

In brief

WHAT Private garden combining formality with exuberant planting.

WHERE Near the town of Hasselt, northern Belgium.

SIZE 4 hectares.

CLIMATE Cold and dry winters, hot summers.

HARDINESS RATING RHS H5
USDA 7b/8a.

SOIL Neutral poor sand.

POINTS OF INTEREST Strong structural planting with long-flowering herbaceous borders and intimate enclosures.



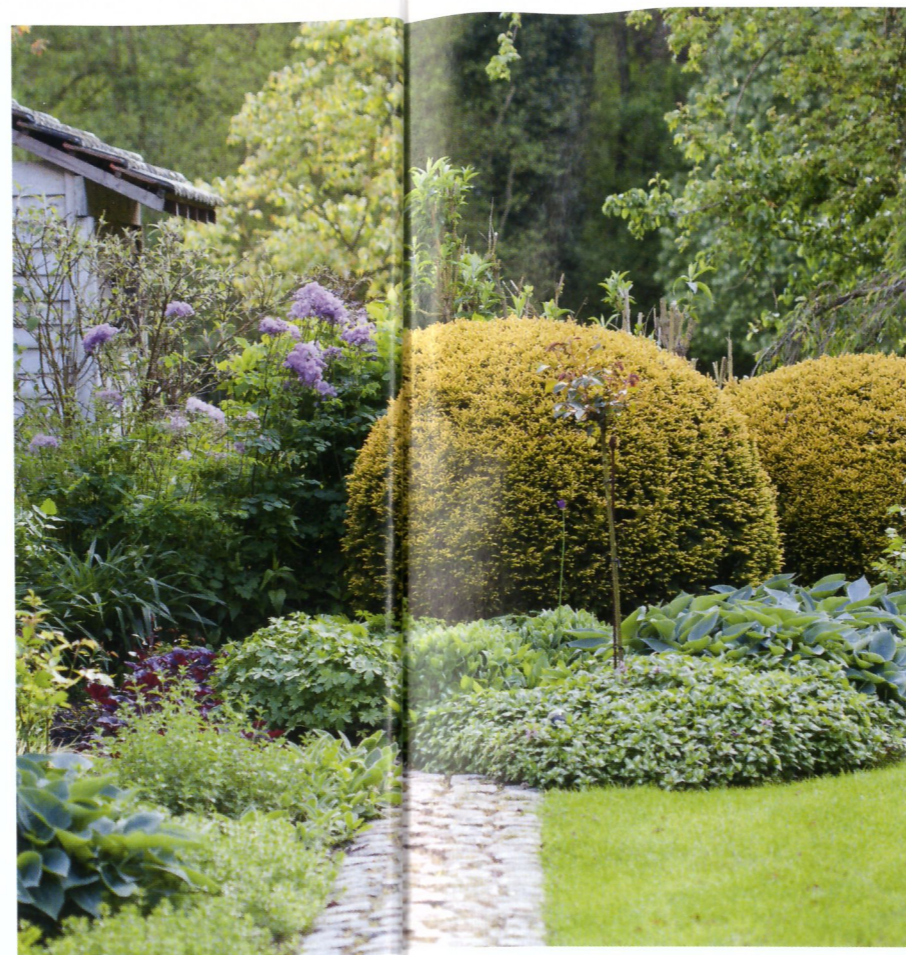
Dina Deferme designed her garden to offer seclusion and sit comfortably within its rural setting.



Fresh meaning

Dina Deferme's private garden gave her a new lease of life and broke with Belgian architectural traditions

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS ROBERT MABIC / GAP PHOTOS



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hen we meet, Dina Deferme tells me: "This garden saved my life." Most of us feel close to our gardens and many of us use hyperbole when we talk about how important our gardens are to us, but Dina Deferme is serious. After a terrible accident that left her badly burned and disfigured she withdrew from the world, and, during a decade of painful surgery, created a luxuriant garden: a place of vigour, vitality and beauty that is one of the most visited private gardens in Belgium. Thanks to her garden she overcame her adversity.

Dina studied fine art and as a young woman had imagined her future as a painter until the call of the natural world attracted her to explore landscape architecture. "My grandmother was a great gardener. I enjoyed working in the garden with my parents and I loved plants. Becoming a landscape architect felt comfortable and right." One of the main influences on her designs was the Belgian landscape architect Jacques Wirtz, best known in Britain for the gardens around Canary Wharf in London and those of the Alnwick Garden in Northumberland.

