

# Starting (almost) from scratch

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Many people have memories of visiting the Isle of Wight on holiday. For the uninitiated, it was part of mainland Britain many millennia ago, but it's now a roughly diamond-shaped island around 13 miles north–south and 25 miles east–west. Its geology and related natural flora are very varied, with soil types ranging from acid through neutral to alkaline, and mainly heavy clay, solid chalk, plateau gravels and free-draining sands.

On the plus side for gardeners, the coastal areas experience little frost, and snow is uncommon though not unheard of – in the 15 years we've lived here I can recall only four occasions when snow lay long enough to cause disruption. However, as an island it has considerable exposure to the wind – one notices when there isn't a breeze rather than the other way round. This year my garden has been more fortunate than those of several local HPS friends, who in the recent gales lost large deciduous trees and, in one garden, a tall conifer flattened the mature borders, taking established, choice deciduous trees and shrubs in its wake.

I've made two gardens on the Island – the first on free-draining ferruginous sand and the second, the subject of this article, on very heavy clay. There are several disused brickworks in the area, which should give you some idea of the nature of the soil. The ground opens to reveal huge cracks when it dries out in the summer, and there is much waterlogging after persistent rain, especially during the winter. Those who garden on clay soil will know that the window of opportunity to cultivate and plant is a small

one, and the ability to adapt to these conditions is essential if you're to remain sane and achieve at least some of your goals.

When you read about the various exploits of gardeners who have moved to a 'new' (to them) garden, several descriptions regularly crop up – 'open field', 'brambles, bindweed, nettles and ground elder', 'blank canvas', and so on. When we moved to our



Fig. 1 Mature trees at the bottom of the garden 2007



Fig. 2 If only it had been a blank canvas! The view from the house before work started



Fig. 3 A similar view in 2012, when some progress had been made

current 1-acre garden in November 2007 we had most of the above, and more, to contend with – but ‘blank canvas’, oh how I wish.

The plot may be described as roughly rectangular, with the longest boundaries running at right angles to the road. The house is set back from the road with a 25ft-deep front garden. At the bottom half of the rear garden there are mature oaks, several pines, willows, a poplar, gleditsia and walnut and an assortment of other trees and shrubs. Fig. 1 illustrates this area when we moved in. Over the years these and neighbouring trees have provided welcome shelter from the onslaught of the gales, without casualties so far.

The rest of the plot, between the bottom half of the garden and the back of the house, had been the site of a small plant nursery (no, that’s not why we bought it) which had closed several years earlier after a steady decline over a number of years. There were three polytunnels and six glasshouses of various sizes and in various states of disrepair. If that were not enough, there was also a 1960s ‘mobile’ home that was sinking and sagging as its supports rusted; one rotten, wooden shed with an asbestos roof; and an assortment of other sheds. Fig. 2 shows the part of the garden closest to the house and in full view of the lounge before work started. Fig. 3, from a similar viewpoint, was taken in 2012 when some progress had been made.

We later discovered, as we attempted to remove them, that the mobile home, greenhouses and some of the sheds were supported on depths of concrete more suited to a nuclear bunker, and rubbish skips seemed to be a permanent feature of the verge at the front of the house. Further concrete and flag paths crossed the ‘garden’, bordering weed-filled gravel areas that had once been the plant-display areas. Last but not least, there was also (and still is) a large garage/workshop to one side of the garden and considerable resources were needed to make this, together with the house, habitable and comfortable.

Attempting to build a garden where there was so much undoing before creating was extremely challenging. Some things were obvious, like the redundant, tatty buildings, but what to keep, what to get rid of, and how to manage the project were constant themes. Without unlimited resources there have to be compromises.

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Fig. 4 Waterlogging is a problem

Garden improvements developed slowly as the house was the priority, but disaster struck during the first winter of 2007/8, with the lowest temperatures since we'd moved to the Island nine years before. Coming after a period of wet weather, the unusual, prolonged freezing temperatures left many of my potted South African treasures, particularly *Agapanthus*, *Dierama*, *Watsonia*, *Melianthus* but even some *Crocsmia* and *Kniphofia* as irretrievable mush. Lesson number one: expect the unlikely and protect small pots every winter. Better still, get plants into the ground – as I would have done if there had been any ground to put them in at that time.

