

HOUSE & GARDEN®

The background image is a photograph of a rustic bathroom. It features a bathtub with a green-painted wooden surround. On the wooden ledge above the tub, there is a white ceramic pitcher, a blue glass bottle, and a wooden soap dish with several bars of soap. To the right of the tub, a wooden vanity holds a white sink with a chrome faucet. A blue ceramic vase with a floral pattern sits on the vanity, filled with a bouquet of pink and white tulips. A brass bell hangs on the wall above the vanity. The walls are made of horizontal wooden planks, and a framed landscape painting is visible on the wall. A striped towel is draped over the side of the tub. In the foreground, a portion of a chair with a green and white striped coverlet and a blue patterned cushion is visible.

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TEXT
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ANDREW MONTGOMERY

Blurring boundaries

This former farm near Toledo in Spain is a testament to landscape designer Fernando Martos' belief that a garden should work in perfect harmony with its surroundings

In the gravel garden, drought-tolerant perennials including *Nepeta racemosa*, 'Walker's Low', *Salvia transpontica* and *Stachys byzantina*, creeping thyme and rosemary, and grasses such as *Sedum Greenleei* fill the organically shaped beds. One of the old stone walls of the farm, now restored, separates the garden area from the wild landscape.

In the hills and the woodlands of the Sierra de San Vicente, south west of Madrid, spring brings an extraordinary richness of wildflowers that ebb and flow round the gnarled trunks of native *Quercus ilex* oaks. In the evening gloaming, swathes of yolk-yellow *Anthemis tinctoria*, vivid purple *Echium vulgare* and delicate white *Silene vulgaris* take on a surreal glow. The effect is so arresting that it takes your breath away. Pale pink foxgloves, *Digitalis thapsi*, arrange themselves artistically around moss-covered boulders, and wild *Stipa gigantea* – used so frequently in British gardens – dots itself around the landscape.

Sometimes nature is so intensely beautiful that there is almost no need to make a garden, but in this unspoilt corner of Spain, landscape designer Fernando Martos has succeeded in creating one around an old farm dwelling that works in complete harmony with the land around it. 'The surroundings are fundamental to me when designing a garden,' says Fernando. 'I want it to look completely integrated in the landscape – it must look as if it has always been there.'

Fernando has been championing this naturalistic approach in Spain ever since he qualified as a gardener and designer over 20 years ago. Now aged 46, he gave up a career in law to follow his heart and work with plants, starting as a gardener and setting up his own company, and then going on to establish his design studio 15 years ago. During a three-month placement at Newby Hall in North Yorkshire, he fell in love with English gardens and returned to Spain energised and inspired, wondering why other designers were not being more adventurous in their outlook.

'All people wanted was green lawns and lavender – there was no imagination,' he explains. 'To me a lawn looks so alien here and needs to be irrigated all summer. I wanted to develop a new type of garden in Spain – an English-style perennial garden, but using Mediterranean natives.' He came back from Newby Hall with a list of plants to experiment with. Now, after more than a decade of pioneering gardens in this style, Fernando finds himself at the forefront of a new wave of garden design in Spain, devising beautiful, plant-filled, drought-tolerant schemes that work with the landscape and the seasons rather than imposing an artificial ideal on a space.

This garden near Toledo wholeheartedly embodies Fernando's design philosophy. Its owners had fallen in love with the area and wanted to maximise the views out into the landscape. So they needed no persuasion to keep the formal areas to a minimum, ensuring that the cultivated spaces played second fiddle to the natural environment beyond. At the front of the house, the planting beds contain a matrix of evergreen shrubs such as *Pittosporum tobira*, *Philadelphus angustifolius* and *Cistus salvifolius*, interspersed with silvery *Stachys byzantina* and wild white roses, acting as a transition point to a new meadow. 'As the garden moves away from the house, I am planting an area that was previously grazed by sheep,

His beautiful schemes work with both the landscape and the seasons

introducing native shrubs such as hawthorn, arbutus and prunus to attract birds,' explains Fernando.

The main planting area is in the gravel garden at the side of the house and is a small, intimate space contained within softly curving granite walls. It was here Fernando could indulge his love of combining plants in a naturalistic tapestry, creating a scheme that echoes the contours of the surrounding hills and the curious, lumpy forms of the holm oaks. 'Historically, the oaks have been pruned and cut for firewood, so they have these strange shapes,' he says. Boulders push up through the layers of plants, further linking the garden with the landscape beyond. Several have been artfully placed by Fernando, while others were already there, along with an old stone pigsty that has also become part of the design. The planting here is subtle in colour to make sure it is subservient to the terrain outside. 'I don't want too many colours,' he says. 'In this bright light, the effect would be too intense. I like a simple colour palette, but one that is always changing.'

All the plants in the gravel garden are drought tolerant and require little irrigation. At their best in late spring, many go into dormancy in the intense heat of the summer, greening up again as soon as the rains come in September. Key plants such as *Euphorbia nicaeensis*, *Phlomis tuberosa*, *Scleria 'Greenlee'* and *Nepeeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low' are repeated around the space, with self-seeders like *Catananche caerulea* making their own trajectory around the curves and mounds of the evergreen plants. The tall, semi-transparent fronds of *Stipa gigantea* catch the light, golden as the sun goes down. 'The best-performing plants in this garden are the salvias,' observes Fernando. 'There are always some species suitable for each place. I have used various species of *Salvia officinalis*, which are always green however hot it is, and blue cultivars of *Salvia greggii*, which are especially long-flowering.'

Fernando also designed an inner courtyard, a tranquil, cobbled area with large raised beds within whitewashed walls. With no outward views, a more formal atmosphere can be created with clipped wild olive in terracotta pots and multi-stemmed *Malus 'Evereste'* underplanted with *Ceratostigma willmottianum*, creeping rosemary and tumbling *Erigeron karvinskianus*. Like the jewel in the crown, the courtyard is the inner sanctum. Meanwhile, the outer garden becomes progressively wilder, so it flows eventually into the landscape becoming part of it. It is hard to know where nature ends and cultivation begins □

Fernando Martos: fernandomartos.com/en

BELOW Swathes of wildflowers, including yellow, daisy-like *Anthemis tinctoria* and blue *Echium vulgare* create rivers of colour below the holm oaks in the countryside around the farm. The sculptural shape of the trees is the result of historical pruning for firewood



ABOVE Native Spanish foxgloves, *Digitalis thapsi*, grow in the lee of the large granite boulders in the landscape. Fernando has taken the feel of this wild scenery into the garden, emulating colour, form and texture to create a space that is in harmony with nature

BELOW Arching above spiky mounds of *Scaloria* 'Greenlee', the golden flowerheads of graceful *Stipa gigantea*, which also grows wild locally, catch the evening light. Native holm oaks on the other side of the boundary wall shelter the garden from prevailing winds



ABOVE Giant boulders, nestled among the planting in the gravel garden, provide another echo of the wider landscape. Creeping rosemary softens the base of this rock, while yellow *Phlomis viscous* and mauve *P. tuberosa* add colour and structural interest

BELOW In the borders at the front of the house, undulating mounds of shrubs such as *Cistus x florentinus* 'Tramontane', *Trachium fruticosum* and *Phyllaea angustifolia* are punctuated by the white blooms of *Rosa* 'Kew Gardens' and mauve spires of *Phlomis tuberosa*



ABOVE The inner sanctum of the garden, the courtyard does not have views of the landscape. Its feel is more formal and it features raised beds with multi-stemmed *Malus* 'Evereste', *Cercataligna willmotii*, creeping rosemary and clouds of *Eriogonum hirciniense*