



## THE BIGGER PICTURE

Designer Brita von Schoenaich's walled garden at Marks Hall in Essex is a 21st-century garden set within 18th-century walls - a glowing example of intelligent design ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS **JERRY HARPUR** WORDS **ANNE DE VERTEUIL**



## Garden profile

**OWNERS** The Thomas Phillips Price Trust

**DESIGNER** Brita von Schoenaich

**GARDEN DETAILS** Marks Hall, Coggeshall, Essex CO6 1TG.

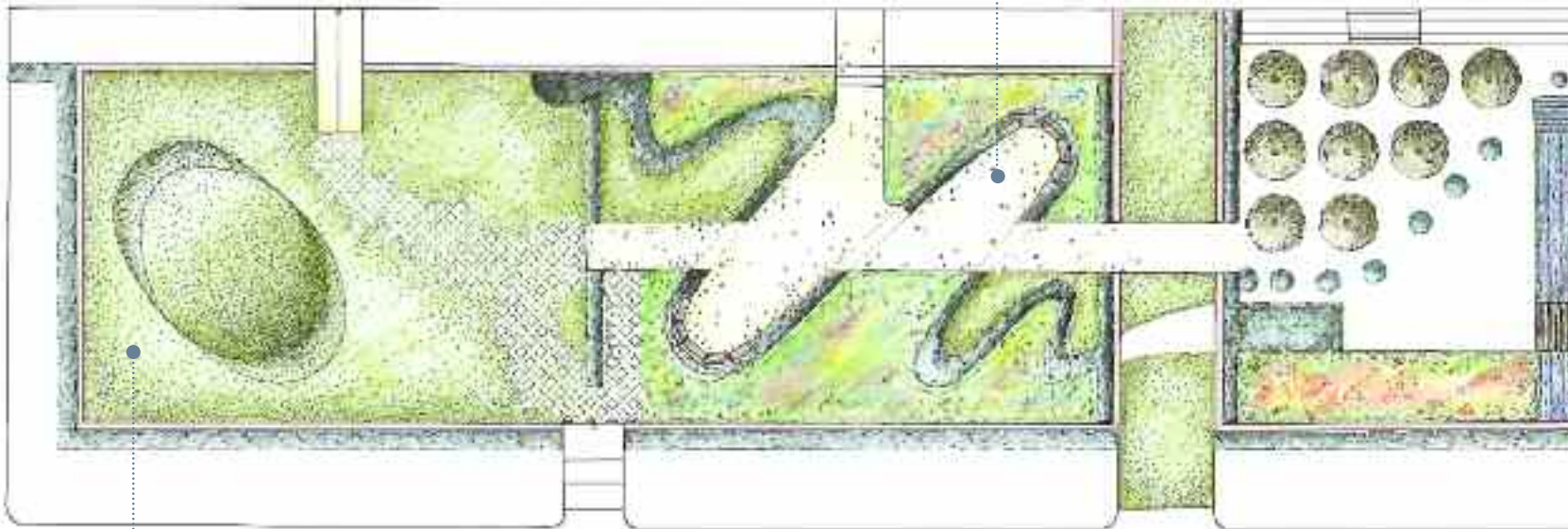
Tel: +44 (0)1376 563796. [www.markshall.org.uk](http://www.markshall.org.uk)

**SIZE** The walled garden is two acres; the whole landscape extends to some 200 acres

**SITUATION** South-facing slope

**STYLE** Formal/contemporary garden rooms

A wavy hedge of *Pittosporum tobira* swoops through the garden's second space, creating sinuous borders on either side. These are planted in a naturalistic manner with early to midsummer flowering perennials (verbascums, achilleas, kniphofias), tall grasses (miscanthus, calamagrostis) and drought-tolerant, silver-grey shrubs (salvia, santolina, lavender).



Brita's design for the walled garden unfolds playfully through a sequence of five garden rooms. Shapes evolve and develop and there is a gradual progression from rest to movement to rest again. At the beginning, grass and close-clipped, earth-bound shapes give a sense of calm and stability, but the sculpted mound (right) suggests a giant's footprint which kick-starts the garden's lines into action.



