

# Winning FORM

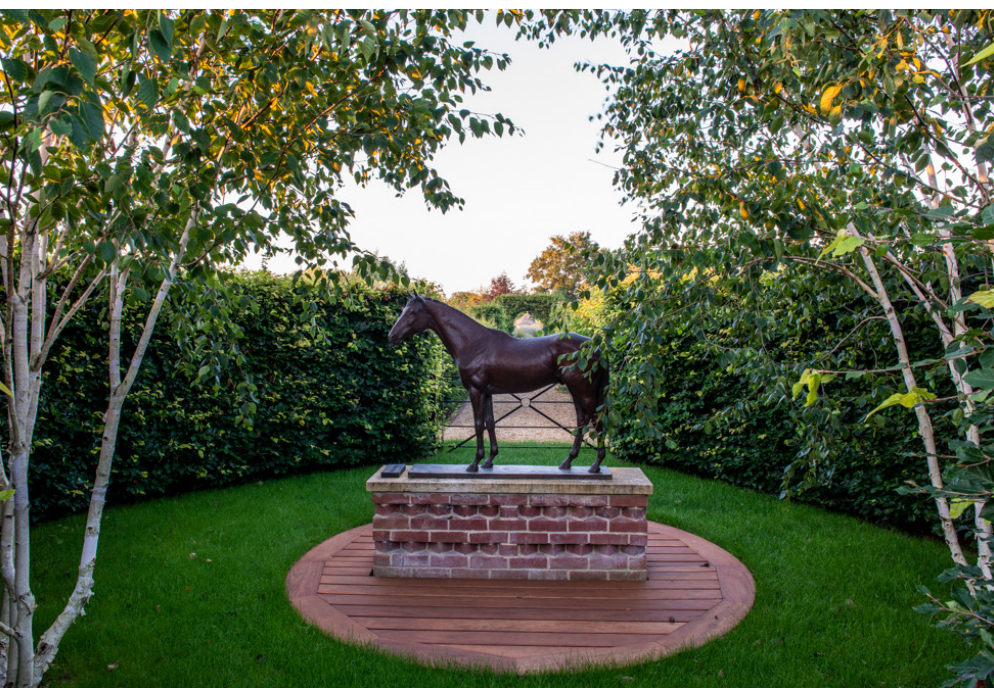
At Highbridge House in Somerset, acclaimed racehorse trainer Paul Nicholls OBE has created a beautiful rose-filled garden in just five years – and it's now the perfect place to unwind after a day at the races

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**This image** Roses 'L.D. Braithwaite', 'Darcey Bussell', 'Munstead Wood' and pink 'Strawberry Hill'.  
**Opposite** The more informal 'wild' garden.





**Top** Looking towards the house from the wild garden's large beds of grasses and perennials. **Above** A statue of Gold Cup winner Kauto Star, surrounded by a beech hedge and *Betula utilis* 'Jacquemontii'. **Right** Racehorse trainer and garden owner, Paul Nicholls OBE.



On the face of it, horse racing and gardening couldn't be more different. Racing is glamorous, full of adrenaline-fuelled action, speed and high stakes; gardening, in comparison, is a more sedate and relaxing way to spend your time. That contrast is perhaps why Paul Nicholls finds such enjoyment in tending his garden at Highbridge House in Ditchet, Somerset. Paul is renowned in the racing world: a twelve-time champion National Hunt trainer, he operates from the two stable yards in Ditchet that form his base, where he and his team train around 150 horses.

Over the past 30 years he's trained more than 3,000 winners, including some horses that even non-racing folk have heard of – Cheltenham Gold Cup winners Kauto Star and Denman, for example – and in 2020 he was awarded an OBE for his services to horse racing. A typical season sees him constantly travelling to racecourses the length and breadth of the country, so when he does come home, taking a few moments to unwind in his garden is the perfect antidote to such busy working days. "Racing takes up a lot of your time, but you also need something to give you some focus away from it," he observes.

Actually, the hectic racing season meshes surprisingly well with the gardening year. "We're



'Emily Brontë', 'Roald Dahl' and 'Claire Austin' roses in shades of pale peach and pink, with silver-leaved santolina.





The first part to be tackled was at the front of the house, where the curving drive and gateway is flanked by gently landscaped lawns with hedging, specimen trees and shrubs. But the main garden is to the south of the house, a long slice of former paddock that's divided roughly in two: the half closest to the house is more formal and features roses and standard trees in a framework of quite geometric beds; the second half is a 'wild' garden of mixed perennials and grasses, with that all-important gin-and-tonic gazebo at its heart.

While Paul always knew he wanted to create a garden when the house was finished, he turned to his friend Nicholas Pearson, a landscape architect based in Bath, to help him realise his vision. "Nicholas helped me with the ideas for it," he explains, "and Dan Weaver comes twice a week and helps me maintain it. It's because of Nicholas and Dan that we've got it to where it is today."

