



and yellow dahlias, which flower all summer and into the early autumn.

Neil, a joiner with a busy practice, bought his 200-year-old house in the Carse of Gowrie 17 years ago, when he was just 23. At that time he did not consider himself to be a gardener and kept his lawn for his nieces and nephews to play on. "It was my neighbour Pete Mackay who got me into dahlias," he says. "He grew some and gave me plants to get started, and it just kept going. I just added to it. I make it up as I go along." Many of his plants are given by friends or clients. "If I see something I like, I just ask for a cutting – especially if it is something strange and different," he says. "You see a wee corner and you throw things in – if it works it works and if it doesn't it doesn't."

When pressed, he says, yes, it did take a bit of work to get started. An old workshop had to be removed from the back garden. Excavations soon revealed the skeleton of a horse – "there was an old slaughterhouse down

**Clockwise from top right: the pond nestles within a horseshoe-shaped dyke; Cercidiphyllum with orange leaves is well suited to the garden; apples are one of the trees that Neil is fond of; a willow grows near the pond**

the road" – and when a 5ft-deep trench was dug to install electrical cables in the front garden, workers uncovered the skull of a sheep and the remains of cow. Filling the south-facing front with dahlias, he laid out a lawn at the back and then created a pond, which nestles within a horseshoe-shaped dry-stane dyke.

The pond has many benefits, he says. Kept clean with the use of one UV filter "and some oxygenating plant established from a cutting", it attracts birds, mayflies and dragonflies in the summer and even a "less welcome" heron. "A pond makes a good place to relax at the end of the day and also a focal point for different plants." Here he has tall sculptured cordylines, willow, yellow goldenrod and red-leafed *Rodgersia aesculifolia*.

He mulches the soil towards the end of March and avoids weedkillers. "Because I keep fish in the pond, I don't use any chemicals on the lawn and even let the dandelions grow until they are all tall enough to dig out with a fork." The dahlias are lifted at the first frosts, kept dry in an old bread-basket filled with wood-shavings and covered with a piece of old carpet until the soil warms up in the spring.

"We all lead busy lives," he says, adding that he maintains the garden as and when he has a few moments. "I just go out from time to time on weekends and at night for a few minutes here and there – you have to keep on top of it." Keep dahlias well watered, deadheaded and staked. "Just have a go, throw a plant in and try it, and when it establishes itself you can move it to a better place. And if it doesn't work, keep persevering." \*

## Plant sense

**HAVING WORKED** at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh for 11 years, I have a wide knowledge of plants and know how to get the most from them. In May I will be launching Green Edge Garden Design, which aims to fuse contemporary and traditional styles to create distinctive, innovative gardens. In this new monthly column, I will share some of my growing secrets.

I know only too well that finding the right plant for the right place can be a challenge. In the coming weeks, I will discuss some of the more reliable, hardworking and noteworthy individuals of the plant kingdom that are best suited to different roles in your garden. In each article, plants will be grouped by themed topics.

But before you rush out and buy anything, there are several factors to consider. These will greatly influence the type of plants you can grow successfully in your garden.

- How much time do you have? All gardens, even the most wild and informal, need maintenance.
- How much do you know about

### 'Finding the right plant for the right place is a challenge'

plants? Plants have different needs and require varying levels of care. Even the most undemanding species will benefit from occasional pruning, staking, feeding and watering.

■ What is your local climate like? Is your garden close to the sea, which means you enjoy an almost frost-free environment? Or do you live further inland and suffer from frost pockets?

■ Can you describe your soil? Type, texture and acidity (pH) can be easily identified using a soil-testing kit, available from garden centres.

If your horticultural knowledge is reasonable, you can judge your soil conditions by the type and health of plants already growing in your garden.

Next month I will discuss low-maintenance gardening. Topics to be covered include celebrating the virtues of ground-covering plants ('a living mulch'); describing some of the best low-maintenance plants on the market; encouraging gardeners to consider hard-working plants with extended seasons; and the merits and menaces of self-sowers.

