



The daffodil lawn was inspired by the many heritage varieties (top right) Frank inherited; erythroniums (right) thrive in wooded areas.



SHAPING NATURE

Frank Kirwan has fulfilled his dream of opening Humble Dean, his East Lothian garden, to the public, having wrestled with the undergrowth to reveal burns and woodland that is spangled with spring bulbs including heritage daffodils

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS **SHEILA SIM**

For generations East Lothian has been seen as Scotland's 'garden county', renowned for its rich horticultural heritage and its wealth of gardens, designed landscapes and fine public parks. Humble Dean is a relative newcomer to the county's impressive list of private gardens. It lies at the south-western corner of the county, near the foot of the Lammermuir Hills, reached via sinuous country roads lined with neatly trimmed beech hedgerows that are a zingy green in spring.

Frank Kirwan moved here in late 2008, having purchased Humble Dean with a challenge in mind: to create from scratch a garden with year-round appeal that he could open to the public under Scotland's Gardens Scheme within five years. And what a challenge it has been. When he moved here, only a small area near the driveway could have been described as garden. In more recent years the rest of this two-acre plot had barely been touched, although Frank did inherit some wonderful mature trees, fine rhododendrons and masses of bulbs from when the house was built in the 1930s.

As described by Frank, the shape of the garden is reminiscent of "a wedge of ripe French cheese". The long sides of this tasty triangle take the form of steep, wooded slopes leading down to two small rivers: Greenbank Burn to the south and Humble Water to the north. The rivers meet at the apex of the garden, which faces west. The flat top of the triangle, with the house situated roughly in its centre, has gradually evolved into a number of distinct areas ("not 'rooms'!" insists Frank emphatically) including a cottage-style garden around the house and a meadow of bulbs to the rear.

The removal of a vast wall of light-blocking conifers near the house was the first priority. After that it was the steep, overgrown banks down to the rivers that required the most intensive effort. When Frank arrived,



provided the chippings to surface them. Encouraged by these initial efforts, Frank now felt he could “create a garden that went with the land rather than being forced into a contrivance”. Having restored access down to Greenbank Burn, he constructed a zigzagging wooden boardwalk so that he – and those future visitors – could stroll by the river without getting muddy feet. A ‘passing place’ sign, made from a pile of discarded road signs, provides a humorous touch.

The result of Frank’s endeavour on the southern edge of the garden is a light and airy tree canopy that has allowed attractive groundcover to be planted. The semi-shaded slope, damper than the rest of the garden due to rain run-off, is the ideal habitat for primula, meconopsis, pulmonaria and gunnera. These have been supplemented in recent years by hellebores and erythroniums – the latter being particularly successful. In fact, BBC Scotland came to film *The Beechgrove Garden* here two years ago, drawn by the erythroniums. “The species ones tend to disappear if there’s any competition,” says Frank, “but the hybrids do well. I use ‘Pagoda’ and ‘White Beauty’, which bulk up quickly. ‘Pagoda’ has also performed surprisingly well in the meadow.”

The original objective was to create a garden that looks good all year round, and Humble Dean is a fine example of successional planting. Swathes of snowdrops in February give way to daffodils in spring, which, in turn, are followed by a sea of native bluebells. Herbaceous plants bring colour throughout summer, followed by an abundance of berry-laden shrubs in

the autumn. Only in the depths of winter does the garden sink into a well-earned rest. Much of the effect is achieved using a limited plant palette. Frank points out that when he finds a plant that performs well, he looks for other varieties of the same thing.

One of the most successful features is the meadow. Inspired by the clumps of daffodils that he inherited (many of them thought to be pre-1930s hybrids from the Backhouse Rossie collection in Fife), Frank has gradually supplemented them over the years so that throughout April and May this area becomes

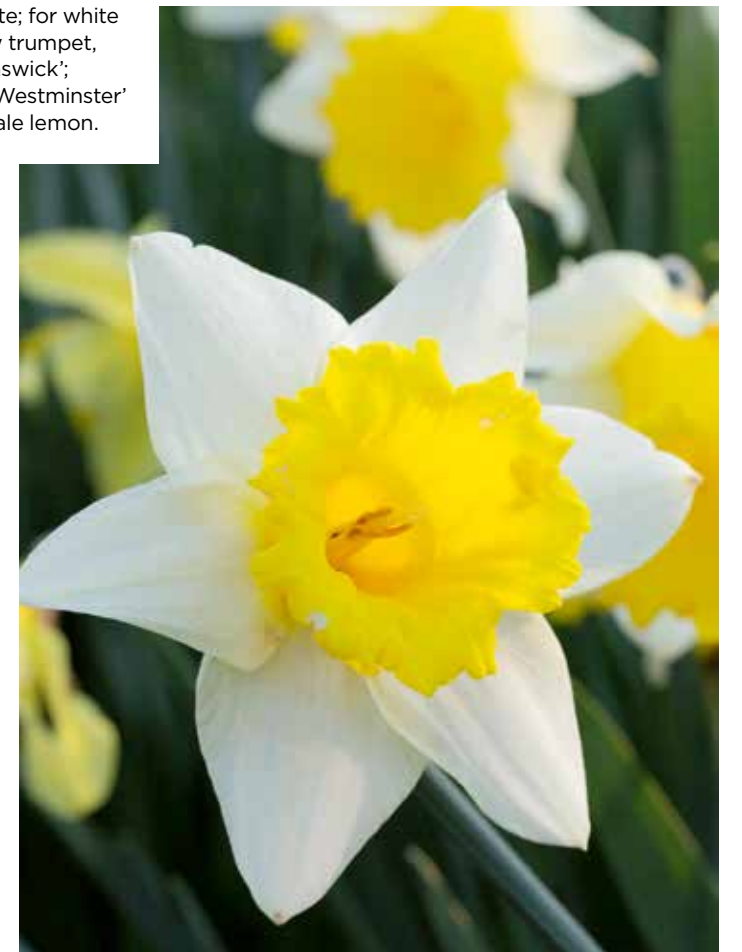
these slopes were virtually inaccessible; only by scrambling through a dense thicket of ash, alder, rowan and hawthorn, not to mention brambles and nettles, could he see what was required. He bought a chainsaw, hired the largest woodchipper he could find, and set to work.

