

IN BRIEF

WHAT Nursery and garden.

WHERE Near the Californian coast,
140 miles north of San Francisco.

SIZE Garden 1.6 hectares (four acres);
nursery 0.4 hectares (one acre).

SOIL Sandy, clay and loam.

CONDITIONS Windy; warm
summers and mild winters with
occasional frost.

American dream

Romantic gardens and a nursery packed with beautiful
and reliable plants make Digging Dog a delight to visit.
Words Kate Frey, photographs Claire Takacs

Tall verbascums (including *V. chaixii*
'Album') mingle in a bed edged with
Geranium x cantabrigiense 'Biokovo'.

“Digging Dog is a dream come true for plant enthusiasts and garden designers”

California's north coast has an impressive grandeur, with dark cliffs, golden meadows and shady woods. Among the sombre firs and redwoods of one of these coastal forests lies Digging Dog Nursery, a dream come true for plant enthusiasts and garden designers.

Owners Gary Ratway and Deborah Whigham searched for four years before finding this site, a flat ridge-top with enough water to support a nursery. Gary was looking for a place to grow a reliable supply of hardy perennials for his landscape architecture practice, and his wife Deborah, a textiles artist with a horticultural degree, wanted to work outside and grow plants.

Gary has long been a plantsman. A former director of the Mendocino Botanical Garden in nearby Fort Bragg, he earlier studied at the UC Davis Arboretum, in California's Central Valley. There he became fascinated with native plants; later the arboretum provided his nursery with an extensive collection.

Deborah, meanwhile, was interested in plants from Mediterranean-type climates. Soon the pair were also stocking grasses, shrubs and trees that were not available in the trade. They began travelling in Europe and America in search of worthy plants as stock.

The nursery's unusual name came to them after they adopted a stray dog. "We began to notice lots of digging in the nursery," says Deborah. "Pots were turned upside down and there were piles of soil and holes everywhere. The dog was trying to catch voles, which sometimes live among the plants. One day I turned to Gary and said, 'We have a Digging Dog Nursery,' and realised we had come up with a name."

A romantic garden

As in any good partnership, there's a division of labour, and Gary's domain is the garden. It began with vegetables and berries in the old orchard, but slowly Gary and Deborah pulled out the vegetables, replacing them with trees, shrubs and perennials grown as trials or for cuttings. Now the area has become an enclosed, romantic world. Redwood trees and ancient stumps add a sense of scale and mystery.

Gary says the main influence on his design ideas is British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens (1868-1944), who famously collaborated with Gertrude Jekyll on more than 100 gardens (such as Hestercombe in Somerset – see issue 116). He also mentions two friends from the UC Davis Arboretum, Jim Lockman and Warren Roberts, who

1. The borders

Long double borders flank the nursery on three sides. Here the bright, apple-green leaves of a small wheel tree (*Trochodendron aralioides*) stand out against the shade cast by a coastal redwood, *Sequoia sempervirens*. Growing at the front of the border are violet-blue *Salvia forsskaalii*, catmint *Nepeta x faassenii* 'Select Blue' and a neat dome of variegated *Echium* (an unnamed form from a friend's garden, possibly *E. candicans* 'Pride of Madeira').

2. Texture and colour

Tall *Thalictrum* 'Elin' bears clouds of small flowers at the back of the border. At its feet is a clump of pheasant's tail grass (*Anemanthele lessoniana*) and a swathe of the low-growing catmint *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low'.

3. Perfect partnership

Gary looks after the borders while Deborah takes charge of the nursery.

4. Long vistas

The vigorous climbing rose *R. brunonii* and magenta shrub rose *R. 'Tuscany Superb'* frame a view towards a spiky *Astelia chathamica* 'Silver Spear'.

5. Wild looks

The airy appearance of *Sanguisorba tenuifolia* makes it well suited to a naturalistic planting, preferably in damp soil or a bog garden.

6. Plants that won't let you down

Deborah is determined to stock plants of proven quality, including the vigorous, free-flowering and clove-scented *Rosa* 'Bourbon Queen'. This specimen is growing at the edge of the nursery, near the family home.



