



# Oasis

## a watery wonderland

Richard Pim spent years working in arid countries. Now he has created a tranquil garden from an old watermill and filled it with ponds, streams and moisture-loving plants

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS CAROLE DRAKE



water garden

### In brief

NAME Westonbury Water Mill.  
WHAT Water garden set around an old corn mill with views into the surrounding landscape.  
WHERE Pembridge, Herefordshire.  
SIZE 3½ acres.  
SOIL Neutral, heavy clay improved with soil conditioners.  
CONDITIONS Generally sheltered and mild, but can get severe winters and occasionally there is low rainfall in summer.  
SPECIAL FEATURES Follies designed by owner Richard Pim, collection of water-loving plants and nursery.

The tower folly is a dovecot and water feature. When the tank inside is full, water spurts out back into the mill pond sending the doves flying. *Iris sibirica* and *Iris pseudacorus* (yellow flag) grow around the margins.

LEFT The Mill House nestles amid moisture-loving plants. Irises are a feature including the blue *Iris sibirica* 'Tropic Night' and pink *Iris pseudacorus* × *versicolor* 'Regal Surprise'. In the foreground is gold-edged prairie cord grass (*Spartina pectinata* 'Aureomarginata', left).



The fertile farm land of northwest Herefordshire, dotted with small woods and orchards and intersected by streams, is a world away from the barren places in which Richard Pim spent his working life as a hydro-geologist, bringing water to arid landscapes. In the 1960s he wrote from the Libyan desert to a friend, with a postscript saying: ‘If you ever find a water meadow, with a brook and an old mill, buy it for me.’

In 1969 the friend did just that, though it was 1997 before Richard moved in to the old corn mill near Pembridge, a few miles from the Welsh border. He married in 2007 and now lives at Westonbury with his wife Sally, but in the early days it was a solo project.

The garden was an impenetrable tangle and the mill pond, leat and streams were full of silt, so a mini-digger was used to clear the site. “We made some bad mistakes,” recalls Richard, “like getting subsoil and topsoil muddled up which needed a lot of fork and shovel work to sort out – I certainly learnt about some things the hard way.” But even when the garden was a “clay quagmire”, he intended to open to the public. “People thought I was a lunatic, but I was always confident this was a good place for a garden.”

Into the existing structure of streams and trees Richard introduced another large pond and two boggy areas crisscrossed with walkways, one area gently blending into the next, allowing long views out into the surrounding landscape. “Keeping the boundaries open is a wonderful way of extending the garden,” explains Richard.

Richard’s previous experience of horticulture amounted to “growing rice, wheat and alfalfa in the desert”, so he ordered one of everything from a nursery selling plants for watery conditions and waited to see what happened, learning by trial and error. The garden is now packed with water lovers, from familiar staples such as yellow flag iris, towering gunnera and intricate candelabra primulas to rarities such as *Senecio smithii* bearing clusters of white daisies above coarse grey-green leaves, and *Butomus umbellatus*, a graceful flowering rush with loose heads of pale pink flowers.

### Intense colours

In May the garden is a sea of fresh new foliage spattered with pools of intense flower colour: blue irises, pink candelabra primulas, deep red cirsium and tangy orange trollius. Many water and bog plants sport distinctive foliage too: *Lysichiton americanus*, American skunk cabbage, has large, smooth chicory shaped leaves; *Rodgersia podophylla*’s leaves are coarsely textured, horse chestnut-shaped and tinted pink; *Schonoplectus lacustris* subsp. *tabernaemontani* ‘Zebrinus’ has narrow grass-like stripy foliage; while king of the bog, *Gunnera manicata*, boasts massive umbrella-like leaves supported on thick prickly stems. “I love the fact that by July one can walk through a grove of gunnera and the leaves tower overhead. It’s spectacular,” Richard exclaims.

Westonbury is also a mecca for connoisseurs of quirky buildings, as a ▷

“By July one can walk through a grove of gunnera and the leaves tower overhead. It’s spectacular”

Swathes of sky-blue *Iris sibirica* ‘Perry’s Blue’, yellow *Geum* ‘Farmer John Cross’ and delicate pink ragged robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*) run down to the water’s edge, overhung by a large weeping willow (*Salix sepulcralis* var. *chrysocoma*).