Guided by the contours of the land, Frank identified where paths needed to be laid. From the first trees that he removed (and others that were felled by “the great landscaper in the sky”), large trunks were used to demarcate the first paths and

Above Masses of golden daffodils line the drive to the house, which sits at the top of the triangular water-edged plot.



Clockwise from top left Frank thinks Humble Dean’s daffodils date from the 1930s. ‘Twink’ has a similar split corona; try ‘Beersheba’ for a nodding white; for white with a yellow trumpet, look to ‘Brunswick’; ‘Duchess of Westminster’ is a similar pale lemon.





Frank co-exists with deer, rabbits, pheasants, mice, voles and moles – not always the most welcome of partners



a profusion of golden trumpets. “The varieties I’ve added have been chosen to extend the season; they flower earlier or later than the ones that were already here.” Since the meadow faces west, spring sunsets are now a very special part of the garden year.

During the relatively short time that he has lived at Humble Dean, Frank has noted the impact of climate change and intensive agricultural practices. Each year he wades into the Greenbank Burn to rescue clumps of snowdrops threatened by the rising waterline and moves them to safety further up the banks. Extremes of rainfall, coupled with heavily compacted soil in the local arable fields, lead to increased rainwater run-off that erodes the garden’s banks and causes occasional mudslides on country roads: thorny issues for the local community.

Humble Dean brings new meaning to the concept of the wildlife garden. Frank co-exists with deer, rabbits, pheasants, mice, voles and moles – not always the most welcome of partners, given the

damage they have wreaked over the years. Discreet fencing has been put in place with more being erected this year, but Frank often feels it is a losing battle. “What can I do? They have prior squatting rights,” he sighs.

Above Purple *Magnolia* ‘Susan’ flanks a bark path that’s in keeping with this informal woodland garden.
Left Spring blossom on *Prunus avium* ‘Plena’.
Far left Chequered *Fritillaria meleagris* thrives in grassy meadow plantings.



After ten years of hard work, Frank was keen to record his experiences, and has been writing a book about Humbie Dean, which he hopes will be published at the end of 2020. It will describe his gardening year, month by month, allowing him to share his accumulated experience – particularly the lessons he has learned and the mistakes he’s made. To take one example, with the benefit of hindsight

“It’s not perfect... but if you’d told me ten years ago that this is what it would look like, I wouldn’t have believed you”

Meadow MAINTENANCE

Frank’s advice on caring for a daffodil meadow once the flowering display has faded

Don’t feed or deadhead and don’t bother tying up the dying foliage; it’s not attractive and it doesn’t do anything useful.

Follow RHS advice to leave the foliage to die back over the course of six weeks, and then run the lawnmower over the lot.

Mow paths through the meadow, and dig up bulbs to move them only if they’re blocking a path. I’ve found you can lift a clump of

daffodils when they first appear and move them somewhere else, and they actually won’t mind at all.

I used to mow the meadow only at the end of June, but recently I’ve started mowing it on a four-weekly basis thereafter. In addition to eliminating the most pernicious weeds, this will stop the bluebells from self-seeding. Even though the bluebells here are our native variety, not the Spanish one, they can become invasive.

Above The zigzagging boardwalk safely navigates the burns that run along two of the garden’s boundaries.

he wishes he had not planted camassia amongst the bluebells, since they are practically the same colour and

simply merge together in the wider scheme.

The garden will be open to the public on ten, yet-to-be-announced occasions this year, but Frank is always happy to be contacted by groups or enthusiasts who want to visit at other times. Although he has had previous gardens, this is the first one that he has created virtually from scratch. Has he achieved what he wanted to do? His response is modest as he points out that some of the paths are too narrow, the lawn is not manicured, some of the tall shrubs are perhaps too close together... “It’s not perfect,” he says, “and I’ll continue to change it. But if you’d told me ten years ago that this is what it would look like, I wouldn’t have believed you.” ■

Humbie Dean, Humbie, East Lothian EH36 5PW. Open on selected dates between mid-April and mid-August, and to groups and individuals by appointment. Tel: 07768 996382; humbiedean.com