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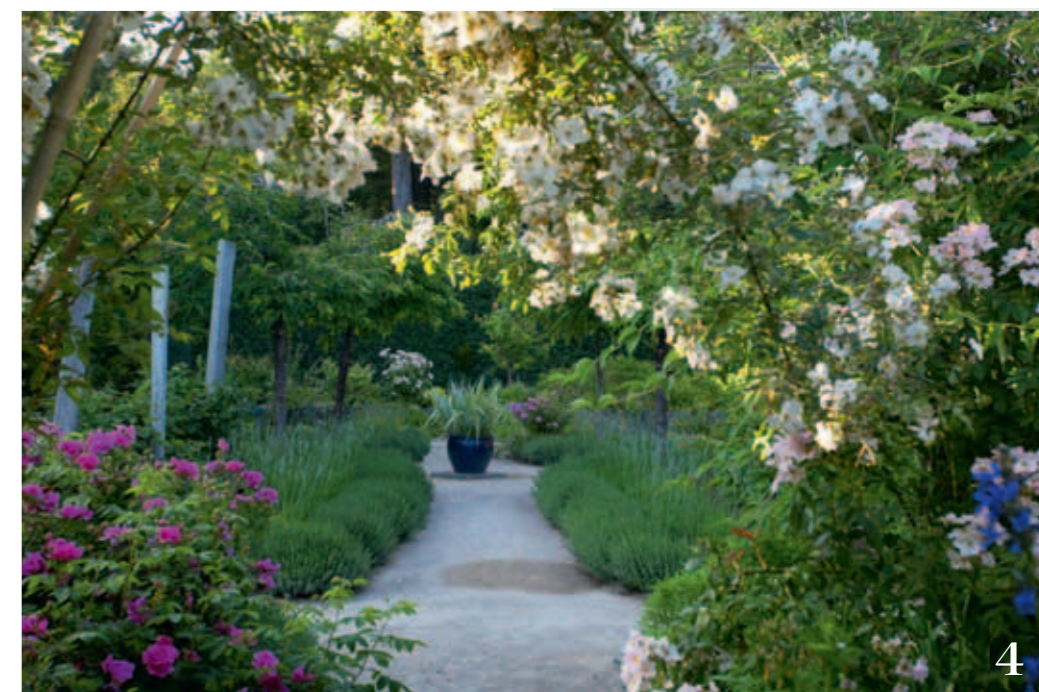
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“I like an organised style with strong bones and loose planting; a structured informality, dictated by the site”

▷ encouraged his love of plants, especially drought-tolerant Mediterranean-type ones. Gary says, “I like an organised style with strong bones and loose planting; a structured informality, dictated by the site.”

In Gary’s gardens, the site suggests the structure. On the north side of the nursery, two parallel borders line up. The one fronting the nursery is sunny, bordered with a rock retaining wall and backed by a tall hornbeam hedge. It’s filled with a lively mix of plants including *Kniphofia* ‘Apricot’, *Lobelia tupa*, *Lepechinia hastata*, *Eucomis comosa* ‘Sparkling Burgundy’, *Geranium* ‘Orion’, *Thalictrum* ‘Elin’ and others. Rounded steps with small plants go up through a door in the hedge to the parallel back border, filled with late bloomers and backed by a yew hedge and redwood, fir and pines.

Hedges of hornbeam, beech and maple define long axes through the garden, and enclose spaces. The hedges are broken by low, rounded ‘doorways’ through which visitors can glimpse painting-like vignettes (see the opening pages of this feature, for example).

Wild about colour

Flower borders billow in naturalistic compositions in front of both hedges and clumps of katsura trees (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*). A number of large, glazed pots on rough sandstone slabs sit at the end of vistas. Columnar hornbeams and gold rammed-earth columns punctuate profuse vegetation. White, single-flowered roses such as *Rosa* ‘Paul’s Himalayan Musk’, and semi-doubles (such as *Rosa sempervirens* hybrids and soft pink *R.* ‘New Dawn’) cascade in scented showers down trees and shrubs; they festoon doorways and border ends, creating a softness and delicacy that works well with the billowing yet bold plant compositions.

On the south side of the nursery is a sunny border filled with drought-tolerant stalwarts such as *Cistus x dansereauii* ‘Jenkyn Place’, *Cistus ladanifer* var. *petiolatus* ‘Bennett’s White’, *Euphorbia mellifera* and *Euphorbia griffithii*, *Melianthus major* ‘Antonow’s Blue’, *Lavandula x chaytorae* ‘Lisa Marie’, *Verbascum x hybridum* ‘Banana Custard’, *Eryngium* ‘Sapphire Blue’, pale yellow *Achillea* ‘Taygetea’ and *Muhlenbergia lindheimeri*.

In contrast to the mass of plant species everywhere, the entrance garden to the house is striking in its simplicity and serenity. Moving through its spaces is like imbibing a glass of cool white wine. It has a portal of rammed earth walls, a small court of clipped box balls ▷

1. Sun-loving plants

In the sunniest border, magenta *Salvia greggii* ‘Wild Thing’ mingles with white and pinkish-purple lavenders (*Lavandula stoechas* ‘Ivory Crown’ and *L. stoechas* subsp. *luisieri* ‘Tickled Pink’).

