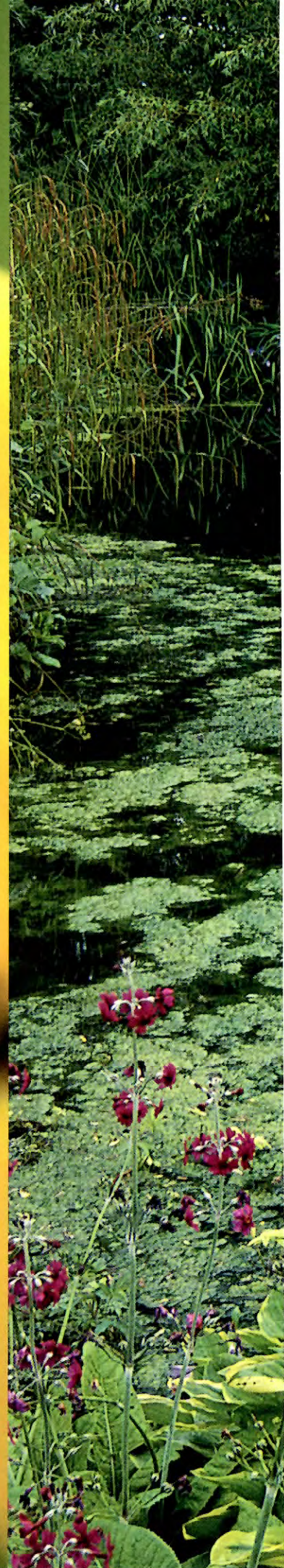


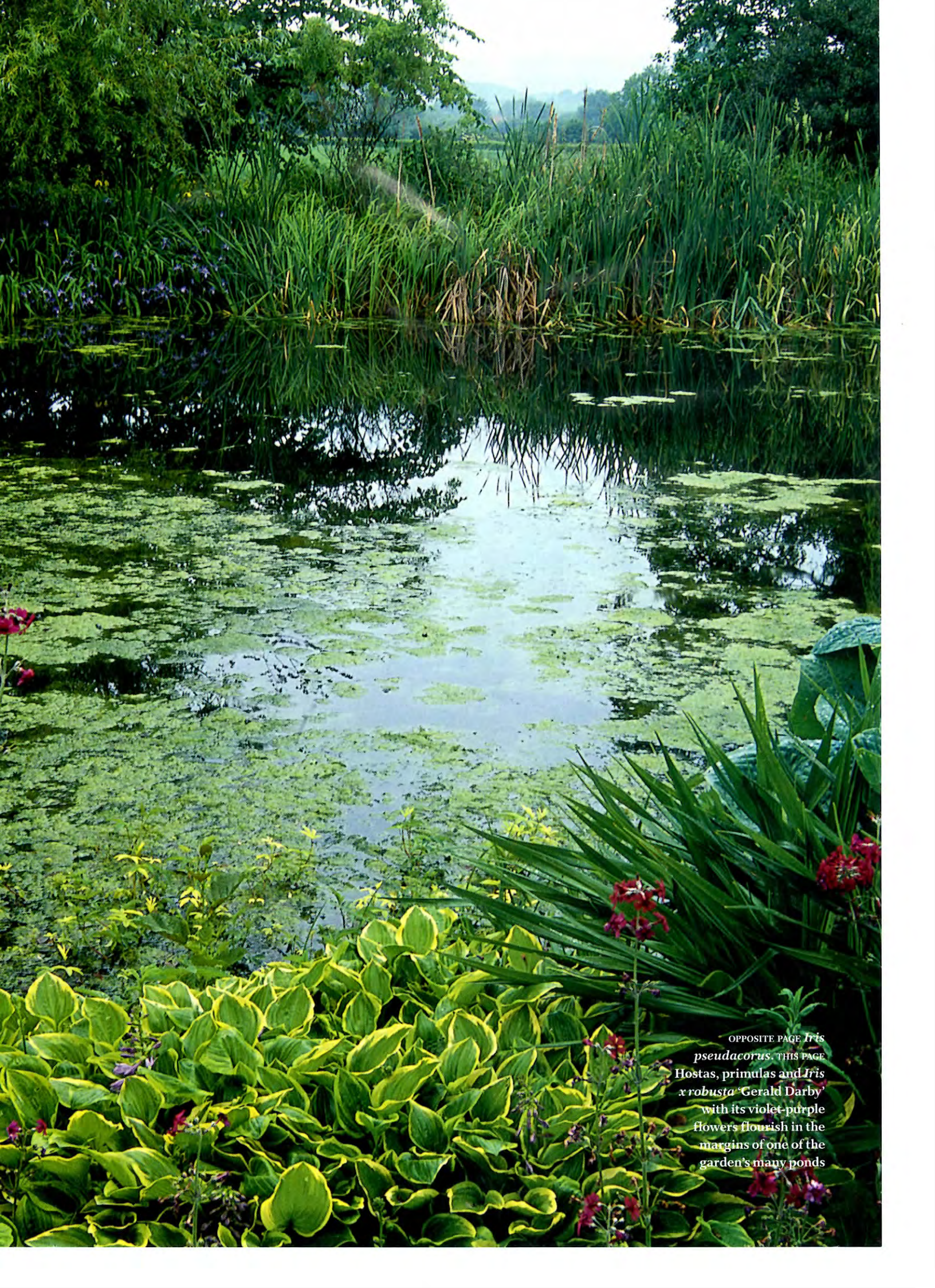


Water, water everywhere

A clay quagmire surrounding an old mill in Herefordshire has been shaped into an enchanting oasis. Bold garden buildings now rise up among swathes of spectacular foliage and seductive blooms, and lush, waterside plantings frame views out to the meadows beyond

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLIE DRAKE





OPPOSITE PAGE *Iris*
pseudacorus. THIS PAGE
Hostas, primulas and *Iris*
x robusta 'Gerald Darby'
with its violet-purple
flowers flourish in the
margins of one of the
garden's many ponds



THIS PICTURE *Butomus umbellatus*. CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT The tower seen beyond clumps of *Carex elata* 'Aurea'; a gargoyle; *Lysimachia ciliata* 'Firecracker'; Richard Pim



It seems entirely apt that a retired hydrogeologist, who spent his working life irrigating land in some of the most arid places on earth, should end up creating a garden set in a water-rich landscape. Westonbury Mill, Richard Pim's two-acre plot near Pembridge in Herefordshire, not only contains streams, ponds and a mass of water-loving plants, but also features a tower complete with gushing gargoyles. Writing to a friend in England from the Libyan Desert in the 1960s, Richard made a request: "If you find a water meadow, with a brook and an old mill, buy it for me". In 1969 the friend did just that and Richard performed a rudimentary renovation on the derelict corn mill, waiting another 30 years before fully restoring it and shaping the gardens.

