

'Forgotten' plants add a sense of sculpture

Designer Tim Rees says shrubs are underrated and deserve more attention for their beauty and lasting appeal. By Stephen Lacey

Perennials have all the publicity, and shrubs are getting forgotten about," says Tim Rees, looking out of the window of his north London design studio. "For me, their main appeal is their sculptural quality, and the fact that they develop their beauty over time. They give a garden a sense of evolution."

He has built the studio at the end of his narrow, 80ft-long plot, so with his russet Cavalier King Charles spaniel Mango lolling behind him, it is a short walk to work in the morning. But this is not a very regular routine because his design projects take him far and wide, and for half the year he lives in Italy.

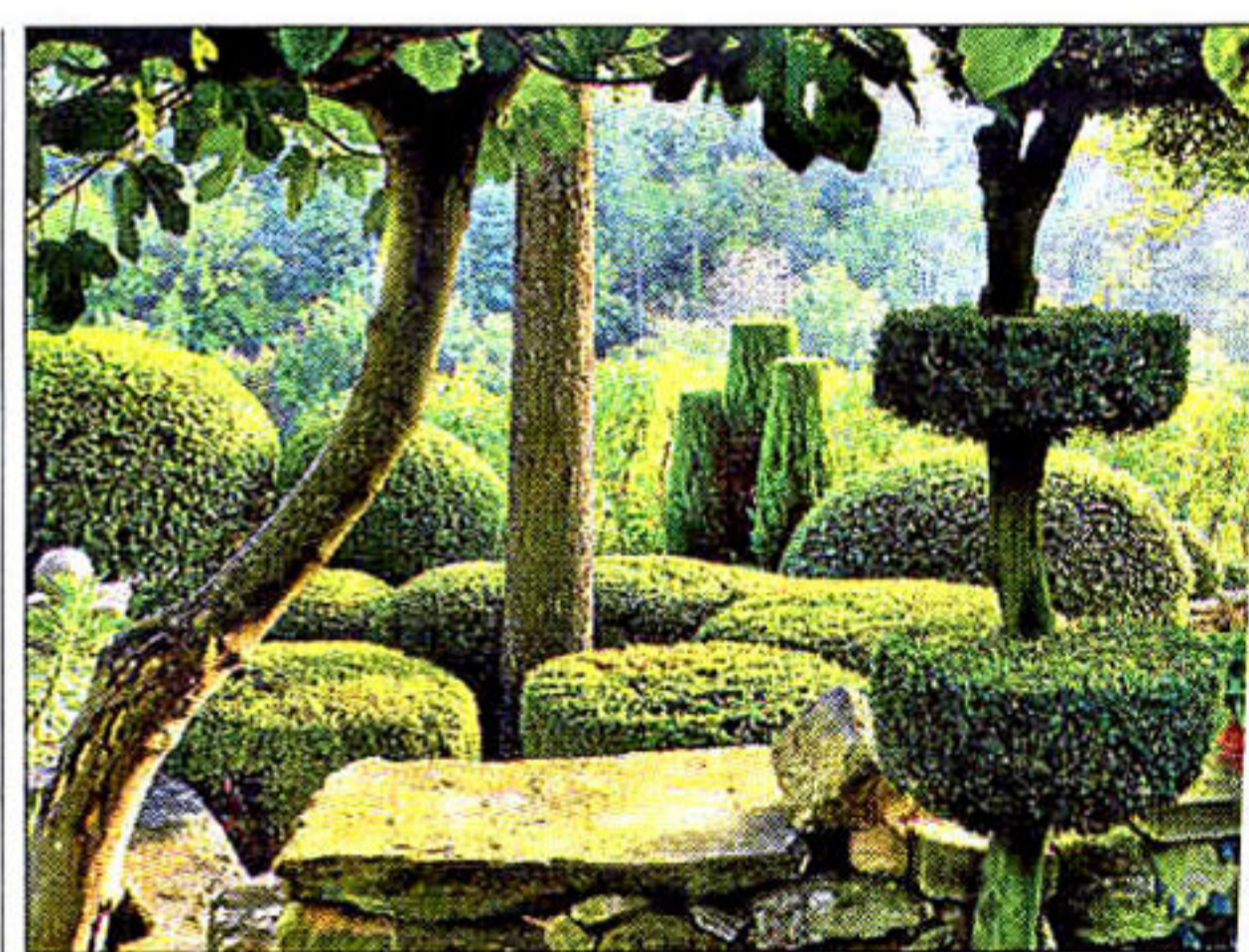
I have known Tim since the late Eighties, when we met at Batsley House in the Cotswolds, home of the garden writer Rosemary Verey.