What was in Dina's mind when she began her garden in 1991 was Wirtz's sculptural treatment of trees and shrubs married with the formality of classical French and Italian gardens. Before proceeding with a design, though, she spent a long time getting to know the site: how the light changed during the seasons, which

plants grew well, what the space felt like. "When we arrived we put up the hedges around the garden because this was to be my haven from the world and then we took four years to lay out the rest of the garden." Her partner Tony Pirotte constructed wide paths of stone pavers and planted hornbeam, box and yew hedges to Dina's design. She created several enclosed areas, each with a different view across the garden. "I wanted to enclose the space to shield me from the world but I did want to have views out across the garden and towards the landscape." Each part of the garden looks out on to other areas within it and outwards to the trees and fields beyond. And everywhere there are benches, tables, chairs: places to pause. "It is too easy to rush around a garden. It is important to sit and to ponder and to look."

Within the garden is a large, clear meadow, where Dina's horses often graze. "I wanted it to be inside of the garden so that there is a calm quiet spot that relaxes the eye. I also wanted my animals near me; everything in the natural world is important and should be part of a garden."

In a country where the winters are long and dreary, the structure of the garden is crucial; even the weak light of winter accentuates the delicate tracery of the hornbeam hedges. For Dina the harsh winters mean that it is important to make the most of the rest of the year and she

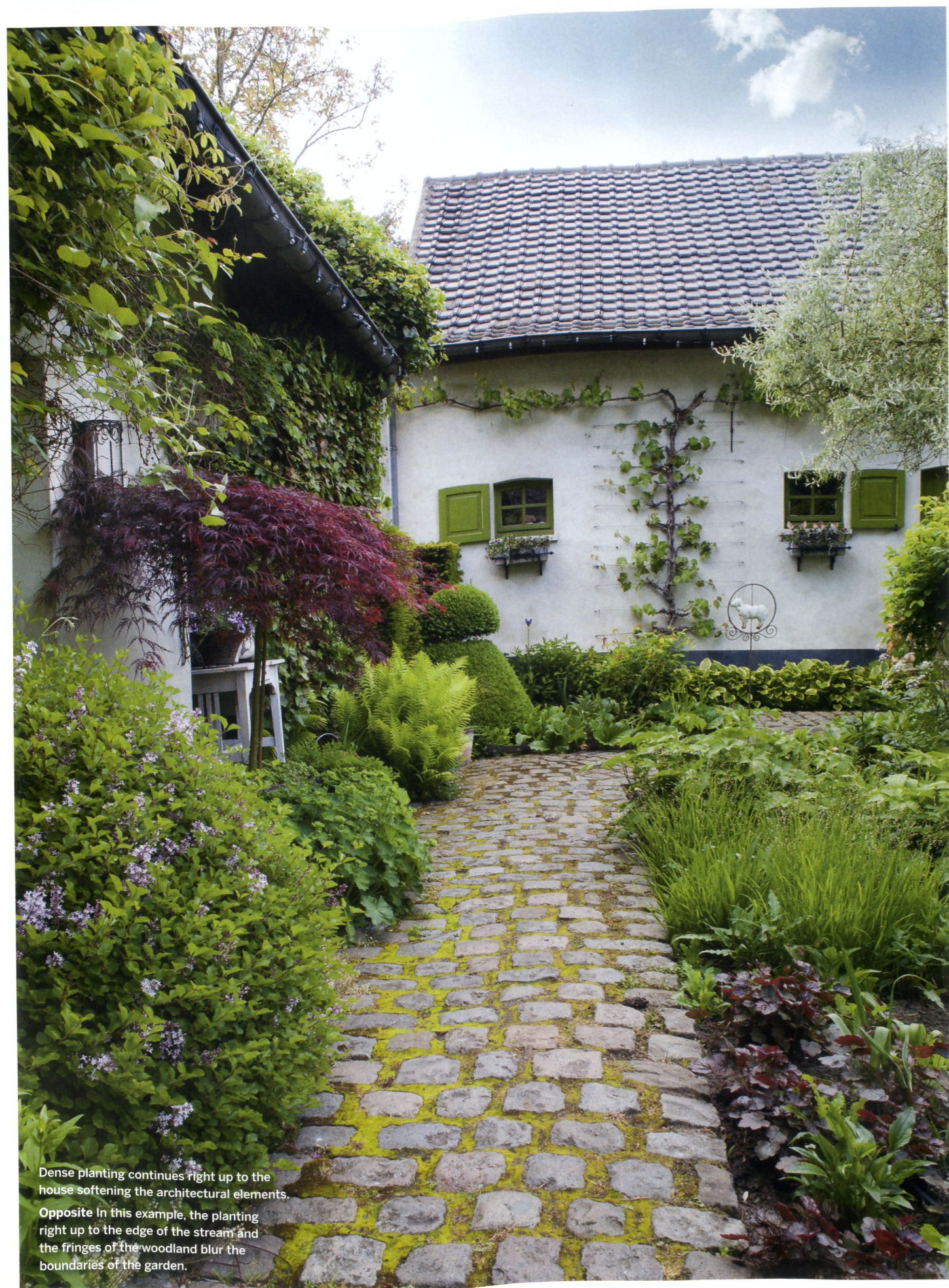
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Top left Dina incorporates lots of seating areas into the garden to encourage visitors to pause. Close to the house the seats are encircled with low box hedges and densely planted borders.