In 1997, when Richard moved in full time, the garden was choked with brambles, and the millpond, leat and other streams were silted up, so the first task was clearance. "We used a mini-digger, but made some bad mistakes in the process, such as getting subsoil muddled up with the topsoil. There was a lot of fork and shovel work to reorganise it – I certainly learnt the hard way," Richard recalls. Remarkably, even when the garden was a "clay quagmire", he intended to open to the public one day. "People thought I was

a lunatic, but I was confident this was a good place for a garden."

Into the existing structure of streams and mature trees, Richard added another pond and two boggy areas, crisscrossed with paths and walkways. Following no particular plan, he chose to adopt an intuitive approach and gently blend one area into the next, allowing uninterrupted views across swathes of planting and across the surrounding landscape. "Keeping the boundaries open extended the garden, bringing the meadow in," he explains.

Richard's previous horticultural experience "growing rice, wheat and alfalfa in the desert" was hardly relevant to the damp Welsh Marches so, as if embarking on a teach-yourself-water-plants course, he ordered one of everything from the catalogue of a water plant specialist and "waited to see what happened". Ten years on, the garden is brimming with plants, from bog garden staples such as bog primulas and irises to the unusual *Senecio smithii*, a hardy herbaceous perennial bearing white daisies above coarse grey-green leaves, and *Butomus umbellatus*, a flowering rush with pink flowers.

