



# Where the wind blows

*The Lookout, Devon*

This coastal garden  
has woven itself into the  
landscape with its clever  
use of wild and cultivated  
planting, reveals  
Noel Kingsbury

Photographs by Claire Takacs



Preceding pages: *Verbena bonariensis* with *Euphorbia rigida* and yucca. Left: The swimming pool, built into an old shellfish cleaning bed. Top: Cloud-pruned blackthorn offers a softly formal contrast to the Exe estuary. Above: The path leading to the wild end of the garden

HERE is a paradox in British gardening. We pride ourselves on being an island nation and a nation of gardeners, yet there are so few gardens that really embrace the coast. The normal reaction of gardeners who find themselves anywhere near the sea is to plant a big windbreak and carry on activities behind it. This may be understandable: the sea or, more accurately, the winds that sweep over it, are very damaging to a great many of the plants we conventionally grow. Perhaps it also goes against the notion, deep within many of us, that the garden should be somewhere restful and relaxing—often impossible in a strong wind. The sea is also in competition with the garden: the reaction

## ‘Integrating wild and cultivated, this garden has woven its way into its surroundings’

of many people, when faced with the ocean, is to look out at it, and not pay much attention to their immediate surroundings.

Jackie and Will Michelmore faced all these issues in 2002 when they moved into their new home, The Lookout, on the Exe estuary. The view is not over open water, but their garden has a long south-westerly fetch for

the wind, so they get everything a gale can throw at them. The coming and going of the tide dominates—there is either a stretch of water or a wide expanse of mud flats in view.

Yet although the garden the Michelmores have made does have a shelterbelt, it embraces the coast in a way that is surprisingly rare. In its selection of plants, and its repetition of them, it feels like a very un-British garden (northern Californian, perhaps?), but in the way it integrates garden and landscape, wild and cultivated, natural and managed, this garden has woven its way into its surroundings like no other.

The Lookout’s two acres stretch some 800ft along the eastern shore of the estuary, in a roughly tadpole shape. The lower end

is a large sunken lawn, above which rises a slope with a swimming pool and the house, with its weathered grey clapboard more Cape Cod than Devon; beyond this is a small wildflower meadow and the long tail of the garden, which becomes increasingly wild until it is eventually little more than the shelterbelt and the slope of the sea wall.

When they bought the property in 2000, says Mr Michelmore, stabilising the site was a major priority. ‘Land was being lost at the rate of a foot a year, so we had to rebuild the sea wall. That needed so many consents, not only from the local council, but also from the National Rivers Authority and the RSPB, which insisted that the timing of the work had to be delayed because of migrating

birds... Eventually, we had to bring in 1,000 lorry loads of fill to secure the area.’

Planning permission for the house itself, on such a visually sensitive site, sounds less complex than might have been expected. ‘We built a scale model for the planners,’ explains Mr Michelmore. ‘They really liked the proposal and the care we’d taken to keep it unobtrusive.’ The site had belonged to the Ministry of Agriculture, which built a shellfish cleaning station here in the 1930s. One of the concrete holding tanks was kept as a memento—now filled with sand, it functions as a volleyball court—and a cleaning bed was rebuilt as a swimming pool.

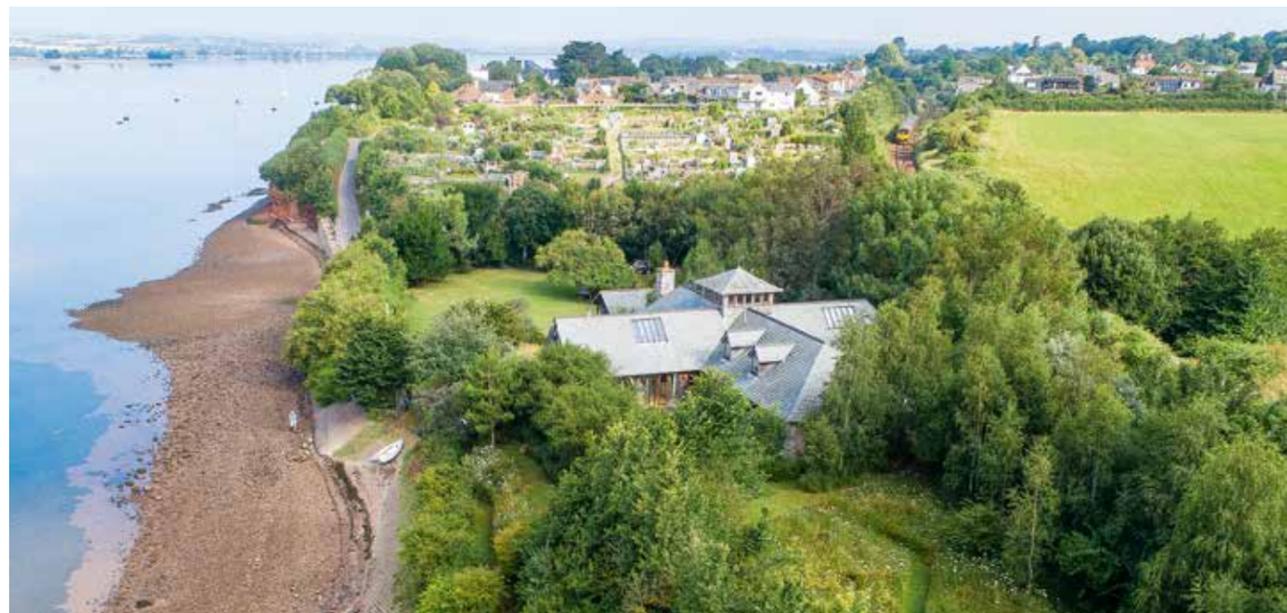
It was far from a straightforward project and no small challenge for Mrs Michelmore, who

