange. Tel: 020 7739 3035; www.projectorange.com

■ **House, summerhouse and garden** built by Elford & Sons. Tel: 01787 210714; www.elfordandsons.co.uk

■ **Pleached trees, landscaping and topiary**, ProScape. Tel: 01284 735779; www.pro-scape.co.uk

■ **Plants** from The Place for Plants. Tel: 01206 299 224; www.placeforplants.co.uk. Others from Wyevale Garden Centres. Tel: 0344 272 3000; www.wyevalegardencentres.co.uk

■ **Garden furniture** includes two woven chairs, part of the Lyra Collection from www.made.com. Teak furniture, Cyan. Tel: 0208 655 6249; www.cyan-teak-furniture.com

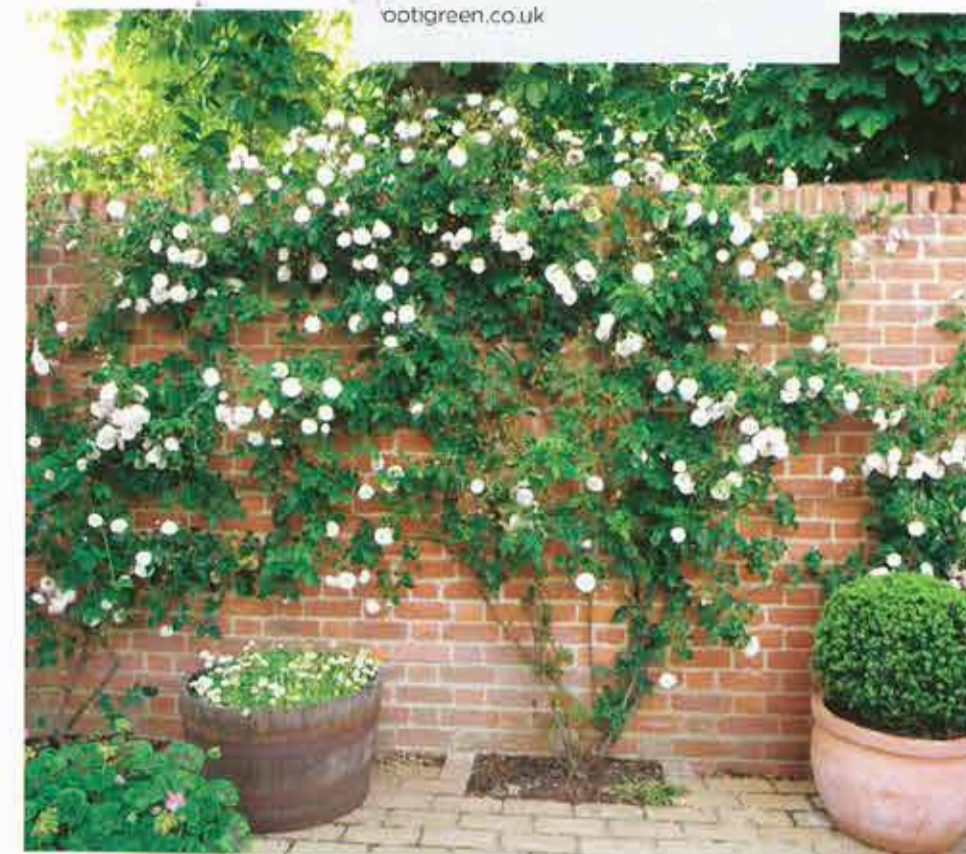
■ **Similar green-roof** seed mix from Optigreen. Tel: 0203 5899 400; www.optigreen.co.uk

went through some raised beds, then stopped. We edged the lawn so that it can be walked around, and we mowed a path through the meadow in the orchard, which is a different type of journey. You have to imagine things seasonally. You have to anticipate how things will grow."

While not initially experienced gardeners, the couple gardened intuitively, with lots of trial and error. "I found I knew when to prune, and how to grow vegetables," says James. The pair clearly has talent – they designed the Himalayan Rock Garden for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2014 with Janey Auchincloss, a friend and garden designer from the village. Piet Oudolf, a consultant on one of Project Orange's schemes, is a strong influence, as is Christopher Bradley-Hole.

"About five years after the main garden was made, it looked perfect," says James. "But I soon realised that the moment was fleeting. Once you know that a garden is not set in aspic, it is exciting. If you see gardening as a chore, the magic has gone. Each year is different. It is never finished."

Orange Cottage will be open as part of the Hidden Gardens programme held in Lavenham on 19 June. Tel: 01787 247434; www.discoverlavenham.co.uk



Design Details

Summerhouse

The summerhouse was inspired by trips to Sri Lanka and serves as an indoor-outdoor room – useful in Britain's unpredictable summers. It is oak framed, insulated and clad in wavy-edge boarding. A small woodburning stove means it can be used all year round. The green roof was designed so that it could be lifted off if it didn't work – but it did. "We bought a seed mix of grasses, sedums and poppies. The grass does take over, but it is fine – we just add a couple of extra sedums each year. In the middle of summer it looks dead, but it isn't," says James.

Sheds

"You can't have enough sheds," says James. "We inherited one and painted it black, which fits in with the Suffolk look and looks great in the garden. The row of three sheds was inspired by fishermen's huts at nearby Walberswick. "The one in the centre is mostly visual, one is for garden tools and the other is for bikes and storage." Behind the sheds is a 'compost kitchen', home to three large hoppers.

Planting

"We wanted a cottage garden with the odd surprise," says James. There are plenty of fresh greens from plants such as *Alchemilla mollis*, which contrasts with purple irises and bronze fennel. "We plant a lot of white bulbs for spring, but we like to chuck in something like a red poppy. I realised yellow makes sense in late summer when it comes to the fore, so we have *Ligularia*, *Achillea* and other daisies." Roses include 'Gertrude Jekyll', 'Iceberg' and the pink old roses that were in the garden originally. The garden looks after itself during the week and is rarely watered.



Above Pleached hornbeams shelter the sunken vegetable garden without casting too much shade.

Below left Iroko decking creates a neat area for garden furniture.

Below right *Salvia x sylvestris* is a high-performing border plant.

Landscaping materials

The decking by the summerhouse is made from iroko, a hardwood popular with designers. Corten steel is used for curved edges in the gravel. "We used timber originally, but it didn't last," says James. "Corten is brilliant – we're currently using it on a project in Russia." The sleepers used as steps are reclaimed and the paths in the veg garden are made from brick pavers. The flint and brick wall was already in place.

Pleached trees and topiary

These were the biggest spend in the garden. "Our contractor advised us to have privet balls, not box because of the risk of box blight, and hornbeam instead of beech for the pleached trees. They have connected well." ■

