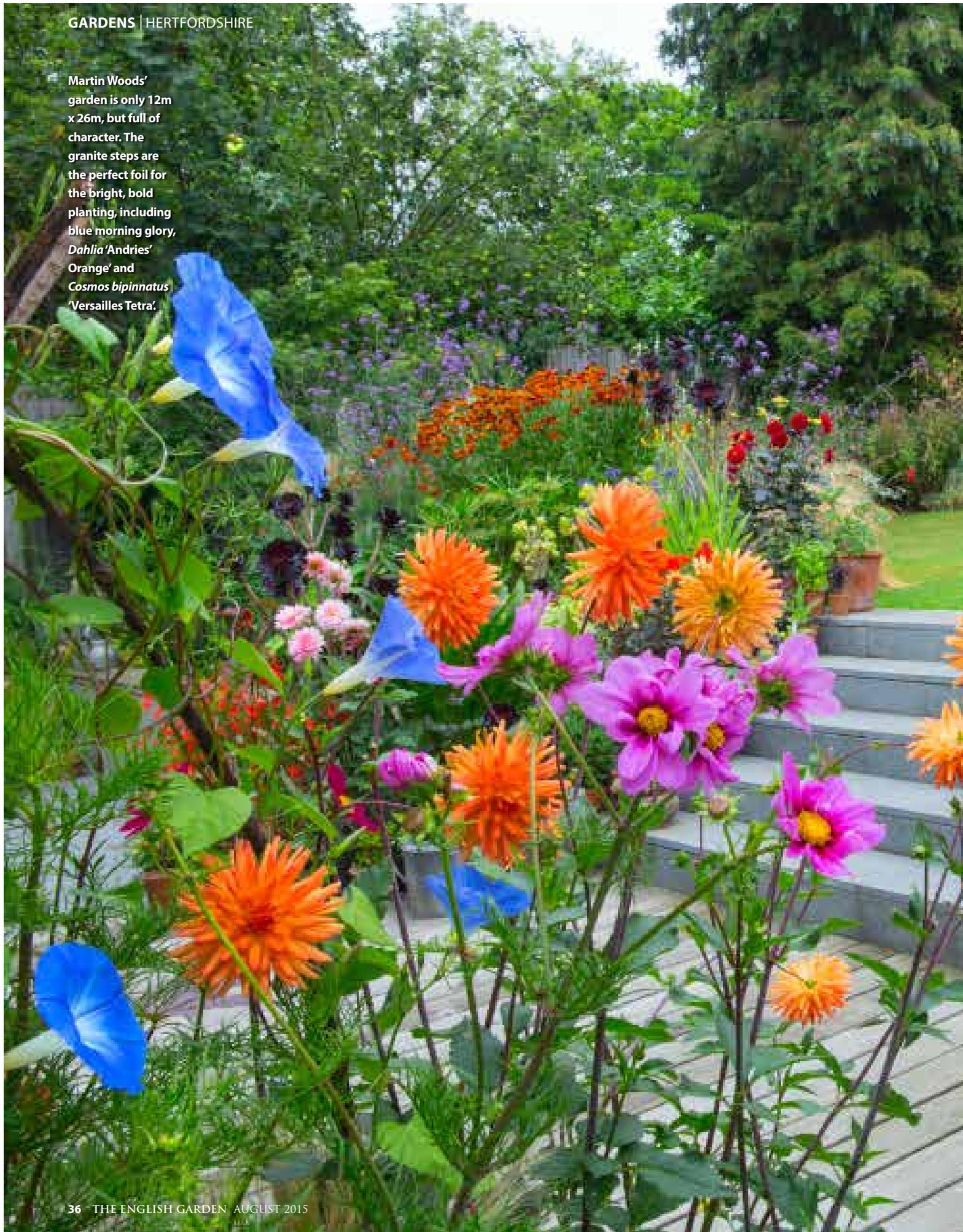


Martin Woods' garden is only 12m x 26m, but full of character. The granite steps are the perfect foil for the bright, bold planting, including blue morning glory, *Dahlia* 'Andries' Orange' and *Cosmos bipinnatus* 'Versailles Tetra'.





Burst of colour

This graphic designer's town garden is truly vibrant in late summer, with great ideas for small but powerful plots →

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS | WORDS AILEEN SCOLAR



When you spend long days in the office drawing precise lines and puzzling over complex typography, most of us might want to loosen up a little in the garden. So it's not surprising to discover that graphic designer Martin Woods takes a resolutely relaxed attitude to his sunny Hertfordshire town garden and its colourful planting palette. Both Martin and his partner Jane love mid-century modern furniture, and the couple's passion for retro design works perfectly in this 1960s property. Oddly enough, there's



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Martin is adventurous with colour, happily clashing tangerine-orange with shocking-pink

something of a retro vibe going on within the planting, too.

