

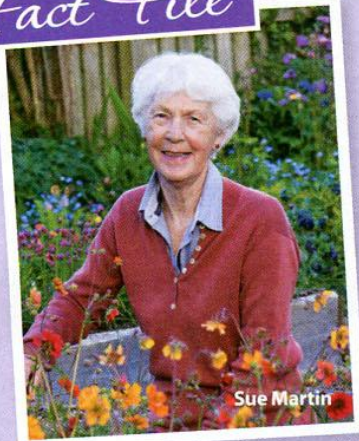
## Martin's Nest

Sue Martin's Kent garden evolved over three decades into one that harmonises with her huge collection of geums – and the result is a sparkling display against a spectacular backdrop ▶

A rustic pergola makes a magnificent focal point. At its heart is a square pool and fountain and the path is straddled by clipped box, giving year-round structure



## Fact File



Sue Martin

**Gardener:** Sue Martin

**Location:** Frittenden, Kent

**Moved in:** 1988

**Special Features:**

This ¼-acre village plot is designed in the cottage-garden style and filled with cherished plants that spill casually out of borders and pots. A rustic pergola and walkway lead down the garden, with a sheltered patio to one side and lawn to the other. Beyond the lawn, an arch leads to a table and chairs shaded by the canopy of an old apple tree. Beyond is a small parterre and then a nursery where Sue focuses on her National Collection of Geum.

**Aspect:** South-west

**Problems overcome:**

Although the garden is on heavy yellow Wealden clay, the soil has become rich and friable because, for decades, it has been regularly fed with manure and lime.

**Inspired by:**

Beth Chatto's *Garden Notebook*, which led to the design of a yellow colour-themed bed, as well as books by Christopher Lloyd, Rosemary Verey and Helen Dillon.

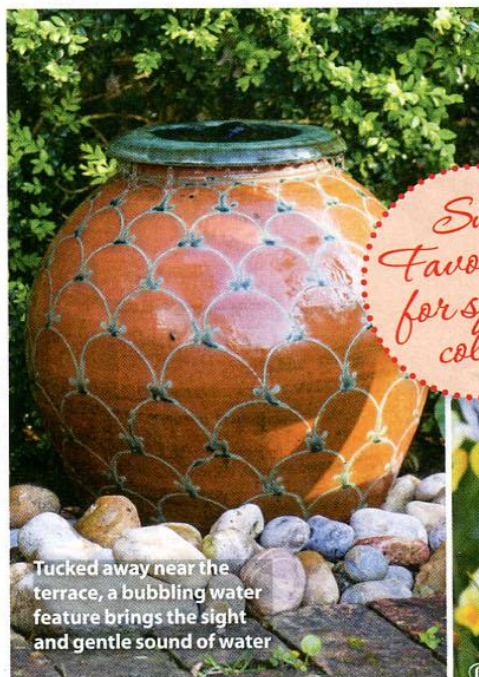


The *Cercis canadensis* sits in a bed brimming with plants; the clay soil is now easier to work after being greatly improved over the years

Sue Martin's garden has evolved in a delightfully harmonious cottage style, its planting composed to fit with the natural rhythm of the seasons. 'Others describe my planting style as "cottagey" or "informal": I call it "wild", she says. Hers is a relaxed design approach, much of it improvised as various self-seeding plants appear, so it's not surprising to discover she is a musician, as quick-fingered on her cello as she is green-fingered in her garden. 'Now that I've retired, I can balance my love of music with caring for my garden,' she says.

With more time on her hands, Sue has also been able to build up a collection of geums that, by mid-spring, are growing throughout her garden, both in dedicated areas and combined in beds and borders with euphorbias, tulips, aquilegias, forget-me-nots, centaurea and alliums.

'They are fantastic plants and I've more than a hundred different varieties that grow throughout the garden,' she says. They have a long flowering season — the scarlet *Geum* 'Rubin' flowers over a staggering five months, from April until September. However, they are also promiscuous and if they cross pollinate the result can be many sub-standard plants. Just two chance seedlings have turned out well — 'Olympic Flame' and the frilled, soft yellow 'Dawn' that, rising on maroon stalks high above handsome lobed leaves, flowers almost continuously for six months.