*If you wish to make suggestions for discussion topics, please get in touch: Rebecca Govier, Green Edge Garden Design (0131-476 0860)*



**'I like tall plants, things like hollyhocks – not the short bedding plants, but tall plants that bring a sense of the dramatic into the garden'**



**Above: Andrea's half plot in the allotments of Inverleith Park measures just 10 by 10 metres and is set apart by its unique set of steel sculptures**

plot is set apart by a unique set of steel sculptures. There are tall geometrically shaped planters and spiral plant supports rusted to a subtle shade of brown, coupled with a dramatic tulip-shaped sculpture, all of which melt into the allotment while accentuating the colours of the plants.

This sight, which is unusual for an allotment, has a soft but contemporary feeling that blends perfectly with its surroundings.

A lady with brown hair is on her hands and knees weeding and pruning. "I've been exhibiting at the Gardening Scotland Show, and the allotment has got a bit out of hand," she says. Because she is so obviously busy, I fail to introduce myself as a gardens journalist, thinking that our paths will cross again.

A year later I am about to resort to lobbing a plastic bottle with a message in it over the allotment fence when I spot a dramatic arch in the same rusty steel, cut with shapes of ivy leaves, this time in a Morningside garden.

Just as exciting, this garden, which is sited on a busy corner, is protected from the road by five tall rec-

tangular panels with light reflecting through cut-outs of leaves. The style is instantly recognisable.

The artist responsible is Edinburgh-based Andrea Geile, who specialises in garden art. When we finally meet, she explains her background. Born in Germany, she moved to Scotland eight years ago, when she met John McKenzie, who later became her husband. Andrea immediately noticed how much more interested the Scots were in gardening than the Germans. She had no garden experience and lived in a second-floor flat, but she was able to get her hands on a small plot of land in Granton, where she began sowing and propagating.

"I learnt to understand the needs of the plants and to share them with friends. As an artist, I was very keen to work with plant material and to learn." When that plot was taken over by developers, she turned to window boxes, experimenting with her windy second-floor conditions. "If you don't have a garden you find ways of doing things," she says. "It was really good fun. I grew all sorts of things from mini alpine gardens to annuals." →

## Plant sense

**O**NE OF the best ways to reduce a garden's maintenance is to plant a 'living mulch', which covers the ground. Ground-cover plants have many advantages: most importantly, they can suppress weeds by allowing only green light to penetrate the soil's surface, preventing the germination of seeds; they protect the soil from erosion and insulate it from heat, cold and water loss; and provide a valuable habitat for wildlife. Make sure you choose your plants with care – otherwise your salvation could quickly become a menace, turning your border into a monoculture.

By choosing the right ground-cover plants you can enhance your garden's appearance by utilising redundant areas under shrubs or trees, next to buildings or where grass can't grow. They are great for disguising problem areas such as steep banks, shade, and wet or dry conditions.

Once you know your soil type, texture and acidity, select plants with weed-suppressing foliage. How dense they should be planted will depend on

### 'Ground-cover plants can disguise problem areas'

their vigour and how quickly you want total cover. Very fast-growing species such as *Ajuga reptans* may need one metre between plants. For more lethargic species such as *Pulmonaria officinalis* (lungwort), 15cm will be adequate. In dry growing conditions, water your plants until they establish.

#### For 'carpets' up to 15cm deep:

■ *Cotoneaster dammeri* (bear-berry cotoneaster); *Lamium maculatum* 'Roseum' (dead-nettle); *Viola riviniana* *Purpurea* Group (Labrador violet); *Ajuga reptans* (bugle); *Gunnera magellanica*; *Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea' (creeping Jenny)

#### For 'carpets' 15-30cm deep:

■ *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Jack Frost' (Siberian bugloss); *Cornus canadensis* (creeping dogwood); *Geranium* 'Johnson's Blue' (cranesbill); *Tellima grandiflora* (fringe cups); *Sedum*, *Pulmonaria*, *Thymus*, *Vinca* species; *Gaultheria procumbens* (creeping wintergreen)

As with most things in life, it's best to get your weeds when they are young. Next month I will look at low-maintenance plants for focal points. *Rebecca Govier, Garden Designer, Green Edge Garden Design (0131-476 0860, b.govier@virgin.net)*