

Despite a slow-burning passion for gardening, Rob Dalrymple and his wife Anna have risen to the challenge of creating a garden that keeps giving year after year at Broadwoodside, says Antoinette Galbraith

Images **Ray Cox**

The Reluctant Gardener



PREVIOUS: Foxglove spires line the drive west of the steading at Broadwoodside, with the new oriental-style summer house overlooking the orchard.

ABOVE: Planting in the Cottage Garden includes lupins, poppies and foxgloves.

TOP RIGHT: View towards the Clock Tower in the Upper Courtyard.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Rob and Anna Dalrymple.

For many years Rob Dalrymple harboured a guilty secret: he didn't really like gardening. Eventually a piece in *The Times*, by the columnist Damian Whitworth, struck a chord. 'The piece exactly echoed my own feelings,' Rob says. 'Whitworth wrote of his love of gardens and his enjoyment of being in a garden but that it was just the back-breaking reality of gardening that he couldn't handle.'

It's an unexpected admission from one of the owners of Broadwoodside, the East Lothian garden widely considered to be one of the most innovative Scottish gardens created over the last 25 years and recognised in the Top 100 Best British Gardens by the Royal Horticultural Society. As is so often the case, this garden came about by chance.

Reluctantly persuaded by his wife, Anna, to view the 'ruinous buildings', a derelict farm steading enclosing a central

yard near Gifford, Rob was surprised by the potential of the buildings standing among fields of wheat.

The purchase complete, architect Nicholas Groves-Raines was commissioned to draw up a renovation scheme and Rob and Anna began 'taking a pencil to the plans and to lay out the garden that had started to form in our minds' eye'. As a book designer, Rob found 'the articulation of a two-dimensional space on a plan came easily'.

For inspiration they drew on *Living by Design*, the 1997 publication documenting the Dorset garden of the interior designer John Stefanidis, embracing informal planting within the confines of the formal box and yew structure.

Once they had the outlines of a classical design that extended from the the steading and melded into the landscape it became clear that help was needed. 'It was obvious from the scale of the venture if we wanted a garden then a gardener was a necessity.'

Cometh the hour, cometh the man, and for 25 years Guy Donaldson planted and maintained everything in the garden, while living on-site with his family. At the beginning of 2025 Nanette Wraith took his place.

The first area to be planted, now the heart of the garden, was the Upper Courtyard. Here, Robert says, 'We started from first principles – what one might term 'Grade 1 Piano''

Each of the eight square beds is planted with a single,

'To get a group of plants to give a pleasing display from one year to the next is a demanding skill'



contrasting, evergreen: plinths of yew and box, wall germander, pachysandra, *Ophiopogon bodinieri*, *Anemathele lessoniana*, rosemary and box balls.

'How entertaining it was when these monosyllabic horticultural grunts were greeted by visitors as an exercise in chic minimalism.' One square incorporates a Pagoda-like wooden cage which is home to William the parrot when it is warm enough to be outside.

Were you to glance at the planting, it would come as a surprise when Rob admits to finding right combinations tricky. 'What no one seems to tell you is that gardening is really, really difficult,' he says. 'To get a group of plants to give a pleasing display over successive seasons, and from one year to the next, is a demanding skill.'

As an example he cites the Thug Bed in the Lower Courtyard. 'For instance, *Macleaya cordata*, *Eupatorium purpureum* and Japanese anemones have been slugging it out for more than fifteen years; more recently the equally invasive *Euphorbia cyparissias* 'Fens Ruby' has been introduced to clothe their ankles at the front of the bed, an idea stolen from Gresgarth Hall. [in Lancaster] We have always been shameless in our plagiarism.'

Next to the shady Italian-style loggia, where the display of container-grown plants set against terracotta coloured walls 'can be changed like a window box', on the outside of the steading is the Hall Garden inspired by the Old Lime Walk at nearby Tynninghame House. The double row of lime trees lining a stone path is underplanted by a succession of early flowering alliums, hellebores and geraniums followed in summer, by soft, summer yellow *Phlomis russeliana*, *ligularia* and *Digitalis lutea*.

