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1 Eileen's front lawn has twice been declared the best in Sulgrave. 2 Wild pockets only add to the garden's charm. 3 English lavender creates a heavenly aroma. 4 Eileen's perfectly ordered array of tools. 5 Pink hydrangeas prove quite an attraction for passers by. 6 A delightful winding path parts the main lawn. 7 The stunning church backdrop



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An English affair

Tales of gold awards, paparazzi...and tomato soup. Jessica Simmons visits a Northamptonshire garden for a taste of fame



IF, true to superstition, the four-leafed clover brings good luck then Eileen Roberts' garden should be swarming with them. Such is the remarkable sequence of events, which, over the past decade, has thrust her quintessentially English lawns on to an international stage.

But let's start locally. For Eileen's front garden is quite an attraction in her home village of Sulgrave, near Banbury. Described as 'glamorous and painstakingly looked after' in 2003, the judge who penned such a testament awarded Eileen first place in the Sulgrave Front Garden Awards. This year, her well-placed alliums and 'lovely array of salmon diascias' have helped her reclaim the title once more for the cultivated charms that lie front-of-house.

So Eileen, who has been a member of Sulgrave with Culworth WI for 18 years, is well used to the attention of passers-by. Yet, as she reveals, she could never have predicted the international attention that would result from a knock at the door just over 10 years ago.

'A few weeks after I'd opened my gardens for the National Gardens Scheme, a Japanese couple turned up on my doorstep,' she explains. 'I gave them permission to take photos of my garden for a Japanese gardening magazine but never thought for one minute they'd want my lawns in print.'

Unknown to Eileen, photographer and journalist duo Hideo and Sachiko Takamizawa had ideas to the contrary. Two years later she received her copy of *Enjoy Gardening* hot off the Tokyo press, which devoted two pages to her 'typically English garden.' The magazine was distributed to millions, and to this day the couple still write to Eileen on a regular basis, sending photos of their own family, house and garden from their homeland.

'Traditionally, Japanese gardens are serene, spiritual and compact,' says Eileen, as we take a gentle walk around her borders. 'The couple couldn't



Eileen shows off her superb alliums

believe how much space I had. They seemed quite enamoured with the "Englishness" of it all.'

It's hard to disagree. A smooth kidney-shaped area of grass is subtly divided by a narrow winding path, which veers upward toward a vegetable patch, potting shed and compost section. This allows the eye to rest on

'The deep herbaceous borders are rich in pastel tones'

the deep herbaceous borders which, are carefree in style, and rich in pastel tones. The apricot coloured 'Peter Pears' *Gladiolus*, pink hydrangeas and pale ice-cream shades of wavering sweet peas create a soft blend of colour, one of Eileen's biggest prerequisites when designing a garden. For although it's a few years since the

first seeds were laid in the soil of her own plot, her horticultural skills have not gone unnoticed in WI circles.

Along with three fellow WI members, Eileen decided to enter a recent garden design challenge set by Northamptonshire Federation following the relocation of their headquarters to Moulton. 'After around five months of site visits, sketching and costings we submitted our entry along with over 15 other entrants from neighbouring WIs,' Eileen recounts. 'To our great surprise we received a phone call several months later which informed us we'd won the trophy.'

Adopting the role of technical illustrator for the submission, Eileen's detailed plans promise to make an *al fresco* business meeting at WI House

an irresistible option. Palettes of blues, silvers and white plants are set to colour the borders while fragrant lavender beds will nestle between relaxing benched seating. Eco-issues are high on the agenda; a host of

aromatic herbs will provide a sweet visiting spot for bees while the choice of Mediterranean plants lessens the need for manual watering.

The federation awarded Eileen's group an impressive 138 out of 200, a tribute to her green-fingered talents.

'There's rarely a day I don't garden,' she says. 'I've vivid memories of being sat in a wheelbarrow full of potatoes as a toddler while my dad pushed me round – that's where it started.'

Her own vegetable patch provides fine fruits for home-made jams and crumbles – though it's the greenhouse activity that's proving most curious. Here, whopping Italian plum tomatoes are growing at quite a rate, good news for Eileen's signature dish of tomato soup. Now, if we could just find a local vegetable competition... **WI**

Eileen's award-winning tips

- Invest in a two-part compost section. More air flow speeds up the process
- Ensure you prune regularly – this is a great way of maintaining colour in your garden
- Visit open gardens to get a boost of inspiration