



The Beth Chatto Gardens in Essex, England, which were created from a wild wasteland of gravel, overgrown brambles and boggy ditches



The late garden designer and author Beth Chatto in her famous gardens

# True grit: the growing appeal of a year-round gravel garden



**Ali Rochford** Gravel gardening is not for everybody, but it's great if you're into plants, experimentation – and less work overall



Pollinator-friendly, drought-tolerant *Nepeta nuda* in Des Doyle's garden



*Diascia fetcaniensis*



*Eryngium pandanifolium*, a solid performer in gravel gardens

**I**t was like meeting Madonna," garden designer Des Doyle said of meeting garden guru Beth Chatto years ago in her famous Essex garden. Doyle is now one of Ireland's foremost gravel gardeners, but meeting one of England's top plants people was a crossroads in his life, he said. "She was great, really interesting. It was sort of like, when you find the clothes designer or the shop that suits you, and you keep going back. You just go, 'Oh my God.' The garden had everything. It had structure, it had form. There was scent, foliage, it was just brilliant. I became fascinated by it. "I met my wife then, who very luckily for me had two botanist parents and a four-acre garden. The garden was in a rain-shadow, which had its challenges and set the garden designer on a path of discovery and experimentation.

Doyle, who lives and gardens at Lavistown House, a Georgian house on the banks of the River Nore just outside Kilkenny city, had been left unfulfilled by years of visiting other gardens, including many on the continent, hailed as shining examples of how things should be done. He decided to find a way of gardening that would work for him in his situation. "Kilkenny is odd because it's very cold in winter, very hot in the summer. Where we are, we have a micro-climate because we're on a west-facing, very well-drained slope," he said. "I did the whole exotic thing, the dahlias and cannas and all that. And that was great and very interesting. But there was just a part of me that thought: 'Why is this so much work? It's all hoisting stuff inside in winter and out again in April... staking, feeding, watering, watering, watering?' So I suppose I got to a point where I nearly resented gardening."

## Gravel gardens

"I set myself an objective that I wanted a garden that was botanically interesting with lots of species, that's interesting for winter, that's low impact, that's pollinator-friendly, that was low maintenance, that didn't require water or weeding." And so began his experiments with gravel gardens.

"I did one area first and I was really thrilled with that, I got a certain amount of self-seeding, which I liked. Then I extended it.

"I played in the gravel around the front of the house, seeing what works where, and it was a real relief not to have to bring things into the tunnel in autumn. The first year I did my gravel garden, I got rid of my tunnel and I was just so happy. No watering, no wrapping. I couldn't believe it.



Garden designer Des Doyle tried exotics before turning to gravel gardening



A view of Des Doyle's garden at Lavistown House on the outskirts of Kilkenny

"My winter interest is phenomenal. The seed heads are brilliant, the grasses don't fall over. There are points in October where my garden is as good as it is in June. I was so surprised how it went through the winter really beautifully.

"Certainly there were things that didn't work – I have a list of plants that do not work – but from experimenting I came up with a palette of plants that work well."

Among his favourites is *Marrubium libanoticum*, or Lebanese white horehound, which is upright with shimmering grey leaves and tiny white flowers that are pollinator-perfect, and has a beautiful winter skeleton. It is one of the plants Doyle gets the most messages about when people see it on his Instagram feed: @gardenfable.

Doyle trials new plants every year. "I take 30 to 40 plants to try and I grow them hard in awful soil and I see what they do. So when I put a plant in, I decide this is what the medium is, then I water once, maybe a watering can per

plant. And that's it, it's best of luck. If it dies it dies.

"Big, lush plants like *Nepeta* six hills giant need a lot of water even though it's a *Nepeta*, whereas you could grow *Nepeta govaniana*, the yellow one, or you could grow *Nepeta nuda* or *Nepeta emilia*, which are superb and they're all drought-tolerant."