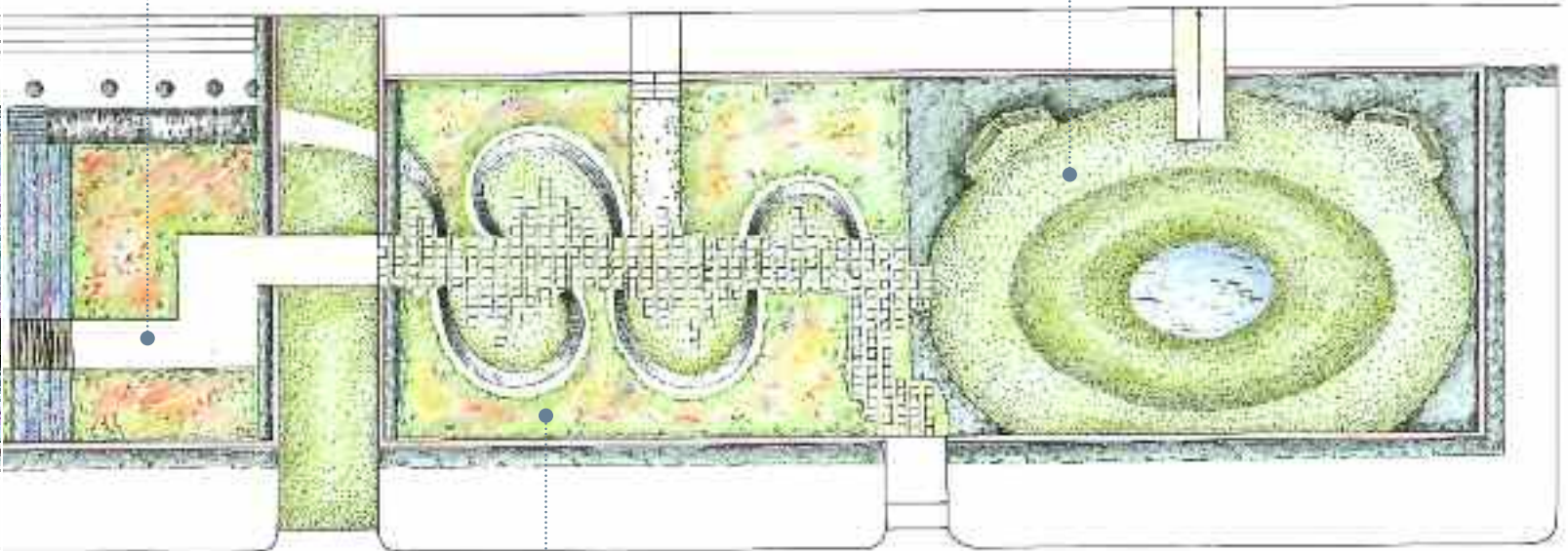
# DESIGN guide



There is a pause and a change of pace and style in the linear garden, which is spare with hard, contemporary surfaces, clean lines and geometric shapes (*above*). The design plays with topiary spheres and cubes, alternating them with concrete balls and seats. Blue flowers, lavender, agapanthus and iris are densely planted in a band that cuts across the space to make a link with the lake.



In the last space, it's back to winter and stillness again. An elliptical earth sculpture (*above*) appears to contain a ripple pool – an effect created by slate pieces packed vertically into the dip. ▶



In the fourth space, the meandering line of the pittosporum hedge is resumed, but this time in the form of a low rendered wall with slate coping (*right*). The seasonal planting here takes up the baton from the second space, providing late summer and autumn colour from asters, sedums and echinaceas, while the bleached flowerheads of grasses keep their shape well into winter.



# DESIGN guide

**M**arks Hall 200-acre estate has a long history that encompasses a Saxon manor and a deer park long before the 17th-century lake and 18th-century walled garden were built.

In the late 19th century, the land was bought by a Welsh industrialist, Thomas Phillips Price, who was captivated by its landscape of water and trees and planned to develop it as an arboretum. Price's death in 1933, followed by the intervention of the Second World War, when Marks Hall became home to 3,000 RAF personnel and their Nissen huts, who left the place in a state of dereliction. It was not until the Thomas Phillips Price Trust was formed in 1971 that work began on bringing Marks Hall back to life.

The garden's present curator, Jonathan Jukes, arrived in 1985, and recalls years of heavy clearing that had to take place before any creative work could begin. The walled garden at this stage was a blank space, grassed and open to the lake. In 1999, landscape architect Brita von Schoenaich was asked to design a new garden for it. She knew, she says, that she must find a way to keep her design subservient to what she describes as 'the grace of the space - its emptiness'.

To preserve this sense of emptiness, she planned that the garden should sit low, so that when viewed along its open side from the opposite bank of the lake, the old brick wall would stand proud from a complementary band of hornbeam hedge, behind which the garden would be hidden.