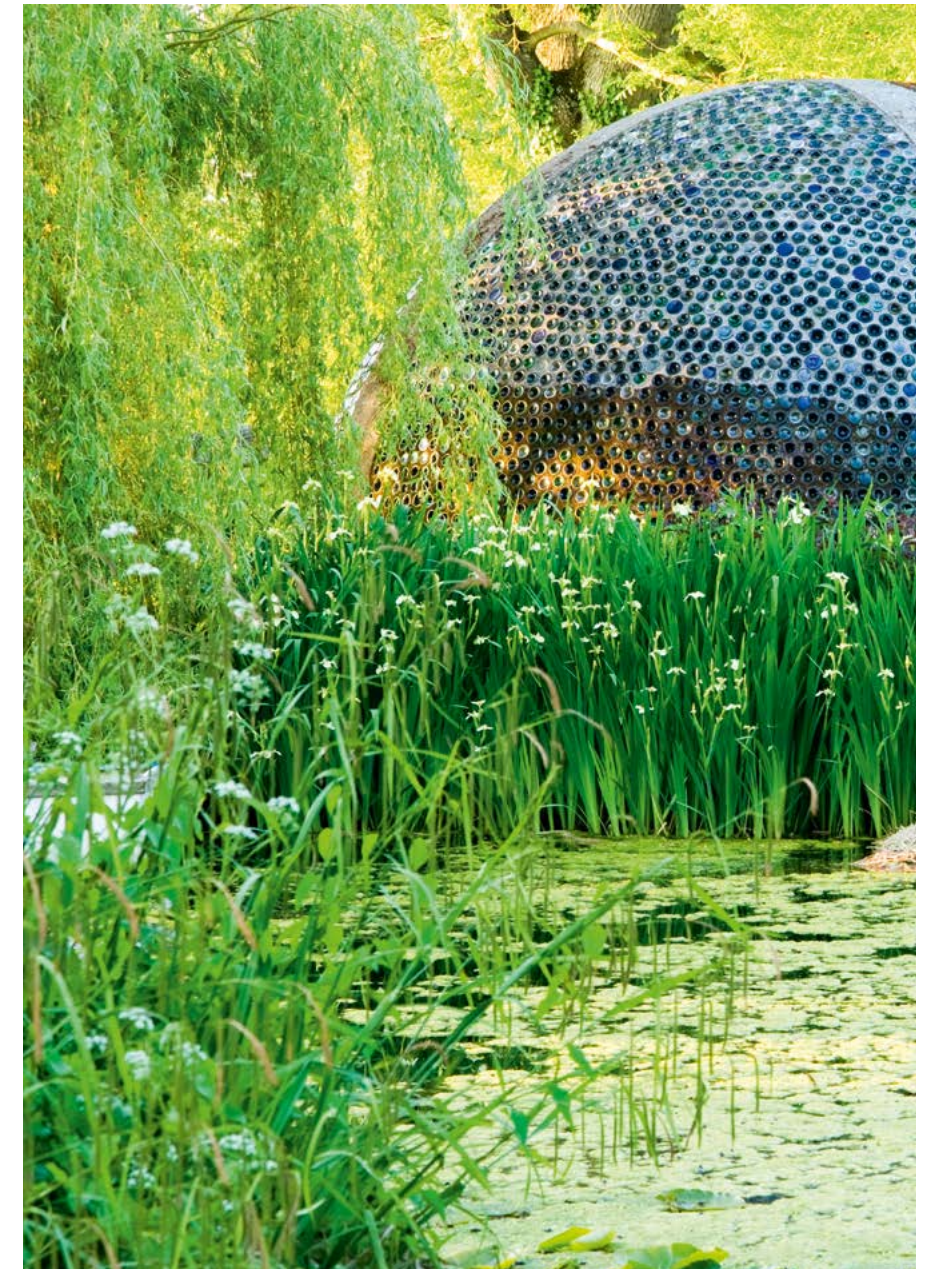
water garden







water garden



*“The second folly took Richard five years and thousands of wine bottles to build. There is a glorious stained-glass effect inside when the sun shines through its vitreous walls”*

Richard's latest folly is an oak viewing platform housing a water-powered clock. Growing in the water is the tall reedmace *Typha angustifolia*, red campion and *Iris sibirica* 'Tropic Night' growing in the margins.

ABOVE A clump of *Iris pseudacorus* var. *bastardii* grows at the edge of pond in front of a domed folly made from thousands of wine bottles.





A tunnel woven from living willow forms a path to the house.

▷ recent visit from heritage charity The Folly Fellowship demonstrates. “I think gardens should have fun in them,” declares Richard, who is building his third folly, a water-powered clock in an oak viewing platform. His first was a dovecot and water feature. “It drives a belt fitted with metal buckets that scoop water into a tank at the top, like irrigation systems that have been used in the Middle East for centuries.” When the tank is full the water spurts out back into the millpond, sending the resident doves “flying around in beautiful formations”.

The second folly took Richard five years and thousands of wine bottles to build. The dome provides a shady grotto for ferns and

there is a glorious stained-glass effect inside when the sun shines through its vitreous walls.

Asked what he loves most about the garden Richard replies without hesitation: “It’s still what I loved when I first came here, the views, the hills, the meadows and the streams. It’s the place itself.” □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

ADDRESS Westonbury Mill Water Gardens, Pembridge, Herefordshire HR6 9HZ.

TEL 01544 388650

WEBSITE [www.westonburymillwatergardens.com](http://www.westonburymillwatergardens.com)

OPEN Daily 1 April to 30 September.

## 9 of the plants enjoyed by Richard Pim



As a hydro-geologist, Richard worked abroad for much of his career. He has spent the last 25 years creating Westonbury Garden.

### 1 *Carex elata* ‘Aurea’ (Bowles’ golden sedge)

Dense clumps of arching, striped golden foliage with black flower heads.

### 2 *Primula bulleyana*

“A must for any garden with moisture,” says Richard, with tiered whorls of flowers above rosettes of crinkly leaves.

### 3 *Iris sibirica* ‘Perry’s Blue’

“I have used irises throughout the garden – this one has exquisite sky-blue flowers with white markings,” Richard says.

### 4 *Osmunda regalis* (royal fern)

Large deciduous fern forming dense mounds of pale green foliage. In spring new fronds are covered with a rusty coloured down.

### 5 *Geum* ‘Karlskaer’

Masses of bell-shaped, upward-facing, deep yellow-orange flowers on dark wiry stems throughout summer.

### 6 *Cirsium rivulare* ‘Atropurpureum’

Richard likes the deep ruby red pincushion-like flower heads, which are carried above shiny dark green leaves.

### 7 *Euphorbia griffithii* ‘Fireglow’

Dramatic bushy spurge with mid green foliage on red stems. Small yellow flowers are surrounded by striking pink and orange bracts.

### 8 *Iris pseudacorus*

Native flag iris with intensely yellow flowers, suitable for water up to 25cm deep. “Can become invasive so use with care only in large ponds,” warns Richard.

### 9 *Gunnera manicata*

“Simply spectacular giant rhubarb with umbrella-like leaves”, sometimes reaching 1.8m across.



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9

water garden