As the polytunnels, half the greenhouses, the mobile home and the assortment of sheds were removed, the space grew before our eyes. Large expanses were cleared of brambles, willow saplings and other weeds, then levelled and turfed, in order to minimise maintenance while we tackled other areas. It should be noted at this point that over the years the original gravelled areas had provided a very fertile growing medium for an assortment of persistent weeds, and these were cleared by friends and family on numerous occasions. There was one positive aspect, though, in that we were able to re-use the much-weeded gravel as a base under topsoil for the turf, and to provide better drainage in some of the borders.

Eventually, from 2009, new borders were outlined with canes or string, then dug, so planting could begin with the specimens which had been sitting in pots waiting for their chance to establish. The most recent borders were started at the beginning of 2013, after



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Fig. 5 Work in progress

a winter not quite as wet as 2013–14, but Fig. 4 shows the waterlogging plants have to endure. At that point a hint of despair surfaced as I'd made a commitment to open the garden for the NGS in August later that year. Parts of the garden and lawns looked like lakes and I could only look on helplessly as many of the recently planted shrubs and perennials sat for what seemed like an eternity surrounded by moats. I couldn't imagine how they would survive, but I need not have worried as the garden (along with 2 others in the road) opened as scheduled and by then it was impossible to believe what had conspired to defeat it and me several months earlier.

Although I have been developing gardens for more years than I care to remember, this garden has probably been the most instructive for several reasons. Improving clay soil by better drainage and incorporating gravel/humus is always necessary, but I've learned that raising a border, even 6–8 inches, can make a considerable difference to growing a wider range of plants that will survive and thrive. Part of the garden had had raised borders, which influenced me to try them elsewhere.

Without being pessimistic, recognising the limitations and modifying my expectations have been other aspects of developing this garden. I was always attracted

to the area with the established trees at the far end of the rear garden and I had every intention of developing borders under the canopy which would be filled with woodland delights. Unfortunately the ones I planted there either dried up in the summer or were eaten by molluscs. The garden is large, and while I haven't given up on the idea completely, it is possible to derive satisfaction from looking at the trees and shrubs at different times of year, in different lights, and the native (albeit common) orchids in the grass in June. I can also enjoy the fiery stems of *Salix alba* 'Britzensis'

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Fig. 6 The garden open in August 2013

from the comfort of the lounge in winter. The Chusan palm, an alien in that same space, was once on a list of inappropriates for removal. It still looks incongruous, but it's clearly a few years old at 10 ft tall and its central trunk provides the birds with an endless supply of nesting material – so it stays. The location of some of the existing trees and shrubs leaves the viewer with the thought that the previous owner had some plants left over at the end of the season and plonked them into the nearest available space.

The most recently planted parts of the garden are maturing well despite everything that the weather and clay throw at them. I put a lot of plants in closer proximity than usually recommended, which has helped, in part, to suppress weeds. The resilience of most plants never ceases to amaze me, as shown in Figs 5, 6, 7 & 8 of the garden open in August 2013.

All the replacement South African varieties have thrived and some have even seeded. The miscanthus is hit by frost but it comes up again from the base, and I left some *Eucomis* bulbs in the ground for the first time this winter to see whether they will survive.

Walking round the garden and weeding also encourages closer scrutiny of growing conditions, microclimates, or the need for more shelter. A leisurely stroll at different times of the day and year provides information about exposure to sun, shade, or the infamous south-westerlies. Plants that are failing to thrive will be lifted, inspected for pests and diseases, and moved to a more favourable situation. I had planted an *escallonia* hedge almost immediately: it looked sickly, I thought it didn't like the clay and it had to come out. I have subsequently learned that a recently-introduced fungal disease affects *Escallonia*, starting with yellowing and blotching on the leaves which



Fig. 7 August 2013



Fig. 8 August 2013

then drop. They tend to recover in summer but their days as evergreen hedging may be numbered.

So, what else is to be done? Creating and developing any garden is a very personal process, and if you are passionate about plants, that process continues as long as you are able. I have learnt a lot by observing, making mistakes, reading, and listening to the very generous advice of many fellow Hardy Planters at local and national events.

Despite my best resolve, the borders here are starting to get longer or wider and new borders have been dug, but I would be surprised if there were any readers out there who have been able to resist a plant even though they haven't the faintest idea where they will put it.

The garden will be open by appointment for the NGS from March until the end of September, and there's another more established garden of an HPS member further up the road. We hope that some of you will come and visit. 🐾

**Helen Mount** continues to develop her garden in between coordinating the HPS Conservation Scheme.