"Rosemary was a temperamental character, but she was a great friend and mentor to me," he says. "I

helped her with some of her design work, and she passed me jobs to do myself. "Her planting style particularly intrigued me, because within her formal layout it was quite unruly. She loved to let things seed around and romp about. There was no ecology behind it, but it was naturalistic in the William Robinson tradition."

An interest in naturalism took Tim to Germany in the early Nineties and, together with Brita von Schoenaich who was then his business partner, he was responsible for setting up the two landmark Kew conferences. For much of the British media and public, these were their first exposure to the new-wave German and Dutch grasses and perennials movement that now dominates planting design.

In his own projects, he has experimented a good deal with meadows, both with annual seed mixes on bare ground and also with planting perennials into existing grass. "Actually, that's a look that



attracts me more than prairie-style borders." The perennials he has found the most successful for putting into grass are *Knautia macedonica*, *Cephalaria gigantea*, *Centaurea montana*, peonies, asters and geraniums like *G. psilostemon* and 'Kashmir Purple'. Some of his clumps are now in their 20th year.

His easy plantsmanship stems from training at the Oxford Botanic Garden and at Kew. In fact, thanks to his participation in a Kew expedition to the highlands of



Papua New Guinea, he has a plant called after him, a violet-flowered relative of lobelia. "It has a very unfortunate name – *Pratia angulata* 'Tim Rees'." After Kew, he went on to be director of the garden design course at the Inchbald School in London.

He really began to appreciate the contribution shrubs could make when he started working in the Mediterranean, introduced to his first client there by

Rosemary Verey. "The flora in the Med is naturally more shrubby than ours, so you can fit them more easily into naturalistic planting."

I saw a couple of his schemes in the south of France a few years ago – interlocking cushions of rosemary, teucrium, santolina, lavender, sage, oleander, caryopteris and perovskia dispersed across the sunny banks like green and silver cloud formations, blended for further contrast with shrub roses and fountain-like grasses such as *Stipa brachytricha*. A handsome look.

Gentle profusion: clockwise from top left, an Oxfordshire garden by Tim Rees; Classical overtones in Provence; Rees in his London garden; mound in Oxfordshire; mentor Rosemary Verey; and Nicole de Vesian's garden in the Luberon hills, a source of inspiration

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grass, to echo the solitary hawthorn clumps you see in the landscape. All sorts of rose species, such as *Rosa roxburghii*, *R. villosa* and *R. pteracantha*, are good for this."

In other gardens, including his own garden in London and the one he has been making in Italy with his artist partner Gary, he takes his shrub patterns to an even higher level of refinement. It was a visit to the garden of the late Nicole de Vesian that helped alert him to the possibilities. "She had worked in fashion for Hermès, and her garden in the Luberon hills was highly designed, with a simple cast of Mediterranean shrubs arranged in composite sculptural groups over a series of stone terraces. But while, for example, some of her lavenders were tightly clipped, others were left fuzzy, creating a sort of formal and informal effect at the same time."

At home in London, he creates a similar effect using a broader range of hardy shrubs, playing the natural forms of

plants such as 'Joseph Rock' tree peony and wintersweet against clipped shrubs such as osmanthus, sarcococca and cloud-pruned box. The design is sharpened by the contrasts of textures and forms from wispy perennials like stipa grasses, self-seeding verbena, pots of white agapanthus, curtains of climbing plants set against the clean gravel and cobble surfaces, contemporary ornament, and the clipped beech hedges which, around a small square of lawn, are arrestingly overscaled.

The climbers also carry the shrubby theme above head height, with *Trachelospermum jasminoides*, *Wisteria brachybotrys* 'Shiro-kapitan' (formerly 'Alba'), and the roses 'Bobbie James' and 'Mrs Herbert Stevens' – chosen as much for their fragrance as their white flowers. "That's another very good reason to grow shrubs," adds Tim. "There is hardly any scent in perennials."