2. Patio

Steps lead to a small, shady area beyond a lawn fringed with yellow-flowered Turkish sage (*Phlomis russeliana*) and a dark-leaved smoke tree (*Cotinus coggygria* ‘Royal Purple’).

3. Potting bench

Nursery manager Joanne Jewell busily divides perennials at the potting bench.

4. The garden’s edge

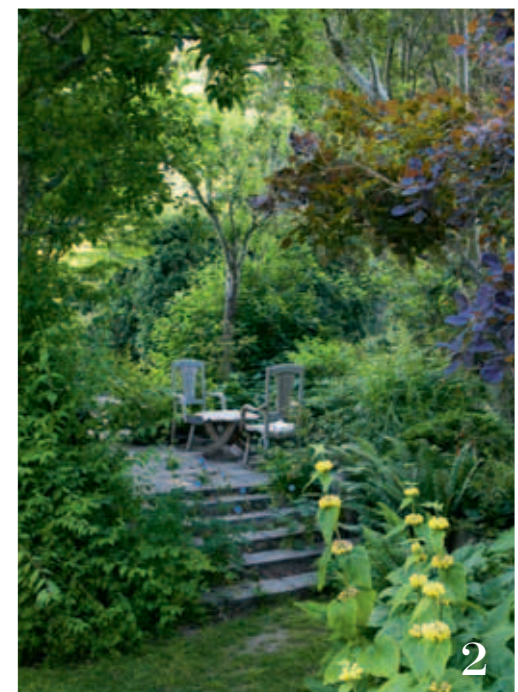
Blue *Salvia forsskaalii* fringes a pathway to a bench on the edge of the garden, surrounded by the soft green foliage of a hornbeam hedge.

5. Feature flower

Alstroemeria ‘Meyer Hybrid White’ – a cultivar selected by planthunter and breeder Fred Meyer – is actually a mixture of white with deep pink, burgundy dashes and splashes of chartreuse.

6. Perking up a shady spot

Hakonechloa macra ‘All Gold’ marks a junction of pathways. It also makes a dramatic splash of colour in the shade beneath an old fruit tree widely known in California as the Santa Rosa plum (*Prunus salicina*), which Deborah says bears ‘delicious’ fruits.



“ All the plants evoke a feeling. Some are shy; others boisterous or happy ”

▷ overlaid with a grid of columnar hornbeams, and is backed by a waving forest of *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’. The pathway to the rammed-earth house is lined with shimmering *Stipa gigantea* and backed with a soft pyramid of *Carex glauca*, which veils the view.

Throughout the garden, front and back, there’s an impressive attention to detail in the planting. Each stairway and step has combinations of small plants growing in crevices, making worthy vignettes of their own. And everywhere, the hand of plantsman and architect is evident.

Tried and tested plants

Deborah’s focus is the nursery. Wandering this central area, it is easy to see Deborah’s interest in textiles, for the plants laid out here look like a soft blanket of squares in contrasting textures, and shades of green, silver, bronze and orange. Deborah grows plants in square pots, which can be stored more compactly; she says this allows her to grow triple the number in the same space. Well-organised polytunnels hold her collection of kniphofias and salvias, shade plants and numerous rarities to tempt the visitor.

The plants Deborah grows reflect her taste for good looks *and* reliability in the garden; she likes to offer plants that grow easily – including sometimes old-fashioned cultivars. Late-blooming and off-season plants are particular favourites; many attract insects and birds, too. “All the plants evoke a feeling,” she says. “Some are shy; others boisterous or happy.”

What Deborah and Gary are most proud of is that they have stayed true to their vision of growing strong plants that require little coddling, but have great visual merit and settle in well to their new homes wherever they are across the country. Gary’s borders reflect both the grandeur and delicacy of the natural landscape and work easily with the site. Together, the sum of the parts sings to us in a way not often felt. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Digging Dog Nursery, PO Box 471, Albion, California 95410, USA. Tel +1 (707) 937-1130, www.diggingdog.com

• Readers in the USA can buy plants from Digging Dog by mail-order or at the nursery – but if you are planning a visit, please make an appointment first.

10 top plants

Gary and Deborah name some of their favourite plants for July

1. *Labelia tupa*

Flower spikes with commanding stature and a lush, almost tropical look. Drought tolerant.

2. *Cercidiphyllum japonicum*

A magnificent shade tree whose graceful foliage announces spring in purple and bronze, matures to a sprightly green and flaunts brilliant autumn yellow, orange, red and pink, while wafting a strawberry scent.

3. *Sanguisorba tenuifolia* var. *alba*

A shower of pendulous, fluffy white catkin-like blooms on upright stems. An elegant addition to a wild garden.