had recently studied garden design at nearby Bicton College. Key aims included making the house recede into the landscape and ensuring the shelterbelt worked with screening at the rear of the house, positioned to absorb the noise from a branch railway line.

The planted windbreak on top of the sea wall is relatively light, which filters the wind and includes plenty of framed views out over the estuary. ‘The change of weather and the tides are a big feature,’ says Mrs Michelmore, ‘and there is a balance between enjoying the view and coping with the wind.’ Part of the screen is created from blackthorn; terribly spiny stuff, but very wind resistant. Rather than remove it, she has shaped it so that it forms a sculptural lower level to a planted ▶



*Above:* Borderlands: agapanthus, *Verbena bonariensis* and pines are separated by topiaried evergreens from wild umbellifers on the bank. *Right:* The Lookout with wildflower meadow visible in the foreground



line of sea buckthorn, *Hippophae rhamnoides*, the silver foliage and orange berries of which always begs the question as to why it is not grown more often. The answer is probably that it suckers terribly.

The windbreak becomes more substantial around the lower part of the garden, where the couple planted eucalyptus, pine, tamarisk and oak. Most of the eucalyptus will be taken out when the pines are big enough, leaving only native planting along the foreshore to be seen from afar. 'It's important to us,' notes Mrs Michelmores, 'that we celebrate our local landscape. We don't want to be like Torquay, so we don't have palms and other exotic planting against the backdrop of the estuary.'

Her plant knowledge has been pushed to the limits here, as the salt-laden winds drastically reduce the number of species that thrive. An important factor is the damage caused by summer storms. (Winter storms cause much less harm, as many plants are dormant.)

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'We've trialed a lot,' she says, 'and settled on those that perform.' This has left her with a palette of about 10 key plants.

A limited range of robust plants is repeated in the narrow borders around the house and for a short stretch at the base of the windbreak. The effect of this repetition creates a sense of unity, as the intermingled natural look of the planting contrasts nicely with the crisp edges of the mown grass. 'I like things that weave,' Mrs Michelmores adds. 'Things that look as if they put themselves there... There's a lot of self-seeding. I take out what I don't want; the rest creates its own matrix.'

## Tough coastal plants

### ***Anaphalis margaritacea***

Long-lasting white 'everlasting' flowers on 16in stems above tight clumps of silver foliage

### ***Armeria maritima***

Thrift is one of the toughest of coastal plants. It grows in tight cushions of fine foliage with heads of pink flowers on 7in stems

### ***Euphorbia characias***

'The absolute stalwart,' says Mrs Michelmores of this early-spring-flowering sub-shrub. Lime-green flowers on 27in stems clothed with dark grey-green foliage. Often self-seeds

### ***Carex Silver Sceptre***

Clump-forming sedge with silver-edged leaves reaching 16in high and wide. Copes exceptionally well with the dry shade below the blackthorn shelterbelt

### ***Elaeagnus commutata***

Silvery evergreen foliage on a large shrub or small tree, growing to 13ft by 13ft

### ***Hippophae rhamnoides***

Small tree (to 16ft) with silver foliage and, on female plants, orange berries; thorny and suckering, but tolerant of extreme conditions

### ***Iris foetidissima***

A native species that tolerates dry shade; evergreen sword-shaped leaves and orange berries. Its flowers are insignificant

### ***Perovskia atriplicifolia***

Prominent lavender flower heads on upright stems clothed in silvery aromatic leaves. A shrub, but usually cut back in winter

### ***Rosa rugosa***

A robust, strongly-suckering rose, more or less evergreen with glossy leaves, typically pink flowers and prominent red hips

### ***Stipa gigantea***

A tall (to 5ft) grass, but because its panicles of flower or seed are so light, the plant appears transparent. The foliage is evergreen and it forms tight clumps

Below the windbreak where the garden narrows, a series of paths have been mown through native shrubs and patches of steep wildflower meadow, creating an area that is not pure Nature, nor a garden, but a mesh requiring minimal control at the meeting point of sky, sea and land. This is a liminal place. A fitting final point for a garden that achieves such a successful and disciplined transition between worlds. 🐾