Having inherited 'a very tidy, suburban garden' when the family moved in 11 years ago, Martin approached the existing plants with an open mind. As a result, huge swathes of handsome hostas, lush ferns and sparkling red-leaved heucheras - all highly fashionable a decade or two ago - now rub shoulders with contemporary 'hot tickets' such as *Digitalis ferruginea*,



Sanguisorba menziesii and *Dianthus carthusianorum*. The result is a garden that fizzes with possibility, despite its relatively compact footprint - around 300 square metres at the rear, plus a generously sized plot at the front.

'I'm not too strict about specific plant combinations,' admits Martin.

ABOVE LEFT Pots are displayed everywhere, with a collection of succulents on the dining table.

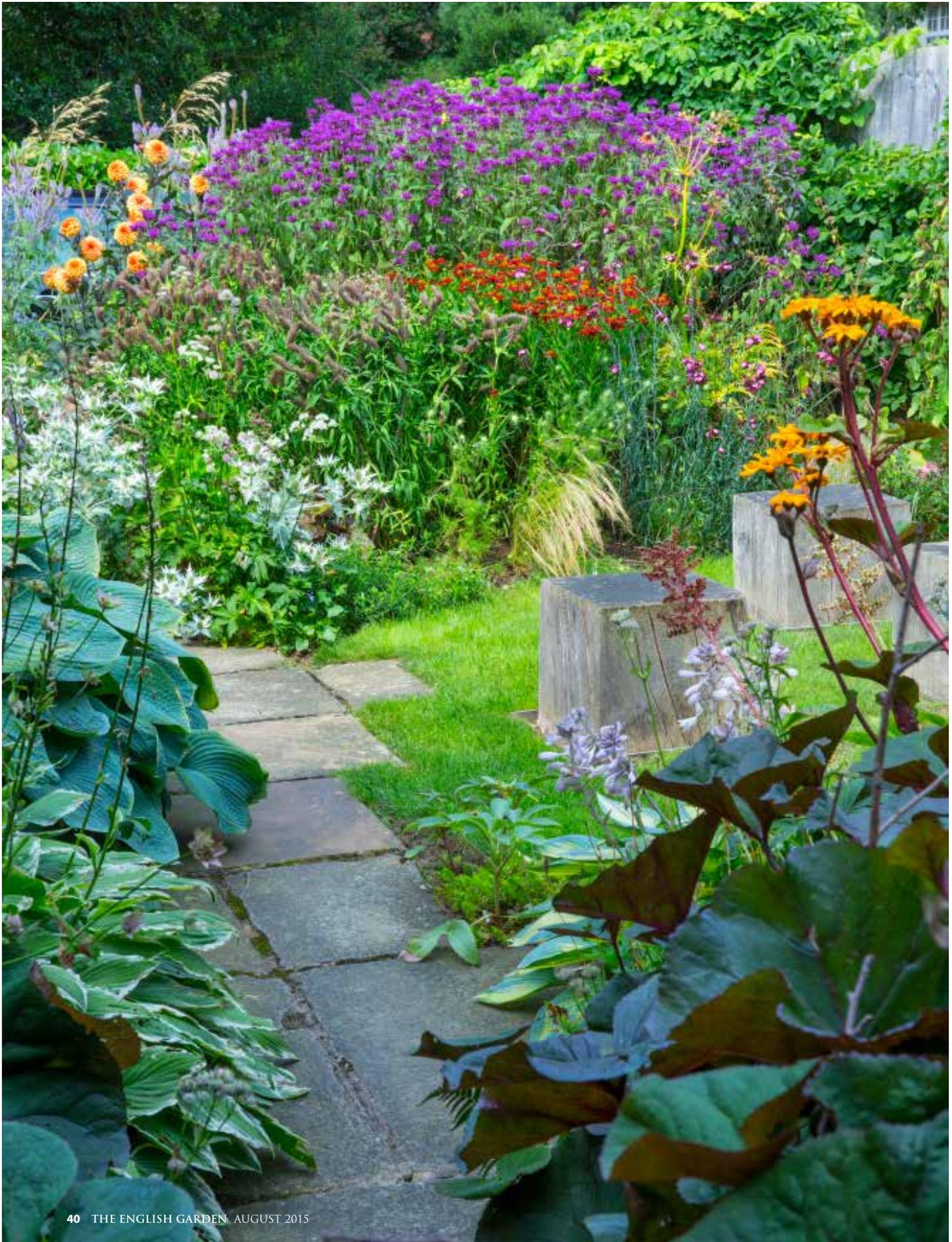
ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Belamcanda chinensis; *Pelargonium sidoides*; *Cosmos sulphureus* 'Bright Lights'; *Pelargonium caffrum*.

shocking-pink *Cosmos bipinnatus* 'Versailles Tetra', or sending electric-blue morning glory into battle with a scarlet-flowered pelargonium. 'I like that clash,' explains Martin. 'I'm not afraid to mix and match - very rarely does it look awful. Take Christopher Lloyd and the combinations he created at Great Dixter.'