While spring is characterised by the fresh yellows and greens of marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*) and skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanus*), summer sees an explosion of colour. Flowers of ▷



FOLIAGE PLANTS FOR DAMP PLACES

- ***Gunnera manicata* (overleaf)** Giant rhubarb with brown cone-shaped flower heads in spring. Leaves can reach 1.8m width.
- ***Rheum palmatum*** Deeply cut, bluish-green leaves up to 60cm long on red stems. Sprays of tiny flowers in early and mid-summer.
- ***Carex elata* 'Aurea'** (left) A grass-like sedge whose gracefully arching leaves form dense mounds of brilliant golden yellow.
- ***Scirpus zebrinus*** Narrow, leafless stems, striped green and white, stand rigidly erect.
- ***Lysimachia ciliata* 'Firecracker'** (below) Bronzed, purple foliage with spikes of small yellow flowers in summer.
- ***Darmera peltata*** Dense clusters of pink flowers are held on a thick, hairy stem. Lobed, rounded leaves turn bronze-pink in autumn and can reach 45cm across.





THIS PICTURE *Rodgersia pinnata* 'Superba'.
CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT The thatched hut; *Gunnera manicata*; feathery *Aruncus dioicus*; willow and oak frame lush planting beside a pond



candelabra primulas sit in neat tiers of orange, pink and magenta; stately irises unfurl deep blue, yellow and white petals; the globeflower (*Trollius chinensis*) radiates orange blooms, and frothy rodgersias open in candyfloss shades of pink and white.

As well as seductive blooms, many of the plants are also blessed with spectacular foliage. King of the jungle is *Gunnera manicata*, the giant rhubarb, producing umbrella-like leaves atop prickly stems. "I love the fact that by July one can walk through a grove of the stuff and the leaves tower overhead. It's spectacular," Richard says. Smaller, though still dramatic, *Rheum palmatum* has deeply lobed leaves on crimson stems, while *Darmera peltata*'s glossy disc-shaped foliage is tinged with bronze and pink in autumn. Sedges love moist soil and clumps of *Carex elata* 'Aurea' and narrow, green-and-white striped stems of *Scirpus zebrinus* contrast with the shapes of flowering plants. *Iris pseudacorus* 'Variegata' scores on both counts, combining striped leaves with clear yellow flowers.

Few gardens can boast Westonbury's quirky structures, rising above the luscious planting like punctuation in a sea of text. At the end of the plot stands a thatched hut made of elm and bulrushes harvested on site, a reference to Richard's years working in Central

Africa. Elsewhere a pergola constructed with metal rods and a willow tunnel act as transparent screens and bring structure to the garden. But the most striking construction is the tower built in local grey stone, which doubles as dovecote and water feature. "I found a small water wheel during excavations and was inspired to give it a purpose," he explains. "The wheel sits in the stream at the bottom of the tower and drives a belt fitted with metal buckets that scoop water to a tank at the top. It's quite like bucket irrigation systems that have been used in the Middle East for centuries." When the tank is full, a flushing mechanism spurts the collected water out of the gargoyle's mouth back into the millpond. The eruption of water sends the doves "flying around in beautiful formations" before coming back to perch on the tower. Musing on the principles that guide him, Richard declares, "I like a garden to be fun as well as beautiful". Westonbury Mill exudes beauty and fun from every pore – a beguiling combination. 🏡
Westonbury Mill Water Gardens, Westonbury Mill, Pembroge, Herefordshire (01544 388650; www.westonburymillwatergardens.com). Open 1 April-30 September daily 11am-5pm. Adults £3.50, children £1. For details of more inspiring gardens, see www.allaboutyou.com/homes.

MARK BOLTON, GAP PHOTOS



FLOWERING PLANTS FOR DAMP PLACES

- *Iris sibirica* Beardless iris with blue-purple flowers marked with dark veining.
- *Primula beesiana* Whorls of deep rose flowers with a yellow eye held on a pale stem.
- *Caltha palustris* The native marsh marigold – deep yellow cup-shaped flowers above dark green round-to-kidney-shaped fleshy leaves.
- *Trollius chinensis* Yellowy-orange flowers on tall stems, above deeply divided leaves.
- *Rodgersia pinnata* 'Superba' Sprays of tiny pink flowers above mid-green, ribbed leaves.
- *Aruncus dioicus* (below) Feathery plumes of cream flowers on tall stems above lush foliage.
- *Butomus umbellatus* The flowering rush with narrow leaves and pale pink cup-shaped flowers with deep red stamens and stems.
- *Ligularia dentata* 'Desdemona' Orange daisy-like flowers above purplish-green leaves.