Top right Tightly clipped evergreens define the borders and give structure within them. These domes are of yew, which Dina says stand up to heavy snow better than box.

Bottom left Each part of the garden has views out across other areas of the garden or into the surrounding landscape. Here a grass path leads the eye towards a paddock and the woods beyond.

Bottom right Hornbeam, box and yew are used to create the formal architecture of the garden.



Dense planting continues right up to the house softening the architectural elements.
Opposite In this example, the planting right up to the edge of the stream and the fringes of the woodland blur the boundaries of the garden.



“We were used to strongly architectural gardens with understated planting. Seeing the romance and luxuriance of my planting schemes was new to many gardeners”

▷ wanted her borders to be full of colour and vibrancy for as long as possible. During the recovery from her accident she visited many gardens in Britain, including Hidcote, Tintinhull and Sissinghurst, to study plant combinations and ways of making the border sing from spring through into autumn.

“Twenty years ago this was something novel in Belgium. We were used to strongly architectural gardens with understated planting. Seeing the romance and luxuriance of my planting schemes was new to many gardeners.”

To sustain the wide palette of plants that her planting style needs, Dina maintains close links with specialist nurseries. “You need a good relationship

with nurserymen because they know so much more than most of us about plants, particularly new varieties.” She cautions against the overenthusiastic claims made for newly bred cultivars. “Don’t listen to the plant marketing people, particularly when it comes to a plant’s hardiness: you have to test plants for yourself.” Before introducing a plant into one of her schemes she grows it for at least two seasons in a field adjacent to the garden to see how it performs.

Many gardens contain the story of their maker. Embedded in Dina Deferme’s garden is the story of her recovery from terrible disfigurement, through a long and painful decade, to light and colour and vitality. Hers is an uplifting story and an uplifting garden. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Beuzestraat 64, Stokrooie (Hasselt), 3511 Belgium.
Tel +32 (0)11 25 64 58, www.deferme.be
Open every Sunday in June, July and August and by appointment.

Dina Deferme has designed other gardens in the area, also open to the public. Details of opening times can be found at www.deferme.be

- **The Adams’ garden**
Wolvenstraat 27, 2370 Arendonk.
- **Corry Broekx’s garden**
Dingenstraat 9, 3960 Bree.
- **The Vanormelingen’s garden (De Horne)**
Brugstraat 30, 3870 Vechmaal.

Dina Deferme’s advice

Five tips that help ensure your borders look good throughout the summer

Feed the soil

Expecting plants to perform to the maximum takes a lot of energy. Dina digs lots of manure into the soil when planting and mulches every spring with a layer of well-rotted horse manure. She advises not to forget to mulch shrubs and hedges.

Plant early-flowering perennials close by late-flowering ones

There is a tendency in lots of gardens to grow plants that flower at the same time next to each other. Dina advises against this: having, for example, a spring plant next to one that flowers in autumn will mean that you have fewer gaps in the border.

Plant densely

Do not leave even the tiniest gap in your planting schemes. This may mean planting too densely the first year but it is easy to remove plants that have spread too far. Keep a notebook with you and record which plants need controlling.

Feed the soil a second time

At the end of June Dina gives the garden a second feed, this time with an organic granular fertiliser. This gives a boost to re-flowering roses and irises. It also helps plants recover from the shock of being cut back and stimulates late-flowering perennials.

Dead head and cut back

Dead-heading is a daily job from spring onwards as a way of encouraging maximum flower production. As soon as a perennial has finished flowering it is cut back hard. This means that even those that do not flower a second time will have neat attractive foliage and will not take up space that could be used by flowering plants.



Tightly pruned pleached hornbeam skirts the house and provides shade for the adjacent border.