The task of raising funds meant that the garden had to be built in stages, a process that took three years to complete. It opened in 2003.

The site's gradual incline to the water was an important factor in the development of the design and the garden's fourth side is, in effect, the lake and its opposite bank, called The Millennium Walk. So that there should be a strong connection between the two sections, this area was being simultaneously developed and planted by a Peter Thurman as Brita's work progressed in the walled garden. There is spring and winter interest on one side, summer on the other. The planting makes links with the water, which in turn reflects the garden.

The garden's situation in a region of low rainfall and on a substrate of sandy gravel means that it is very much a dry garden. Its south-facing orientation and slope create a microclimate and conditions that are ideal for many drought-tolerant and Mediterranean plants.

At the top of the garden, separated from the five garden compartments by a wide path, a long border runs the length of the wall - at three metres wide and 140m long, it is the longest border in East Anglia.

Here, a richly coloured mix of shrubs and perennials bring structure and successive waves of interest throughout the summer, and Jonathan is particularly interested in experimenting in the border with plants that are on the edge of hardiness in this country.



**CLEARLY DEFINED** A three-metre-wide grass path separates the long border from the succession of garden rooms (*below*). Subtle level changes add complexity to the design and shallow steps lead into the linear garden.





# Landscape and context

**Brita von Schoenaich's design for the walled garden had to be sensitive to the garden's existing landscape of water and mature trees. She used earth, grass and native hedging as sculptural materials and as the building blocks of her design.**

**REFLECTIVE VIEW** Seen in full from the empty lawn below the line of gardens, the lake and its beautifully landscaped bank (*left*) lie happily alongside Brita's design. On still days, reflections add a further dimension. The walled garden slopes down to the lake, which forms the fourth 'boundary' of the garden.

**INTERSECTING LINES** Layers form an important aspect of the design (*below*). Here, the old wall can be seen in the distance, under-stepped by the hornbeam hedge with, in the foreground the 'giant's footstep' sculpture looking like an ancient earthwork. ▶



**DIVIDING SPACE** Brita has made great use of blocks and slabs of clipped hornbeam hedging (*Carpinus betulus*) which act like theatrical scenery flats to divide and conceal separate areas within the walled garden.



# Planting

Even in the depths of winter the planting holds its forms and structure and there are leaves, berries, grass plumes and dried seedheads to enjoy. Low rainfall and free-draining soil make the gardens at Marks Hall ideal for drought-tolerant plants.



## SHADES OF GOLD

Silver-stemmed jacquemontii birches, tan willows (*left*) and the white plumes of pampas grass on the opposite bank of the lake make a visual connection with the brown winter leaves of the hornbeam hedging in the walled garden.

## SHADES OF BROWN

Growing in these optimum dry and well-drained conditions, the sedums (*right*) develop strong, sturdy growth. Their long-lasting flower-heads make an invaluable contribution to the winter planting composition. They will be cut down in late winter to make room for new growth.



## SHADES OF GREEN

Winter stalwarts *Skimmia confusa* 'Kew Green' (*left*), and *Daphne odora* 'Aureomarginata' (*right*) have great presence with their neat, shapes and the bonus of scented flowers, while the brilliant orange seeds of the evergreen 'Gladwyn Iris', *Iris foetidissima* (*centre*), light up the border on the bleakest days. When planting for winter interest, consider how the plants will look when the frosts 'bite'. Most evergreens, and particularly those with a compact, rounded shape, will look good after heavy frost or a shower of snow.

## SHADES OF SILVER

In the long border above the ellipse garden, the low ground-hugging shapes of rosemary, phlomis, *Teucrium fruiticans* and euphorbias are interspersed with grasses. All will be cut down to the ground between late February and March, making this aspect of plant maintenance relatively uncomplicated.



# DESIGN guide

**WOODLAND WALKS** The extensive grounds of Marks Hall are open to visitors throughout the year and are a popular place for winter walks, especially when the snowdrops and aconites are in flower in the lakeside woodland (*below*). The 200-acre arboretum has much to inspire and interest tree lovers at any time of the year.



## DESIGNER PROFILE

**BRITA VON  
SCHOENAICH**

studied landscape design in Germany, before coming to the UK where she studied at Kew and went on to take a degree in landscape architecture. She set up in practice in 1991 and schemes

include lavender fields in London's Vauxhall Park, and naturalistic planting for the HDRA Organic Gardens in Ryton.

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