

# Singularly Dutch

The small Zeeland garden of Jopie Koens and Ton Altena has both a structure and planting style that is distinctively of its place

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## IN BRIEF

Name De Doolman.

What Small garden that is home to a series of different borders offering a range of characters and colours.

Where The Netherlands.

Size 1,250 square metres.


Soil Clay over sand, so well-drained.

Climate Cool temperate with a maritime influence.

Hardiness zone USDA 9.

Leading out from the side of their modern house, Jopie and Ton have created a long Hot Border, with uplifting, fiery tones that include *Helenium* 'Sahin's Early' and *Crocasmia* 'Lucifer'. Dark purple is a good intensifier for warm colours, provided here by the large leaves of *Canna* 'Cleopatra' and purple foliage of *Cotinus coggygria* 'Royal Purple'.





Green abstract shapes are a cool counterpoint to planting that is dominated by a lush range of perennials

The climates of the UK and the Netherlands are very similar, and a similar range of plants can be found in the gardens of these two most enthusiastic of gardening nations. Even so, were I to be parachuted into a random, unfamiliar garden and had to guess in which country I had landed, I'm pretty sure I would instantly know.

One garden that leaves little doubt is that of Jopie Koens and Ton Altena. This small garden, squeezed into a corner plot on one of Zeeland's peninsulas that reach out into the North Sea, has all the elements of a modern Dutch garden. Many of these lead back to one, incredibly influential, Dutch garden and landscape designer, who dominated the profession for much of the 20th century: Mien Ruys. Her

vision was architectural and modern – definitely post-Bauhaus – but she was also a lover of flowers and colour.

Jopie and Ton's garden is very plant focussed, colourful and relaxed, but two features stand out as being distinctly Mien Ruys: a long block of clipped box, rectangular shapes that all mesh together, and in another part of the garden, an array of box clipped into spheres of varying sizes. Both features read as sculptures – exercises in form in themselves, rather than as a structural framework as clipped box might be used in the UK.

These green abstract shapes are a cool counterpoint to planting that is overwhelmingly dominated by a lush and varied range of perennials, with grasses playing an increasingly important role as the summer progresses. Jopie also says that she likes to use seasonal flowers, such as dahlias, and annuals, including zinnias, cosmos and tagetes, that she

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The rectangular canal, which you cross to enter the house, creates a feeling of calm in the first area of this small garden, and provides a visual link to the sculptural groupings of box blocks and the pergola behind. To the left is the large Front Garden border, with a pink and purple theme that includes *Monarda* 'On Parade', *Bistorta amplexicaulis* and *Erysimum* 'Bowles's Mauve'. In spring this border is full of bulbs (mostly tulips and camassias) in a similar colour scheme.





**Above** A neat beech hedge separates the Hot Border from this cooler mix of planting dominated by the pink spikes of *Bistorta amplexicaulis* 'Rowden Gem' (a one-time *Persicaria* cultivar raised by John Carter in Devon). In front, *Phlox paniculata* 'Blue Paradise' stands out among the grasses that add movement to the border, including the steely blue *Poa labillardierei* and *Stipa calamagrostis*, with its feathery panicles and open habit.



**Below** The Hot Border extends out from Jopie and Ton's house, and is filled with hot colour from the red swords of *Crocosmia* 'Lucifer', yellow umbels of *Achillea filipendulina*, and orange sunflowers of *Helenium* 'Sahin's Early Flowerer'. At the front is an unnamed *Gaillardia aristata* hybrid, a short-lived perennial daisy with multi-coloured flowerheads that, according to Jopie, flowers all summer making it invaluable for long-season impact.



**Above** A *Koelreuteria paniculata* tree that Jopie's father grew from seed rises out of a bed of cloud-pruned box to create a focal point at the end of the Hot Border. Facing these sculptural box balls, rounded clumps of *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln' create a rhythm along the path, punctuated by bursts of colour, including the yellow flowers of *Heliopsis helianthoides*.