In the Wilderness Garden, where the yew 'is clipped into a funny shape by the deer' and the grass is left to grow long after a first flush of crocus and Bird's Eye Narcissi, your eye is lifted



Top tips

- Try to find something interesting in the garden every day, it makes you look at the planting. Rob, who admits to finding new inspiration on Instagram, regularly posts the interesting things he finds at Broadwoodside on social media.
- The length of the Scottish winter makes structure important in the garden and was a key focus of the original design. Work with your soil and climate.
- The evergreen squares in the Upper Courtyard were planned with winter in mind as they are always good to look at. Viewed from the kitchen, the Topiary Garden is another example of this.
- Less formal are the shapes of the trees in the Wilderness Garden, such as *Parrotia persicaria*, Hornbeam and yew. Or the sculptures in the Field Garden.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The early morning sun breaks through the avenue of pollarded lime trees in the Hall Garden with its plantings of *Phlomis russeliana*; The Cottage Garden with informal plantings of poppies, thalictrum, foxgloves and lupins; A bright pot amid the blooms on the Cottage Terrace; Reflections in the Willow Pond; *Three Apples* sculpture by Brian Claster of Powderhall Bronze in Edinburgh is a focal point in the Orchard; Red painted gate into the South Garden.

towards the corner Pavilion with its ogee-roof. Designed by Groves-Raines, the Pavilion closed the last remaining gap in the Lower Courtyard.

Next is the rectangular Walled Garden with its willow pond fed by water running from the steading roof. Here, the compact kitchen garden is laid out in raised beds while squash are grown up arches. Last summer's experiment, this is going 'great guns' and is likely to be repeated.

On the Cottage Terrace, between the pond and the guest annexe, spring plantings of hyacinths, geraniums, cornflowers, poppies and thalictrum are cut back at the end of June. This makes way for a second wave of dahlias, day lilies and ammi. 'Successional seasonal display is the holy grail,' Rob says, 'but so difficult to achieve.'

At the corner one of the signature red gates leads to the South Garden, a narrow strip against the house, looking south over the fields. Here, Rob explains the challenge of getting two plants, in this case purple-leaved cotinus and lime green euphorbia, to work together.

'In our previous garden, at nearby Bolton, I had noticed how a fortuitous pairing of *Cotinus coggygia* 'Royal Purple' and *Euphorbia wallichii* looked good for an exceptionally long period. It was an easy thing to repeat this,

to alternate them down the longest bed in the garden. Again, this simple approach has often been mistaken for sophistication.'

This, Anna points out, is 'the way we have gone on, with plants more likely bought from the excellent local wholesale nursery Macplants – or even B&Q – rather than from a specialist nursery.'

In contrast is the formal Topiary Walk, a classic design of evergreen shapes alternating with *Acanthus* 'Rue Ledan' and frothy umbellifers. The path leads the way, via a set of stone steps, to the House Field dotted with quirky sculptures such as *A Load of Balls*, *Ore Stabit* and the *Holyrood Finial*, a cast iron finial rescued when the Holyrood Brewery was demolished to make space for the Scottish Parliament.

Acquired last year in kit form,



the oriental style Summer House, Rob explains, originally presented in a much richer shade of wood. 'I was worried it looked a bit 'Ronseal-Home Counties.' Fortunately, his brother, the author William Dalrymple reassured, commenting: 'Oh no, Mughal-Kashmiri.'

Behind the Summer House is Anna's hen run where the hens enjoy the Orchard, a delight of early colour when



the rectangles enclosing the fruit trees are filled with blue *Camassia* in spring. The focal point is a sculpture of *Three Apples*.

A short walk west of the steading, at a high point in the landscape, is the Temple, a Victorian stone portico relocated from Strathleven House near Dunbar. To the north the garden is bound by the Lime Avenue, the old Edinburgh Road, where you will find, tucked away, a *Golden Hare* and *The Three Sisters*.

'The bigger the area, the more complex the task,' says Rob. 'That is what makes the most celebrated herbaceous borders, those at Newby Hall in Yorkshire for example, such dazzling feats. No wonder, in the sort of gardens you see illustrated in glossy magazines, the role of the garden designer has gained such traction in recent years. By definition, experts can do it better. However, it is widely perceived that the most interesting and atmospheric gardens are the most personal ones. And personal means DIY.'

Even at Broadwoodside the chic minimalism can slip. Last year a gap created by replacing a matted bed of *Ophiopogon bodinieri* in the Upper Garden spontaneously filled with joyful spires of pink and white foxgloves.

'If all else sounds controlling and a bit joyless, fear not as discipline inevitably breaks down over time. Self-seeders spread, retail therapy is indulged. In a recent article my wife Anna was credited as a 'chaotic influence' and it is largely thanks to her that the garden never suffers from looking too regimented, in spite of its rigorously formal framework.'

See it for yourself

Broadwoodside, Gifford, East Lothian EH41 4JQ is open under Scotland's Gardens Scheme.

Check the website at www.scotlands-gardens.org for dates.

www.broadwoodside.com