

# Reference Point

A pioneering community garden in Hertfordshire with a Plant Library at its heart, has been designed by landscape architect Tom Stuart-Smith as a space for beauty and learning, while nurturing those with mental and physical health challenges

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A tapestry of plants including grasses and red-hot pokers grow in sand at the sunnier top end of the Plant Library.



Immersed in billowing clouds of flowers and foliage, visitors to the Serge Hill Project in Hertfordshire fall quickly under the garden's spell, serenaded by the soothing hum of bees and embraced by the power of plants, which slow the heart rate and melt worries away. An oak-clad building made from natural, locally sourced materials sits at the heart of the garden, while a formal grid of rectangular beds plays host to a curated collection of 1,500 mostly herbaceous plants that ebb and flow as the seasons turn.

The one-acre community garden was created on the site of an old orchard by celebrated landscape architect Tom Stuart-Smith and his wife, Sue, a respected psychiatrist, psychotherapist and author of the highly acclaimed book, *The Well Gardened Mind*, which explores the benefits of gardens and gardening on mental health. The couple have lived at Serge Hill in a converted barn for over 30 years, raising their family and making a garden around the house. The new community garden for 'learning, creativity and health', which opened officially in 2023, was conceived about seven years ago, while Sue was writing her book and Tom was planning to move his London-based design practice to his Hertfordshire home.

Sue explains that she wanted to put ideas from the projects she had visited for her research into practice: "I envisaged a garden that would help support vulnerable people, provide a space for social prescribing and teach local children about plants and nature," she says. The couple had already established links to some of the communities Sue had in mind, including the Hertfordshire-based charity Sunnyside Rural Trust, which offers training, work experience and garden therapy to vulnerable people with learning disabilities, as well as two local schools, for which Tom had designed pro bono gardens.

Meanwhile, Tom was keen to create an on-site garden for his new studio, where each member of the team would have a plot of their own to nurture, filled with their chosen plants. "This initial idea fell down on the first day of lockdown in 2020, when we unpacked the plants people had selected, only to find that many were duplicates," he says. "The pause in normal life gave me time to reflect, and I realised that my plan wouldn't work if we had a busy period and the team were unable to keep the garden going. I thought about what would benefit the studio most and decided instead to set up a plant collection, with as much complexity as possible that would extend my team's knowledge as well as providing a space for learning and friendship for them and others."

Tom and his plantsman, Charlie Harpur, developed the concept for a Plant Library on the orchard site, with herbaceous perennials, bulbs and a few shrubs laid out in a grid and grouped by their growing needs. "The sunny area at the top of

Tom and Sue's son Ben, an architect, designed the building that's central to the Plant Library and is used for events and workshops.







Brown allium seedheads poke through a late-summer display of hylotelephium and coreopsis with phlox and eupatorium behind.



the slope is home to drought-tolerant species from warmer, drier climates, planted on 15cm of sharp sand to help them withstand our wet winters, while the woodland dwellers are on the shadier lower slope, planted in green waste on top of moisture-retentive clay, with plants suited to more balanced, general conditions in the middle,” explains Tom.

With the help of volunteers, the pair established the Plant Library in 2021, after planning approval had been granted, and work started on the building designed by Tom and Sue’s architect son Ben. “We also established allotment beds at the top of the hill, which during the Covid lockdowns were tended by neighbours and other locals,” says Sue. “Although this wasn’t in the original plan, it was a wonderful way of connecting people at that time. Many people gradually gave up their plots as they returned to work, and most of the beds are now used to teach children about growing food.”

Just before the lockdowns, the couple had started to forge even stronger links with Sunnyside, the charity’s trainees helping to grow plants for Tom’s 2021 RHS Hampton Court Palace Iconic Horticultural Hero Garden. Tom says: “Sunnyside had been predominantly growing annuals for local council contracts and other projects but was moving more into perennial growing. So we decided to

offer the Trust an area at Serge Hill to propagate perennials from the Plant Library to sell to designers, landscapers and the public.”

Through a fundraising campaign, the charity was able to build an on-site recreation room for the trainees and a large greenhouse to house the propagated plants. Sophie McIntyre Peters, the perennial lead for the trust who runs The Orchard Nursery, explains: “We have around 30 trainees here each week who learn how to propagate the plants that we then sell at Serge Hill open days and events and local plant fairs, or people can view and purchase them by appointment. We grow exceptionally high-quality plants and show that vulnerable people have a place at the very top end of horticulture.”