Things such as *Dianthus carthusianorum*, *Dianthus cruentus*, some thymes and some of the asters, particularly smaller ones, *astelias*, *Bupleurum fruticosum*, *eryngiums*, *sedums*, *dieramas*, *chionochloa* – all of these plants are solid performers in the gravel garden.

## Water wise

"When I think back to how much water I used every night on exotic gardening... I now think we have to think of water like we think about electricity. Last summer, we had seven days of 30 degrees. The gravel garden was perfect. Nothing happened. I haven't watered in 14 months. I think

that's where we're going to be, we're always '40 shades of green' and 'God will it ever stop raining', but we had very little rain in March and similar in April.

"I think water is going to be the new oil. And it's going to be one of our most contentious resources. I use water very sparingly. If I'm doing pots, I'll only do drought-tolerant plants. You would nearly have to hold a gun to my head for me to water. Because that's part of the experiment.

"We have very cool mornings and very cool nights. What's happening is the dew is running down through the gravel. Plants are soaking it up on their leaves. Sure, *Penstemons* might look a bit droopy in the full sun, but by evening they're back.

"I use different percentages of grit and gravel when I'm planting to reduce the vigour of certain plants. So if you were to do a cross section of my soil there would be lots of different substrates."

The depth of the gravel depends on the plant, but it varies from four to seven inches deep.

Doyle uses corten steel to create a framework because an edge is necessary to keep the gravel in place.

"In February, I cut everything to the ground with shears, so that's probably an afternoon's work. And then in mid-March, I weed, which is probably, for quite a big space, just three hours' work. And then there's a little bit of an edit of self-seeders. For example, *Angelica* – you're going to pull out a lot of them, but you're not disturbing the gravel.

"That was my personal design challenge: can I make something that doesn't cost the Earth, that doesn't kill my back? Something that doesn't frustrate me and gives me some pleasure? And it really does that.

"Gravel gardening is not for everybody, but great if you're into plants, you're into experimentation, and you're into less work. There is no way I would ever go back to what I see as conventional gardening. Not a chance."

## 12 plants from Doyle's Gravel Garden

1. *Marrubium libanoticum*
2. *Verbena officinalis* var. *grandiflora* 'Bampton'
3. *Thymus pulegioides* 'Kurt'
4. *Bupleurum fruticosum*
5. *Astelia* red devil and *Astelia* son of red devil
6. *Nepeta nuda*
7. *Sedum matrona*
8. *Dieramas*
9. *Agapanthus inapertus* graskop
10. *Eryngium pandanifolium*
11. *Chionochloa rubra* and *Chionochloa conspicua*
12. *Lamprochrysus hieronymii* (like a mini pampas grass)

## Gravel Garden Masterclass

Join garden designer Des Doyle at Lavistown House and gardens, Kilkenny city, on Saturday July 25 from 10am to 4pm, for a gravel gardening masterclass. Cost is €90 and includes lunch, tea, coffee and snacks. All participants will leave with a plant list and ideas to try in their own gardens. Full Covid-19 Safety precautions will be in place on the day. Book on [gardenfable.com](http://gardenfable.com) or call 085 129 3189.



*Verbascum 'Clementine'*



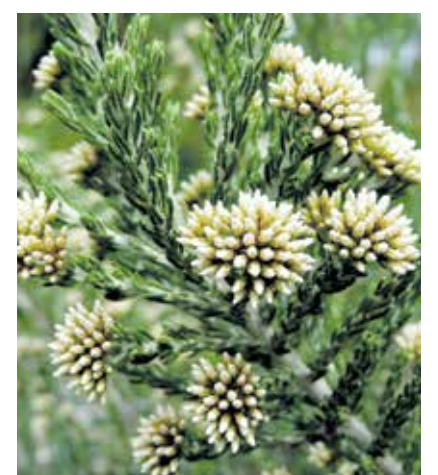
*Marrubium libanoticum*



*Penstemon 'Garnet'*



*Dierama*



*Ozothamnus 'Sussex Silver'*, a perfect choice for gravel gardens