But the garden was not without its initial challenges. The sloping site reared up steeply from the house, and there was no entertaining area, so Martin made the hardwood terrace a landscaping priority, removing the previous owners' rockery and excavating 100 tons of soil. The marked change of level has added infinitely more drama to the garden, and has allowed Martin to create a deep fish pond and two raised beds close to the house.

Looking at Martin's elegant patio and funky dining area now, it would be easy to imagine he only cherry-picks his plants from the most fashionable →



→ places. But there is much more to this inventive gardener. Although he admires Piet Oudolf and cites plantsman John Hoyland, the former owner of Hertfordshire-based nursery Pioneer Plants, as a fantastic source of advice and inspiration, Martin also employs a home-grown approach. He propagates many of his own plants from seeds and cuttings, and splits established clumps regularly. He also welcomes horticultural marauders with open arms: 'Lots of self-seeded plants pop up unexpectedly, and I love that element of surprise.'

It's the collection of exotics and tender perennials in pots that gets Martin most excited

He grows his own summer veg from seed, including courgettes and lots of salad leaves, plus tomatoes, but admits that decorative plants are now creeping into the veg patch. 'If I've over-planted my borders, things often end up being grown on elsewhere. So I now have quite a few waifs and strays in the utility area, waiting for a new home.'

Yet despite all those lushly planted south-west-facing borders, it's the collection of exotics and tender perennials in pots and containers that gets Martin most excited.

'For me, container planting is like having a whole extra garden,' he says. 'I can grow things in pots that I couldn't in the garden, and move them around whenever I want. It adds a whole new dimension to the space, and I love the atmosphere it creates in late summer. The combination of the exotics and the dahlias, and the other things in flower, looks amazing.'

Growing tender plants requires patience and forward-planning and, when autumn days grow shorter, Martin starts to prepare the greenhouse. 'I bubble wrap it and keep

it heated to around 10°C for most of winter, unless it's particularly mild,' he explains. 'I have a 20-year-old Parwin electric thermostatic heater, which is a fabulous piece of kit.' All of his tender plants are shoehorned into the greenhouse - even his huge, multi-stemmed *Aeonium* 'Zwartkopf' ('the daddy of them all!') and his dahlia tubers are lifted and stored.

After 11 years, Martin admits to being pretty happy with the garden's current guise. 'I have no big changes planned, but I do add extra planting

OPPOSITE In the shadier front garden, striking foliage plants like hosta and ligularia balance more colourful perennials.

BELOW LEFT Beneath a pretty katsura tree, a weathered oak bench provides views across the lawn. **BELOW**

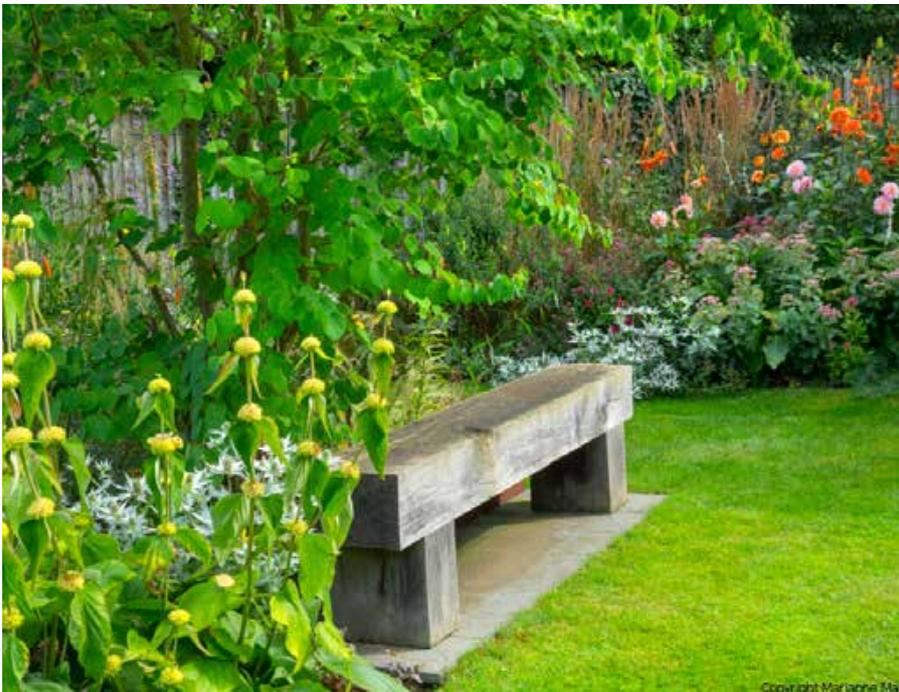
RIGHT The orange pompoms of *Dahlia* 'David Howard' complement the cooler hues of *Eryngium planum*, *Monarda* 'Scorpion' and *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Fascination'.

areas every so often. The border by the katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*) was only created a few years ago, and I've deliberately filled it with tall plants so that it helps to create a new 'room' within the centre of the garden,' he says. 'If I had the time and energy, I'd probably get rid of most of the lawn so that I could just walk through plants. I'd love to have a huge space that I could plant like Pensthorpe in Norfolk - just huge swathes of plants, one species at a time.'

