

SUSTAINABLE GARDEN

# NATURAL *charm*

*This eco-friendly property in the Surrey Hills now has a saltwater pool and indigenously planted garden to match, artfully blurring the boundaries of the landscape beyond*

WORDS JODIE JONES PHOTOGRAPHS HELEN FICKLING

From August to October, the yellow daisy-like heads of *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm' make a bold visual statement against a backdrop of ornamental grasses. The deck itself is sheltered by a hedge of *elaeagnus*, backed by plumes of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Saraband', which forms an attractive and highly effective windbreak.



**S**o many gardens are just an ornamental frame to a predictable building, but I wanted to create an upside-down house with an inside-out garden," says Agne Nilsson. "I set out to blur the boundaries." The Norwegian businessman, who has lived in this country for many years, lists design and architecture as his favourite hobbies, so when he acquired a derelict Dutch barn in an unspoilt parcel of Surrey countryside, he quickly made plans to convert it into a contemporary eco-friendly home.

"I grew up in the woods in Norway, so I love being at one with nature, but I think it is important to remember that just because you live in the country, you don't have to wear muddy wellies all the time. You can love the land and still enjoy an elegant and beautiful environment."

The barn has stunning views across the Surrey Hills, and to make the most of them, Agne decided to invert the traditional layout by putting the main living spaces on the first floor and all bedrooms at ground level. "I still wanted that link with the outside so, at an early stage in the project, I brought in landscape designer Rae Wilkinson to help create a garden that would flow seamlessly from the house."

The brief Agne handed to Rae in 2012 was to create a sustainable garden within the wider eight-acre site. "Sustainability is an important issue for me," says Rae. "Working with indigenous plants to forge a visual ink with the surrounding land, managing rainwater run-off and encouraging wildlife are all fundamental. We put in lots of native hedging and trees, seeded parts of the site with a tailored wildflower mix, and made a lake out of an existing drainage ditch."

Closer to the house, Rae and Agne drew up a rectilinear

**ABOVE FAR LEFT** As part of his "inside out" philosophy, Agne wanted all the bedrooms, which are on the ground floor, to have direct access to the garden.  
**FAR LEFT** The path down the north side of the house is punctuated by carefully spaced *Betula albosinensis*, recalling the woods in Norway, where Agne grew up.  
**LEFT** All-weather walkways were created around the house, to allow easy and clean access at any time of the year.

**ABOVE LEFT** Sourcing a suitably stylish outdoor shower proved tricky, so in the end one was specially imported from Jee-O, *jee-o.com*, in Belgium.  
**ABOVE RIGHT** Steps lead from the roof terrace directly down to the sunbathing deck and the saltwater swimming pool.  
**BELOW** To the left of the converted barn's glass entrance is a feathery block of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus'.





design that would look good even in winter, provide a dry walkway around the building (to avoid the need for muddy wellingtons) and enclose the distinctive pool where Agne swims daily from March to September. “Here, we put in a hedge of elaeagnus backed by ornamental grasses to shelter the deck from the strong winds, and it has made a huge difference,” says Agne. “I love to run straight from my bedroom, jump into the pool for a few lengths, then finish with a hot outdoor shower. Thanks to the windbreak, we have been known to open up the pool at Christmas.”

With Rae’s careful selection of plants, the garden is full of interest even in December. “I put in a lot of ornamental grass, which looks good for most of the year, and many of the summer flowers, such as the *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* ‘Goldsturm’, have an attractive skeletal presence in the winter months,” she explains.

It is on a summer’s day, however, that the garden really comes into its own. Looking down from the glass-balustraded roof terrace, the blocks of yellow rudbeckia, blue aster and bright pink astilbe read like a miniature Mondrian painting sandwiched between the vast blue sky and green fields.

In the middle distance stands a Modernist sculpture of a man made in Corten steel, which featured in an RHS Chelsea Flower Show garden in 2015, just as Agne’s garden was nearing completion. Both Rae and Agne agreed that the piece would make a perfect finishing touch, although Agne had strong views about its location. “It was important that he be placed at a distance from the house,” says Agne. “It is part of blurring the boundaries. You look at what the statue looks at. The view is always outward.”

---

#### GARDEN GUIDE

**Garden orientation** Views south-west, out over the Surrey Hills.

**Soil type** Clay, with occasional seams of greensand.

**Special features** Contemporary saltwater swimming pool garden and wildflower meadows.

**Garden design** Rae Wilkinson, [raewilkinson.com](http://raewilkinson.com).

---

**ABOVE LEFT AND BELOW** The roof terrace allows a bird’s-eye view of the block planting in the pool garden and sweeping vistas of the countryside.

**ABOVE RIGHT** The Corten steel sculpture, called *The Guardian*, was designed by Wilson McWilliam Studio and made by Toby Clayton, of Hot Metal Engineering. It has been positioned at a distance from the house, to help draw the eye outwards to the landscape.

