

Emily Erlam

Clare Foster meets the designer who, having changed careers in her thirties, has embraced her passion for creating gardens that complement architecture, combining dense planting with relaxed, low-maintenance areas

PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY



*New garden
design talent*

PART 3

OPPOSITE Emily in her Norfolk meadow, where she allows native ox-eye daisies and knapweed to flourish. THIS PAGE Tall wands of *Eremurus x isabellinus* 'Cleopatra' lend ochre tones to the Rain Garden



It is a luxury to have a job that you enjoy, but most garden designers will tell you without hesitation that they love what they do. Emily Erlam is among them, having discovered garden design as a second career in her mid-thirties. 'I was at the BBC, working until midnight two nights a week on *News Review*, and had had enough,' she says. 'At the time, I was having some planting plans drawn up for my London garden. Having my own garden changed my life, and I can honestly say I never felt as happy as when I was building and creating it.'

She decided to do a three-month course at the English Gardening School while she was pregnant with her second child and quickly realised that it had sparked a passion in her. She then immersed herself in gardens, visiting as many as she could over the following two years, before enrolling on the one-year diploma course at the London College of Garden Design.

Now 45, Emily has her own London-based business and is designing gardens in the city and beyond – chic, simple outdoor spaces with bespoke furnishings and elegant planting. She particularly enjoys the juxtaposition of garden and building, and is passionate about architecture. 'If a garden is right, the building looks at its best,' she says. 'It is so important to work with the nature of the building; I have had great experiences collaborating with architects so that the garden can extend the experience of the house.'

One of the first gardens she designed while still at college was a collaborative project with architectural practice Johnson Naylor, which won a RIBA award for its redesign of the Experimental Station on the shore at Dungeness. Emily created a sustainable gravel garden that looks completely at home in the setting, planting in hummocks and drifts to mimic the patterns of the natural land formations. In 2015, she won a Society of Garden Designers award for the Dungeness garden, also winning its Future Designer award that year for another garden in Surrey. Current projects include a roof terrace in King's Cross and a beach garden in Norfolk.

She has another project on the go in Norfolk, where five years ago she and her husband bought an old tithe barn with a piggery, a farmyard and an acre of land. Working with the architect Niall Maxwell, they have transformed the piggery into a stylish single-storey house that wraps around the garden, seamlessly integrating building and garden. There are two courtyard areas accessible from the ground-floor bedrooms on both sides of the T-shape building, and the main courtyard garden, the Rain Garden, is on

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THIS PAGE A view of the tithe barn and converted piggery from the meadow. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Purple sage in the Rain Garden. Pale yellow *Achillea xxxxx*. The Rain Garden is bordered by a brick and flint wall. Ornamental grasses. Hummocks of lavender around a table and benches designed by Emily. Purple sage and *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*. *Centaurea* ??????. Emily's wooden portable chairs. The side entrance to the garden (centre)

full view from the kitchen and living area, so wherever you are in the house, the garden is present. Even when it is raining, the glass doors can be left open and you can sit under the overhang of the roof, just to be outside. 'It was always going to be a building and a garden incorporated,' says Emily. 'It's how we live our life.'

The sheltered Rain Garden is a small, intensively planted space enclosed on three sides by the building and a flint-and-brick wall. Hummocks of *Euonymus alatus* lend an evergreen structure, turning burnt red in autumn, which ties in with the brick of the barn and walls. Other orange tones are picked up by *Achillea* 'Terracotta' and tall wands of *Eremurus x isabellinus* 'Cleopatra', leading the eye to the meadow beyond. 'I tend to plant in a matrix style or small, repeating drifts,' says Emily. 'I like things to look generous and exciting, and I have a passion for plants that grow tall, combining them with well-behaved and dependable plants that give drama all year round.'

Here and elsewhere in the garden are examples of Emily's own furniture designs: beautiful oak tables and benches and portable folding chairs that you can cart around to catch the sun. 'I am mad about garden furniture,' she says. 'I particularly like the classicism of Belgian furniture, which I think suits the English countryside. I design things because I know exactly what I want and can never find it on the market.'

The barn is used as a weekend house and the garden needs to be low maintenance as Emily looks after it herself, so the planted areas elsewhere are

kept simple, with repeat planting of ornamental grasses, or hummocks of lavender and santolina. Beyond the main garden, a meadow stretches off to the tree-lined horizon. 'We bought the field from the farmer and share it with our neighbours,' says Emily. Wanting to keep the agricultural feel, they leave the meadow to its own devices, allowing the native flora to flourish, including ox-eye daisies, knapweed and common yarrow. Mowing paths through the long grass is as far as they go, although Emily is yearning to put a natural swimming pond in one day.

Just being in this beautiful rural garden brings a sense of calm, and it is this sense of place, of atmosphere, that Emily is trying to achieve in all her gardens. 'The key element for me when I'm designing is, "How does it make you feel?"', she explains. 'Does it need to be more enclosed for a sense of relaxation? Does it need a view to make it more uplifting? Sometimes the solution is obvious, and you can tell from the moment you walk into a place' □

Emily Erlam Landscapes: erlamstudio.com