Tucked away near the terrace, a bubbling water feature brings the sight and gentle sound of water

Sue's Favourites for spring colour



Dutch Iris 'Apollo'





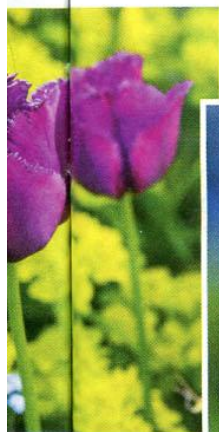


## Gardening Roots

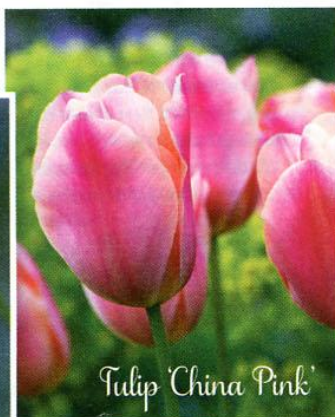
Sue comes from a family of gardeners, learning as a young child from both her grandmother and mother, who originally lived next door. 'After her mother died and her cottage was sold, I kept part of her garden at the bottom of my original L-shaped plot for my polytunnel and nursery,' she explains. In the newly acquired section, she built four raised beds to grow vegetables but two have already been taken over by geums. 'Ironically, the first geum I ever planted died but I tried again with

the lovely orange-flowered "Prinses Juliana", which has self-seeded throughout the garden,' she notes.

Sue's garden is almost unrecognisable from the unappealing picture that faced her when she moved in during 1988. 'It was pretty much all vegetables and looked more like an allotment than a garden,' she recalls. However, she was won over by the sunny, open space, even though initially nothing more than a knee-high hedge separated the garden from a side alley along the north-easterly side. 'It was like living in a goldfish bowl until the dense mixed hedge of holly, ash and hawthorn grew sufficiently tall to give me privacy,' she admits.



◀ Tulip 'Curly Sue'



Continued overleaf



In a secluded corner an old apple tree creates a shady canopy over the seating area



The square pool that centres the walk is a charming feature, its hard edges softened by forget-me-nots



## Guiding hand

Her first priority was to renovate the Victorian cottage. 'It was unbelievably awful and needed much work.' Once work was underway indoors, Sue turned her attention to the views from within. 'I especially wanted a lovely view from my kitchen window, so I grassed over the vegetable beds and formed a path edged in lavender to run from the back terrace to a pleached

lime screen that I established on the far boundary,' she explains. There was never a masterplan, just a gentle guiding hand that allowed the garden to evolve and change gradually. 'Initially, I colour-themed the tulips but bulbs from previous years kept reappearing and the colours became muddled, so I now just enjoy the mix of colours,' she adds.

Early on, Sue planted a number of trees to both screen the plot from neighbours and add

structure. Near the house there is an Eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*), now a stunning specimen that heralds spring with dainty purplish flowers and glaucous, heart-shaped leaves in apple-green. There's also silver birches, whitebeam and crab apple, as well as a liquidambar and *Crataegus prunifolia* — both with rich autumn colours. Only one original tree remains, an old 'Beauty of Bath' apple that a friend of Sue's pollarded to form a leafy canopy above a table and chairs, a quiet shady place to sit in summer. 'The apples taste revolting but the tree has kept its shape,' she adds.

## Self-seeding Stars

Sue's planting relies on a lot of self-seeding plants that add great spontaneity. 'But they need controlling,' she adds. 'I regularly thin out seedlings, otherwise the beds become congested.'

Amongst her favourite self-seeders are large spurges (*Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*) with iridescent lime yellow flowerheads, all babies from one original plant. It's a similar story with purple-flowered honeywort (*Cerinthe major* 'Purpurascens'): 'Once you have one, you have it for

life.' Granny's bonnets (aquilegias) have interbred from just four original named varieties, whilst forget-me-nots go everywhere. 'I have to ruthlessly rip out tatty clumps to create space for summer's perennials, but they always come back next spring.'

It's forget-me-nots and geums that run throughout the garden in the spring, creating a visual link between the different areas. They even crop up in a small parterre, and as spring advances the four beds increasingly become blurred by alliums, euphorbia, centaurea, aquilegias and tulips.