The rose garden is just five years old, but already has an air of timelessness about it. "When we did the roses, Nicholas showed me all the different types and left it to me to choose the actual varieties. He pointed me in the right direction and now we've got some lovely beds with beautiful roses in place – working together we get it right." It's no longer listed in the *RHS Plant Finder*, but one of the roses in the garden is 'Denman', a must-have for Paul since it shares its name with the famous racehorse he trained. Others are more readily available, like the beautiful David Austin rose 'Dame Judi Dench' (Paul has trained racehorses for Dame Judi in the past), with its apricot-orange blooms, crimson 'Darcey Bussell' and 'Munstead Wood', pink 'Olivia Rose Austin' and 'Gertrude Jekyll' and palest shell pink 'Emily Brontë'.

The wild garden is informal, with grassy paths leading through a layout of large curving beds packed with grasses and perennials. It's actually younger than the rose garden, and it seems incredible that this space is so recently completed. Specimens of small-leaved lime, *Tilia cordata* 'Winter Orange', give the planting a permanence that belies its age – they'll also look a treat in winter

flat-out with racing from the start of October to the end of April," Paul explains, "but after that the horses have a bit of a holiday and I have more time to spare. Now I get to walk around the garden two or three times a day, and if I've got people to phone, I might sit in the gazebo with a gin and tonic and make my calls," he adds. It's perfect timing for a break from the racecourse, for in the garden masses of roses are hitting their stride.

"I've always had a passion for roses," notes Paul, explaining that his appreciation of gardening stemmed from wanting his working spaces to look as good as possible. "It's always nice to have the yard looking presentable, with roses and hanging baskets, so that when owners come it looks smart," he says. But it was when Paul built his house at his Highbridge yard that he was really able to indulge

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his passion by creating a garden of his own to fill with these favourite plants.

Paul's bought this property after a Gold Cup win with See More Business in 1999 allowed him to expand the stables. There was previously a small farmhouse on the site, but ten years ago this summer, work began on a new house for Paul and his family. Highbridge House took three years to build, after which Paul turned his attention to its setting. "It's a lovely house and it really lends itself to having a proper garden to set it off," he enthuses.



**Top** The house is now set off by the lawns, mature shrubs and trees that flank its driveway.

**Above** Gorgeous deep crimson flowers of *Rosa* 'Munstead Wood'.



**Above** Roses 'L.D. Braithwaite', 'Darcey Bussell' and 'Munstead Wood' form a block of wonderfully bold colour.

**Right** The soft apricot-pink flowers of *Rosa* 'Emily Brontë'.

**Below** *Rosa* 'Gertrude Jekyll' bears bright pink flowers all summer long.

**Left** *Rosa* 'Dame Judi Dench'; Paul has trained horses for the actress.







when their bark will glow orange-red above the biscuity skeletons of grasses and seedheads. Grasses include upright *Calamagrostis* x *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster', airy *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau' and *Stipa tenuissima*, silkily draping itself through mounds of catmint, *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low'. Achillea, gaura, perovskia and *Stachys* 'Hummelo' are among the other robust perennials that play a role here, the latter a selection named by plantsman Piet Oudolf, whose style this garden draws upon. It has all matured miraculously quickly, helped in part by bringing in good-quality topsoil, but also planting decent-sized plants and attentive watering by Paul and Dan while it all got established.

Beyond the wild garden, Paul has just this spring developed a new orchard area against the backdrop of the River Alham, which runs along the bottom of the garden. "I think we've done enough now though," he says. "Nicholas has always got ideas to improve things and we'll obviously change a few plants, but it takes a lot of maintenance and a lot of time, so we'll probably leave it as it is now."



**Top left** *Stipa tenuissima* and *Nepeta* 'Walker's Low', with *Verbena bonariensis* and *Gaura lindheimeri* 'The Bride'.

**Top right** *Malus* 'Evereste' with an underplanting of *Stachys* 'Hummelo'.

**Above** A path leads through beds with *Tilia cordata* 'Winter Orange' and *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau'.

After five years spent turning empty paddock into fully planted garden, things have reached that delightful tipping point when the hard labour is over, and keeping on top of things is all that's needed. "This summer is the first time we haven't had so much to do, and I can just enjoy it," says Paul. His three daughters are "more interested in horses than they are roses" he observes, but owners enjoy a wander around the garden after they've been to the yard. Perhaps horse racing and gardening aren't so different. Both depend on proper preparation, then patient training is needed to draw the best performance from horses just as good gardening coaxes the best out of plants. And just like at the races, in the garden you need the right weather, good going and a little bit of luck. Maybe we shouldn't be surprised that Paul does so well at both. ■

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