**Below** The Cream and White Border is dominated by a vigorous, long-flowering, white phlox, its name long since forgotten, which Jopie inherited from her parents' garden. Behind, the feathery flowers of *Koenigia x fennica* 'Johanneswolke' (formerly a *Persicaria*) are very long lasting, although strangely of no interest to pollinators, alongside *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Overdam', a subtly variegated relative of the much larger 'Karl Foerster'.



A wide-angle photograph of a garden path made of split grey basalt stones. The path is flanked by dense, colorful plantings. On the left, there are tall grasses and yellow flowers. On the right, there are red and orange flowers, possibly dahlias, and various green shrubs. The background shows more trees and a wooden fence.

While Ton has taken charge of the garden's architecture, Jopie has selected most of the plants

▷ grows from seed. "I put them in among the perennials to provide extra colour through the summer," she says. And while she loves the green of spring, her favourite time of the year is August when the grasses are at their peak, especially as the month draws to its close and the colours begin to change. "At the beginning of the year everything is very low," says Ton. "By the end some plants are two or three metres high; that's something we find really exciting."

The couple started the garden in 2012 but Jopie's links to the garden go back much further. She was born here and lived here with her parents until her late teens. "My father was a metalworker and a hobby gardener who loved to grow many plants," she says. The couple were understandably keen to maintain some of what her father had planted, including

some lime trees and a *Koeleruteria paniculata* he had grown from seed, and designed the garden around them. They also wanted views out on to the landscape, and Ton, who has taken the lead on the general garden layout, wanted the lines in the garden to connect their modern house to the straight lines that dominate the very flat surrounding landscape.

Given the geometry of much of the Dutch landscape, gardens either have to hide away or align themselves with the rows of trees, field boundaries and canals that order this rational country. "We started by planting the front garden diagonally," says Ton. "So that you can look at and through the plants in different ways."

While Ton has taken charge of the garden's architecture, Jopie has selected most of the plants. In her design she was influenced by the famed double border of Madeleine ▷

Ton has used the same split grey basalt stone for the paths throughout the garden to create a sense of "unity and peace". The planting has also added to this strong sense of visual unity by repeating certain plants throughout the borders. In the Hot Border Ton has used *Crocsmia* 'Lucifer' at intervals and used various grasses, most notably *Stipa calamagrostis*, in several of the borders.





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▷ van Bennekom, one of a group of gardeners from Zeeland who became well known in the 1970s, at a time when Dutch gardening was at something of a low point. She also cites the influence of the Dutch designer Piet Oudolf. “But he gardens on a big scale, and we have only a small garden,” says Jopie. “We want flowers for as long as we can, from March to November; it’s difficult to have the number and range of plants to achieve this, and still have the strong structures that Piet has.”

Another inspiration has been the garden made by Nori and Sandra Pope at Hadsen in Somerset in the 1990s. For a brief time the work of this Canadian couple dominated all discussion of colour in the British garden world, and although Jopie never saw the garden in person, she has seen pictures of

it and read their books. Their spirit of bold experimentation has clearly led Jopie down some adventurous paths, such as her border in salmon tones.

Planted exuberance often works best if the boundaries are clear. Firm lines with dense and diverse planting ensure that this is a garden that feels visually balanced and never has a dull moment, while we can be confident that it will continue to generate surprises for a long time to come. □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

**Address** De Doolman, Oudekamerseweg 22, 4451 NC, Heinkenszand, the Netherlands. **Tel** +31 (0)6 22 03 09 22. **Web** doolman-nl **Open** 27-28 August, and by appointment for groups of six or more. Admission €2.50.

The covered terrace offers an extension to Ton and Jopie’s modern house with outdoor sofas positioned to take advantage of the long, double Hot Border, which leads out from this side of the house. Planters on the terrace include a similar mix of bright colours to raise the spirits, including *Tagetes* ‘Starfire Mixed’. To the right, the pink flowers of *Bistorta amplexicaulis* ‘Rowden Gem’ stand out against the row of poplars, which create a sense of enclosure for the garden.