After Charlie Harpur left the studio to join the Knepp Estate, Tom cast his net for a new head gardener to take charge of the Library. “We were extremely lucky to find Millie Souter, who has engaged with it so fully,” says Tom with a smile. A talented artist, gardener and designer, Millie is now the driving force behind the initiative, working alongside Tom to curate and tend the plants.

“I’m constantly assessing the plants, checking to see how each one is performing, and identifying any that may need moving or cutting back so they

**Above left** Plants’ different forms can be assessed, whether it’s the slender leaves and spikes of a kniphofia, a low-growing gaura or a mound of oregano. **Above right** Allotment beds are used to teach groups of schoolchildren about growing food.



# A LIBRARY OF COLOUR *at Serge Hill*

Colourful planting to inspire budding designers from the Plant Library's stock beds



## ASCLEPIAS TUBEROSA

Butterflies adore the vibrant orange flowers of this sun-loving perennial, which can reach up to 80cm tall.



## LAVATERA X CLEMENTII 'LILAC LADY'

A fast-growing 1m tall shrub for a sunny spot, with abundant summer flowers.



## ALLIUM FLAVUM

A small allium producing exploding yellow flowerheads in late spring to midsummer above blue-green leaves.



## AMORPHA CANESCENS

Aromatic leaves and spikes of purple flowers grace an unusual sub-shrub that can be herbaceous in cold winters.



## HELICHRYSUM 'SCHWEIFELLICHT'

Felted leaves and small daisy flowers on this sun-loving, low-growing shrub.



## HYLOTELEPHIUM 'BERTRAM ANDERSON'

A prostrate sedum with dark purple foliage on plants that reach 15cm tall.



## ECHINACEA 'HOT SUMMER'

The blooms of this coneflower change from yellow-orange to fiery red as they age, giving plants a two-tone effect.



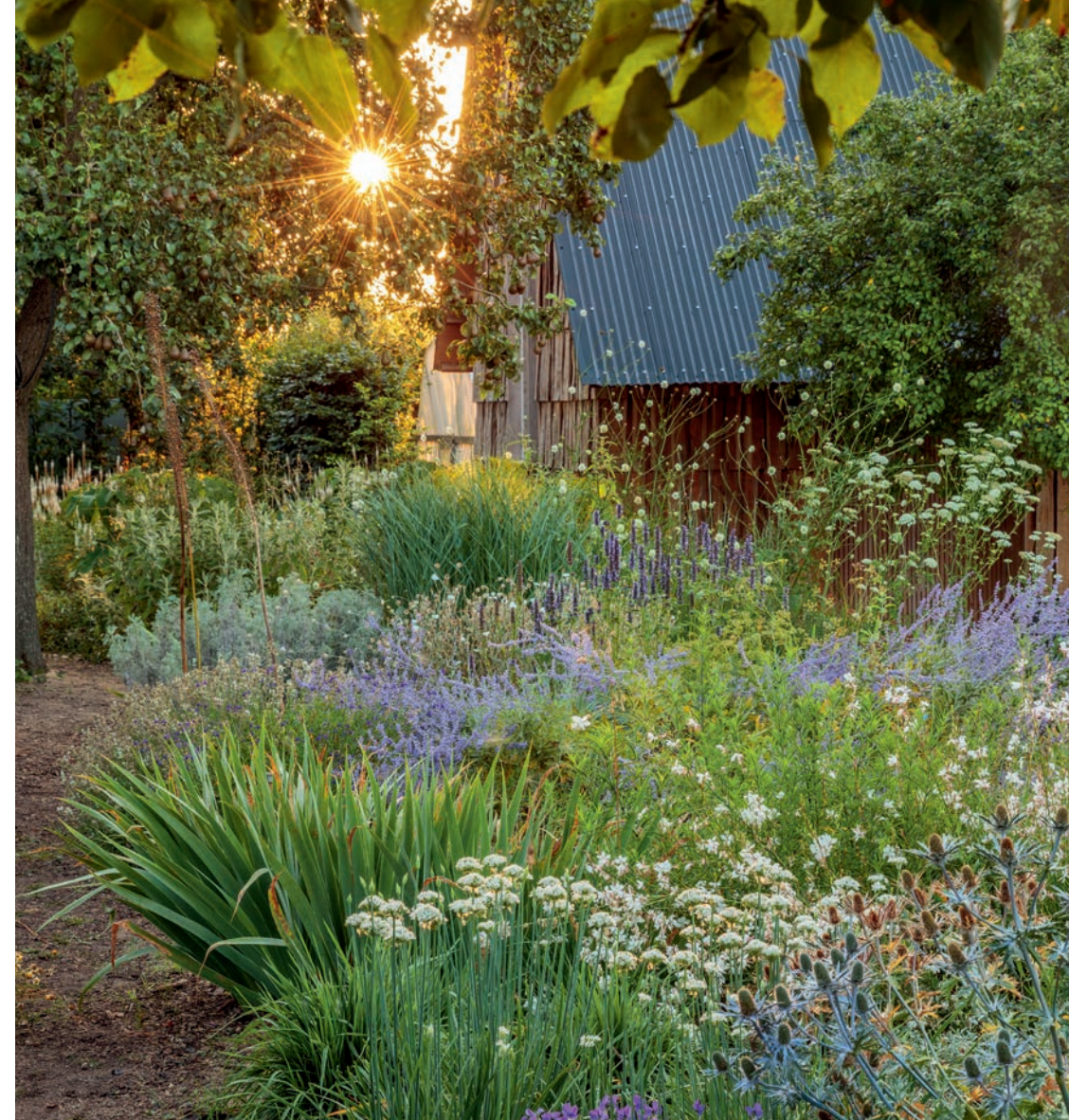
## MONARDA 'PRÄRIENACHT'

