

The garden at Carpe Diem covers about two-and-a-half acres and contains a natural swimming pond and naturalistic planting.

Immersed in nature

Luxuriate in late summer among the elements at Carpe Diem, a garden created for bees, butterflies... and the backstroke →

PHOTOGRAPHS RICHARD BLOOM | WORDS JACKIE BENNETT

Gardening can bring people together. Paul and Bianca Mercer - who have created a contemporary country garden in the village of Bressingham, Norfolk - are living proof of that. Paul, who was born in Bressingham, and Bianca, who comes from Germany, were both studying at Writtle College when they met. 'Bianca was studying horticulture and interior landscaping, and I was doing my degree in landscape and garden design,' says Paul, 'and we never looked back!'

The couple found a derelict single-storey barn with a small garden, and set up home there 10 years ago. The barn was expanded to become a light-filled space, and they were able to buy some extra land, creating a plot of about one hectare. 'I grew up around here,' Paul explains, 'and in my lifetime, I have seen hedgerows taken out and fields get bigger and bigger. I wanted to put some of that back by creating a garden that would shelter wildlife and be a haven for us too.'

About nine years ago, he set up a business designing and building natural swimming ponds. The garden at their house, which is aptly named Carpe Diem (translated as 'seize the day') was the perfect place to put his principles into practice.

'I became inspired by the idea of natural pools while travelling in South Africa and swimming in rock pools. I thought: 'Wouldn't it be lovely to swim in clear water surrounded by lush vegetation, in a haven for wildlife?' So I came home and built one.'

The swimming pond is the focal point of this garden. 'I designed the garden from within the house - looking out - to the



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courtyard on the east side, and to the pond and beyond on the west side. We put in as much glass as we could so that we would have views over the garden,' says Paul.

The spoil made from excavating the pond was used to create a raised circular lawn with borders curving round it. As your eye travels across the water, there are more prairie-style borders - a style that suits rural gardens, where anything too fussy would look out of place. 'Bianca and I are really inspired by the

planting of Oehme, van Sweden,' says Paul, 'and so the planting is based on structural perennials like sedums and veronicastrum as well as grasses. It's a tried-and-tested formula, but it works - it gives you almost year-round interest and it's great for bees and butterflies.'

Wildlife and low-maintenance are the two key principles of this approach. A native hedge of hawthorn, field maple and wild roses forms the boundary, while large expanses dominated by native grasses and wildflowers →

ABOVE The spectacular scene of the pond and garden in the evening light. **BELOW** *Typha gracilis*; *Hippuris vulgaris*; a Brimstone butterfly on moisture-loving lythrum; *Equisetum hyemale*. **OPPOSITE** The large green-oak deck sits over the water, hiding the skimmer, which removes any surface debris such as leaves and blossom. The traditional ladder steps made of the same material make it easy to get in and out of the water.





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→ have been enhanced with bulbs and left to grow long with wide paths mown through. The borders are mulched with bark and cut down once a year, in February or March.

But wherever you walk in this garden, it is the water that draws you back. From the house, a wide, curving, green-oak deck juts out over the water, offering a magical place to sit and watch the dragonflies, newts and occasional kingfishers that visit the pond. Paul explains how the pond works. 'Swimming

ponds are essentially made up of two merging zones,' he says, 'which together, make up an ecologically balanced and self-cleaning pond. Each area is roughly equal in size, and referred to as the regeneration zone and the swimming zone respectively.'

The regeneration zone is a biological filter, and is planted up with a wide range of aquatic plants. The gravel and shallow water of this zone are perfect for birds and other wildlife to come and drink. This is separated from the

swimming zone by an internal wall, which terminates around 20cm below the pond surface, allowing free movement of water between the two zones, but ensuring the swimming area is kept free of vegetation.

Beyond the pool itself, Paul and Bianca have created a bog garden, using a conventional liner, where they can grow some of the more dramatic plants such as *Gunnera manicata* and moisture-loving *Lythrum salicaria*.

The pond and gardens are showcases for the company, and offer potential clients the opportunity to see a swimming pond at first hand, and understand how it works. But the gardens are also the couple's respite and pleasure. Their two large Münsterländer dogs, Stella and Luca, love swimming in the pond, as do visiting children - and there's no chlorine or chemicals to worry about.