Tulips and forget-me-nots edge the brick path

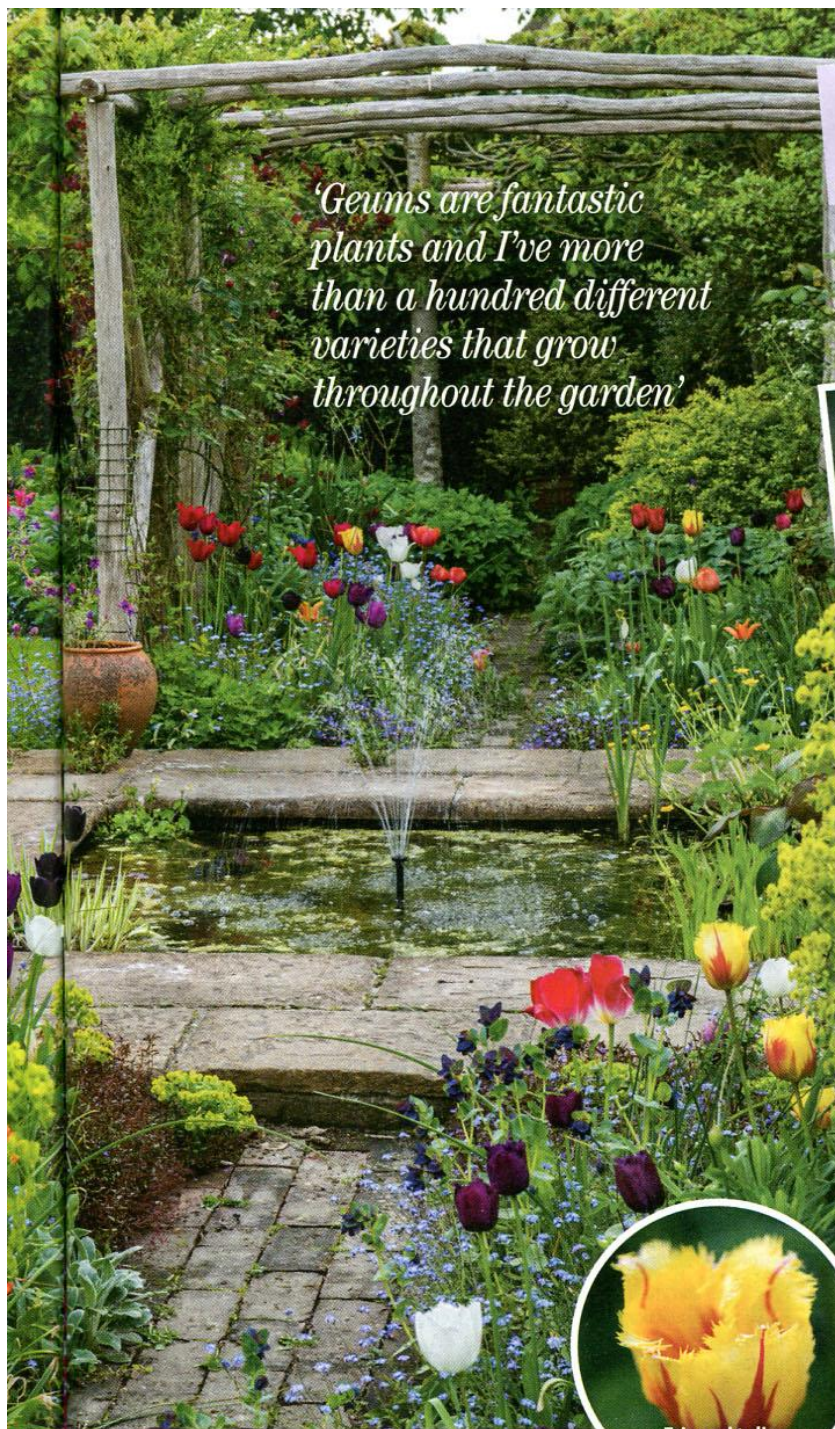


Granny's bonnets



Euphorbias, amongst others, self-seed





*'Geums are fantastic plants and I've more than a hundred different varieties that grow throughout the garden'*

## How to Grow Gorgeous Geums

'Rubin' flowers for weeks

Sue's own 'Dawn'

Sue's Tips

'Fire Storm'

**G**eums, commonly called avens, come in a wide range of colours – white, red, pink, orange and yellow – some suiting full sun and others coping in shade, but all flower profusely. The ground-hugging rivale varieties (such as 'Leonard's Variety' or 'Cream Drop') spread by rhizomes and appear in March, preferring a shady spot. The taller chiloense hybrids ('Prinses Juliana' and 'Fire Storm') form a clump and flower well in full sun from April to September. Plant the slightly shorter coccineum hybrids in partial shade. Although these perennials are robust, they cannot just be planted and left — they need regular care:

- Clumps must be divided regularly, in autumn or spring, to prevent them from deteriorating and becoming woody
- If planted amidst rampant self-seeders such as forget-me-nots, ensure to keep the area around the base of the plant clear
- Geums grow in both acidic or limey soils, but prefer moisture-retentive soil that is mulched annually with compost
- Some geums spread more than others — rivale cultivars spread whereas chiloense stay in neat, tight clumps
- Geums have attractive seed heads that can be left on the plant; there's no clear evidence that deadheading prolongs the flowering season

## Seed exchange

Over the years, there have been changes. The lavender-edged grass path has been replaced by a brick one straddled by the pergola. Then there are the borders, which seem more intensively planted year on year; consequently, the lawn has been annexed in several places. 'My problem is that I can't resist plants and keep having to find a home for new arrivals,' she points out.

