



Kim Wilde

'Rock Gardener'

A garden portrait by **John Dyer**

Kim Wilde writes: John arrived on a beautiful summer's day, just as dumper trucks and diggers noisily invaded the garden.

A long awaited 'tropical garden' was going to be built the same week as our 'artist in residence' had come to paint, and I was worried the mayhem might distract him. He instantly put us at our ease, and wandered off into the garden to find a place to sit and paint. Each day he arrived early, and painted huge canvases full of vibrant colour, and every day we were entranced. Our children were captivated

not only by the paintings, but by John himself, who took time to involve them. The results were magical, and perfectly captured the special atmosphere we feel living in this beautiful place, on a hill somewhere in Hertfordshire. I have always had immense respect for anyone who chooses to take time to interpret our world for us through painting, and feel especially privileged to have hosted such an inspired artist in our back garden!

My lasting memory of him will be of him and his wife Jo jiving wildly at the party which we threw to celebrate the new garden. His paintings decorated our home for the night, but I would have gladly have given them a home for life!

Eden Friends will know I am working on a series of paintings based on well-known gardens. Alan Titchmarsh kindly allowed me to work at Barleywood and it was there that I realised that painting a garden was far more than just recording the plants – it recorded in a very special way the interaction of the family in that garden; a garden portrait, writes **John Dyer**.

One of the reasons my wife Jo and I attempt to grow a few vegetables on our allotment is to teach our daughter Martha-Lilly about food. Kim Wilde's reasons are very similar; she has two young children who she encourages to garden. Kim also inspires thousands of us in our gardens, and that is an irresistible combination. I had to see the garden that had inspired Kim to change from being a Rock Star to being a Rock Star Gardener in the hope that the paintings would capture something about her and her family that would otherwise go unseen.

When I arrived at Kim's barn in Hertfordshire she greeted me at the door and our initial conversations were all about parking! A few moments later I found out why – Kim had the BBC's 'Garden Invaders' in for the week transforming a very large pond into a sunken sub-tropical garden. This involved lots of people and lots of vehicles. Kim and her husband Hal had taken the week off from their respective careers to assist in this garden transformation which was absolutely ideal for me as it gave me the entire

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week to watch and paint the family at work in their garden.

Kim's garden is divided into manageable domestic-sized spaces. It has a very French feel to it, with young apple trees carefully trained into espaliers to create dividers. Roses climb up supports and soften the area between the barn and the garden, which gives the whole space a very beautiful and romantic feel. This 'formal' garden gives way to experimental beds of prairie planting and dynamic architectural plants such as Cardoons and Allium seed heads.

Beyond the garden the land extends to a meadow, planted with many new trees and with a maze of paths cut into it. This slowly slopes away and out of sight, allowing the hillside beyond to link visually with the formal planting near the barn. White horses graze on the hillside opposite and the view from the barn is of almost mythical creatures majestically moving through the tumbling roses and espalier apple trees of the formal garden. For me this was a fairytale garden, and one in which I discovered Kim explores and enjoys her plants with expert knowledge and with the delight of a child.

The garden has been developed at the same pace as the growth of the children and

the children obviously feel very comfortable in their surroundings. They would

appear with aprons and boots on and start to weed a raised vegetable bed, collect apples for me to eat, pick the occasional raspberry or bring me small wheelbarrows full of gravel collected from the paths.

Kim and Hal treated the garden in a very similar way and whenever they found a spare 5 minutes they would gently wander around the garden looking, weeding or simply just being there.

'John. Look at this,' Kim called to me one lunchtime, holding skyward a large healthy cucumber she had just picked. You should have seen the delight on her face. The cucumber was quickly fashioned into a round of sandwiches and kindly deposited next to my painting blanket along with fresh fruit picked from the garden. Wow, lunch served by a rock star!

The weather was very kind to us all during the week and I completed a new painting each day, selecting different areas of the garden



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and aiming to capture a little bit of the magic that Kim so obviously saw there. As the week progressed so did the work in the new area of the garden. Both Kim and Hal worked on it all day every day, up to their necks in mud, and it was a real joy to watch the family working together to create something for themselves.

Kim kept telling me that it was the wrong time of year to plant the new area up, too dry, too late, but when it came to it she just couldn't resist. Architectural phormiums, trachycarpus palms, banana *musa basjoo*, giant gunnera and bamboo all arrived on the last day and it was fantastic to watch her busily planting out her new garden. Kim's choice of plants was typically Cornish and I couldn't resist using my paints to grow the plants on for her, to give a vision of what the garden may look like in a couple of years.



The week ended with a glorious summer party. The garden was set with tables, champagne coolers and parasols. All of my paintings were hung in Kim's barn for an exhibition on the evening and the whole event was set to live classical music – a magical end to a magical week.