'On a warm summer's day, there is nothing more wonderful than swimming in crystal-clear water and connecting with the natural world,' Paul says. 'There is no better way to relax than just sitting on the deck with a drink in hand, watching a flock of swallows swooping down over the water as if they didn't have a care in the world.'

Even in our unpredictable climate, it seems that you can have the best of both worlds.

Carpe Diem, Common Road, Bressingham, Diss, Norfolk IP22 2BD. This garden is not open to the public, but anyone interested in finding out about natural swimming ponds can attend the open day on Mon 24 August, 10am-4pm, and other times by appt. Tel +44 (0)1379 688000. www.theswimmingpondcompany.co.uk

Top swimming pond tips →

OPPOSITE In the borders, the solid structural perennials such as sedum and veronicastrum are interspersed with grasses such as pennisetum.

ABOVE This courtyard is the perfect quiet and shady place for al fresco meals. **BELOW, FROM LEFT** *Verbena bonariensis* with grass *Stipa tenuissima*; *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivanti* 'Goldsturm'; *Eupatorium maculatum* 'Phantom'; *Echinacea purpurea*, visited by a Peacock butterfly.



Carpe Diem garden notebook

Paul's top swimming-pond tips

- **If you decide to have a swimming pond**, think about the landscaping around it. It will sit better if you plan your borders at the same time.
- **The inner swimming area** has a solid base and is between 1.2m and 2m deep. No plants are grown here. It is separated by an internal wall from the outer regeneration zone, which consists of a gravel-and-filter medium and plants.
- **Plants used are specially chosen** for their ability to draw impurities from the water, including small bullrushes, *Equisetum hyemale*, *Cyperus longus* and *Ranunculus lingua* 'Grandiflorus'.
- **There are deeper, clay-lined pockets** for waterlilies. I like the native *Nymphaea alba*. They give shade and attract water daphnia - little creatures that eat algae.
- **The water from the main pool** overlaps into the regeneration zone, where it is gradually cleaned and filtered, then pumped back into the pool as clean water - the cycle takes about 24 hours, so the

swimming water is refreshed every day.

- **The pond needs no additional chemicals** or treatments. Twice a year, any debris from falling leaves is vacuumed up to prevent the bottom becoming slippery.



SWIMMER SCULPTURE

The couple's dog Luca looks on at the metal sculpture in the pond of a woman about to dive in. It was a present from Bianca's parents in Germany.

WILDLIFE WONDERS

The swimming pond and naturalistic planting that stays up for most of the year make this garden real haven for wildlife. Paul and Bianca enjoy many interesting visitors, including several species of butterfly, broad-bodied chaser dragonflies (*below*), birds such as kingfishers and grey wagtails, plus bigger creatures like water voles.



Garden challenges

CLEARING & CLEANING: Blanket weed does form in the pond in spring as the weather warms up, but instead of reaching for the chemicals, it is easily scooped out with a net. The wooden deck needs to be pressure-washed once a year to remove a build-up of slime and to prevent slipping.



COOL SHADE

The east-facing courtyard is perfect for taking breakfast to catch the early morning sunshine. Bianca and Paul designed the space to look cool with smart grey slate and white planting, which includes some white-stemmed birch trees and the impressive panicles of *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle'.

ALSO IN THE AREA

If you are in Norfolk, Paul also recommends:

- **GARDEN East Ruston Old Vicarage** Paul and Bianca love these gardens, where there's always something new to see and plants to buy. Guided tours by Alan Gray (inc. lunch) on 6 & 13 Aug, 3 Sept. East Ruston, Norwich NR12 9HN. Tel: +44 (0)1692 650432. www.e-ruston-oldvicaragegardens.co.uk
- **NURSERY Bressingham Nursery** Jason Bloom runs a mail-order nursery in the gardens created by his father Adrian and grandfather Alan. To order, tel: +44 (0)1379 688282. www.bressinghamgardens.com
- **PLACE TO STAY The Oaksmere** A boutique hotel and restaurant. Sit on the new terrace designed by designer Thomas Hoblyn, looking out over the grounds, with their quirky topiary. Rectory Road, Brome, Eye, Suffolk IP23 8AJ. Tel: +44 (0)1379 873940. www.theoaksmere.com