Instead, Martin has gifted himself an experimental border. 'I change this border every year because I don't want to keep ripping apart the rest of the garden when it's working so well. It's really satisfying to have a place where I can just play around. Last year, it was ricinus and eryngiums; this year, it's home to a collection of pelargoniums and a backdrop of climbing morning glory.' And who wouldn't want a garden that lets you have fun, with plants that make you smile? Perhaps we should all wave a magic wand of colour over our plots.

22a The Avenue, Hitchin, Herts SG4 9RL.
Open for the NGS on Fri 31 July, 6-9pm.
www.mwgardendesign.co.uk

Top container-gardening tips →



The Avenue garden notebook



STILL WATERS

The pale sage-green rendered wall behind the pool shades the water on sunny days, and protects the papyrus in winter. A UV filter helps to keep dreaded duckweed at bay, creating a safe haven for Martin's orfe and carp.

HOT COLOUR

Potted *Dahlia* 'Moonfire' and *D.* 'Honka Red' bring a fiery spark of colour to the cool granite steps, and complement Martin's ever-increasing collection of sun-loving succulents. All of his potted exotics are brought into a heated greenhouse in winter.



Garden challenges

SANDY SOIL: Although easy to dig, the top soil in Martin's garden is very sandy and free-draining, and requires constant improvement with organic matter. Every spring, he top-dresses the borders with his own garden compost and, when planting, he adds plenty of well-rotted farmyard manure.

ALSO IN THE AREA

If you plan to visit Martin's garden, here are some of his favourite places to try:

- **GARDEN Letchworth** Another NGS garden also open on 31 July, from 6-9pm. This lively town garden is owned by Karen Smith, who previously worked at Pioneer Plants. 44 Broadwater Avenue, Letchworth Garden City SG6 3HJ. www.ngs.org.uk
- **NURSERY Growing Strong** A reliable nursery in Hitchin with an interesting selection of unusual dahlia cultivars. Bedford Road, Holwell, Hitchin, Herts SG5 3RT. Tel: +44 (0)1462 712000. www.growingstrong-gardencentres.co.uk
- **NURSERY The Plant Specialist** Although an hour away from Hitchin, this is Martin's favourite plant source. Be inspired by the display gardens before browsing the imaginatively stocked nursery. 7 Whitefield Lane, Great Missenden, Bucks HP16 0BH. Tel: +44 (0)1494 866650. www.theplantspecialist.co.uk
- **FURNITURE Ternex Sawmill** Martin's simple green oak bench and the stylish timber blocks in the front garden were all made by Ternex. 27 Ayot Green, Welwyn, Herts AL6 9BA. Tel: +44 (0)1707 324606. www.ternex.co.uk
- **NURSERY Daisy Roots** An award-winning nursery. There's a new tea-room at the Foxholes Farm Shop opposite too. London Road (B1197), Jenningsbury, Herts SG13 7NS. Tel: +44 (0)79585 63355. www.daisyroots.com

Martin's container-planting tips

- **All of my succulents and exotics** are planted in a compost mix I make myself - I combine a base of John Innes with added grit and sand. I also use peat-free compost. When planting dahlias in pots, I add manure to the compost because they need a much richer mix.
- **I feed my pots weekly** with home-made comfrey feed. I gather the leaves locally, although people do tend to look at me a bit strangely!
- **When it comes to containers**, I think anything goes. Some of my most interesting pots are not necessarily designed for plants. I look for unusual materials, such as copper, and try a variety of shapes and sizes.
- **Don't throw away your broken terracotta pots**, especially if it's an unusual shape that you really like. I repair mine by carefully drilling small holes and joining the pieces back together with copper wire. It adds an interesting new dimension to the look of the pot too.
- **Move your pots around** as things come into flower or go over, and create theatrical displays in nooks and corners. I didn't design the garden with lots of pots in mind, but there are plenty of fantastic spaces for them.



POTTERING AROUND

Never happier than when he's experimenting with new plants, Martin propagates from seed and cuttings, so his utility area is always a hive of activity. Hiding it all behind a neatly trimmed beech hedge is a clever design solution for small town gardens like this, where the whole garden can be seen from the house.