A lovely bee balm with lilac flowers and fragrant foliage. It does best in a moist, light soil and reaches about 90cm tall.



## SALVIA PATENS GIANT FORM

True to its name, this form has larger flowers on a bigger, 1m tall plant.



**Left** Mauves, blues and whites from a medley of plants including perovskia, eryngium, gaura and agastache. The tall stems of *Cephalaria gigantea* sway in the background.

## VISITING SERGE HILL

● Anyone can become a member of The Serge Hill Project, which allows access to the Plant Library on Friday afternoons, priority bookings for events, access to the database of plants and a free subscription to The Plant Library newsletter.

● Tom and Sue's Barn Garden, The Plant Library, and the walled garden tended by Tom's sister Kate Stuart-Smith are also open to the public on the first and third Tuesday of every month until July. The Barn Garden and Plant Library are then open on the first Tuesday of August, September and October 2025. You can also book to visit the first-ever Serge Hill Plant Fair on 27 July 2025.

● To book a visit or event at Serge Hill, head to [sergehillproject.co.uk](http://sergehillproject.co.uk)

don't overwhelm their neighbours," she says. Every season delivers a new wave of plants, starting in spring with lesser-known bulbs such as *Fritillaria raddeana*, followed in early summer by Benton irises and then exploding with colour, as salvias, asters, sedums, kniphofia and phlox mingle with ornamental grasses from late summer to autumn. The cooler seasons are punctuated by overwintering seedheads and berries and a sprinkling of flowers.

The Serge Hill Project became a not-for-profit Community Interest Company (CIC) two years ago and now hosts weekly visits from schools and other community groups, while the Apple House has become a thriving hub for learning, with regular public events throughout the year, including talks, workshops and symposiums.

"It's a wonderful resource for the studio designers who come every week for inspiration, and for all the other groups who visit us," continues Millie. "It's a lot of work, of course, but I have a team of amazing volunteers who help to maintain the gardens and a new scholar, Emma, who is now working with me."

In autumn, Tom and Millie conduct a review of the plants. "The Library is constantly evolving and we replace about five per cent of the stock annually, including duplicates or those that are

underperforming, with new plants to trial," explains Millie. "We are also working with plantsman Noel Kingsbury and volunteers to create a comprehensive directory of the plants, which the studio and members of the Serge Hill Project will have access to."

Asked what the future of the Project holds, Tom says: "As the community using the Library grows, we are extending it to enable us to introduce even more beautiful, precious plants for people to enjoy." Sue and Becky Fincham, the Serge Hill Project's Head of Programmes, are also introducing a new 'Gardening For Health' initiative, working with social prescribers and local charities to offer horticultural therapy to those recovering from illness, mental health challenges and homelessness.

The main challenge for the Serge Hill team is keeping the momentum going while maintaining a revenue stream, but such a worthy initiative brings its own rewards and benefactors including the Rockcliffe Charitable Trust and the Julia Rausing Trust have helped secure the Project for the next couple of years. ■

Serge Hill Gardens, Bedmond, Hertfordshire WD5 0RT. [sergehillproject.co.uk](http://sergehillproject.co.uk)