Many plants originate from the Hardy Plant Society in Kent, which organises an annual seed exchange between members, a great source of unusual plants. 'Last December,

there were 11 of us round my kitchen table, counting the various seeds into little white envelopes to send out to fellow members,' adds Sue.

There's always something to do in this enchanting garden, and hardly a day when Sue doesn't venture out, including winter when she undertakes new projects. However, a couple of years back, she had a hip replacement, and was miserable being stuck indoors. 'Even though I could play the cello, I missed the garden acutely,' she says. 'It really brought home to me just how important it is to me.'

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Fringed tulip, 'Flamenco'



Vegetables play second fiddle to geums in raised beds at the nursery end



# Get the look

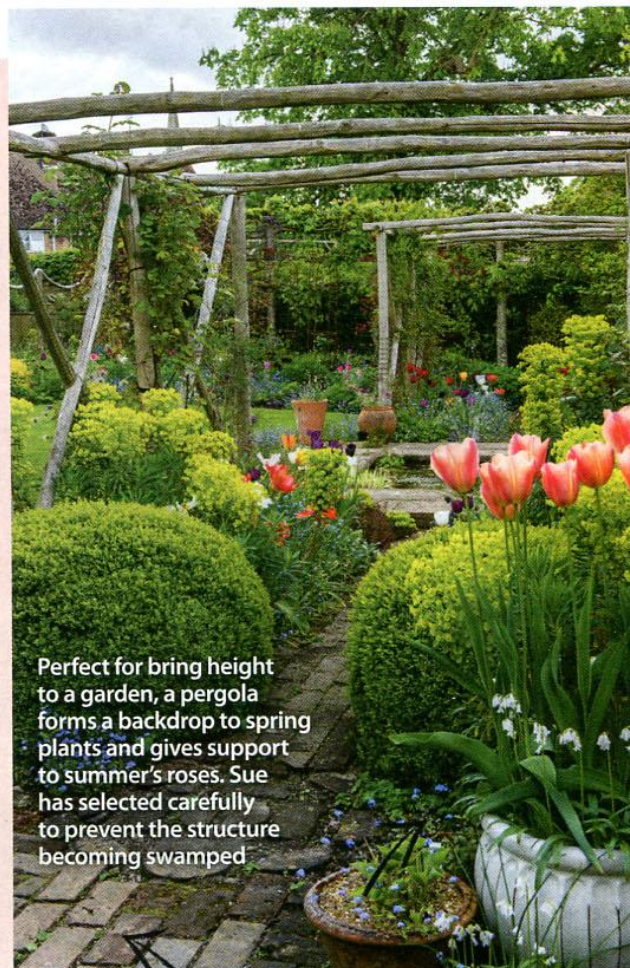
## A rustic pergola walk

**S**ue's pergola is constructed from locally sourced coppiced chestnut poles that are stripped of their bark. The overhead poles are notched to slot onto the framework of upright poles that are concreted into the borders stretching beneath. The pergola straddles a path that runs to about halfway, before arriving at a small, square raised pool with a central fountain in the middle. Beyond, the pergola continues towards a line of pleached limes that demarcate the rear boundary.



Create year-round structure by planting box balls at key points along the length of the pergola. Increase plants by taking cuttings in September

Provide support for climbers by enclosing the bottom metre of each upright with plastic netting



Perfect for bring height to a garden, a pergola forms a backdrop to spring plants and gives support to summer's roses. Sue has selected carefully to prevent the structure becoming swamped

Visit salvage and reclamation yards to find reclaimed bricks; their naturally aged patina builds up over the years. Here, the path harmonises with Sue's old cottage, whilst also acting as a foil to foliage and flower colour

## More Tips

- Position the pergola so that, when viewed out of a window, it frames a lovely view within the garden
- Take care that the structure is in proportion to the overall space. A small pergola, constructed from mean-looking timbers, will be a let down, whereas one that is too large will be overwhelming
- Space the overhead poles sufficiently far apart that summer's roses don't smother them and create a dark tunnel, robbing the beds of light
- Coppiced chestnut is a good choice because it is a hardwood and less expensive than oak. Strong and durable, it needs no preservative and, if left untreated, weathers to a pleasing silvery grey that blends beautifully into a natural setting



In the borders, encourage self-seeding plants such as forget-me-nots, spurge and aquilegias to create a feeling of informality that suits the overall style. These could be followed by hardy geraniums, nepeta and sisyrinchiums

## Visit the garden

Sue's garden at Brickwall Cottage, Frittenden, Kent TN17 2DH opens in aid of the National Gardens Scheme on 2 May 11-4pm [ngs.org.uk](http://ngs.org.uk). For information on the National Collection see [geumcollection.co.uk](http://geumcollection.co.uk)