4. *Eryngium* ‘Sapphire Blue’

Stunning, almost surreal flower colour and striking foliage. A stalwart, good for the front row of a border.

5. *Inula magnifica*

A bold presence with radiant daisies towering above huge leaves.

6. *Philadelphus* ‘Belle Etoile’

Exquisite scented, long blooming flowers and a graceful habit.

7. *Thalictrum* ‘Elin’

A tall, regal plant whose robust spring growth generates frothy, long-lasting blooms. Loosely arranged and attractive, *Aquilegia*-like foliage.

8. *Kniphofia uvaria* ‘Malibu Yellow’

An energetic plant whose large, torch-like flowers in look-at-me yellows are undeniably cheerful.

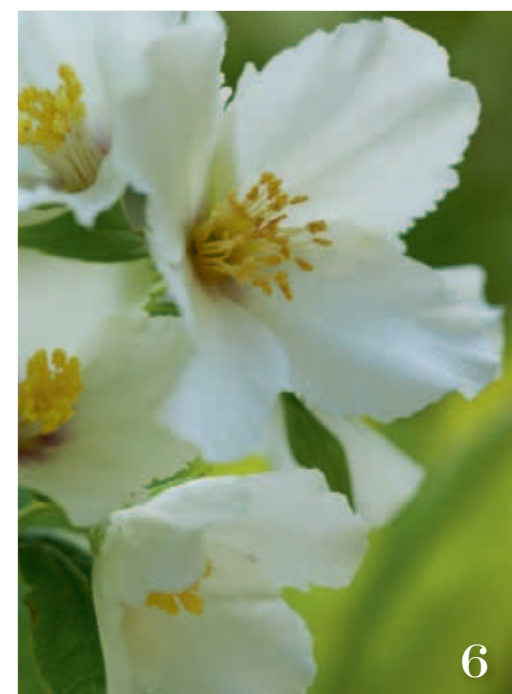
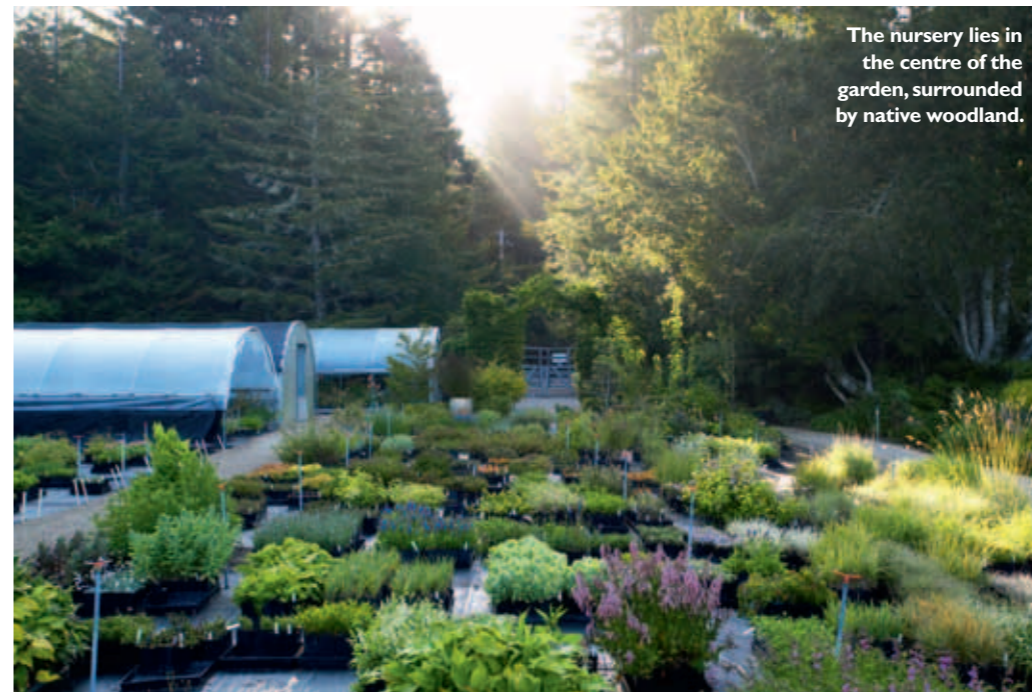
9. *Geranium wallichianum*

‘Buxton’s Variety’

Charming blue blooms illuminated by lighter centres cover handsome, mounding foliage for months.

10. *Kniphofia* ‘Apricot’

These flowers have a lovely pastel shade that goes well with other colours. Its smaller habit is perfect for the front of the border, or a small gap.



LYNN KEDDIE / GARDEN PICTURE LIBRARY

MARK BOLTON / GARDEN COLLECTION

The nursery lies in the centre of the garden, surrounded by native woodland.