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## REFUGE, HAVEN, PARADISE

**LIVING IN NATURE WITH NICO  
WISSING, A VISIONARY IN GREEN  
A HILLSIDE GARDEN  
IN NOTTINGHAMSHIRE**

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# ELEMENTAL FORCE

Dutch garden designer Nico Wissing has a vision, that we become part of nature. Ciar Byrne asks him how he practices what he preaches in his own garden

PHOTOGRAPHS: Robert Mabic





**F**or every important event in the life of his family, Nico Wissing has planted a tree in his garden at Megchelen, a bucolic location overlooking fields in the Netherlands. The first of these trees is the House Tree, a *Catalpa bignonioides* that marks the building of his home, 34 years ago. Next came the Wedding Tree, a *Fagus sylvatica* 'Purpurea Tricolor', or European beech, and it has since been followed by trees that signify the births of each of his three children.

When the designer and his wife, Yvonne Hakvoort, bought the plot, the only trees on it were an avenue of *Populus nigra* 'Italica'. It was important to Nico, however, that he increase the tree count, so he could be sure his new home would be truly rooted within the landscape.

In his home country, Nico is known as a passionate advocate of ecological landscape design and of bringing greenery into cities, not as an afterthought, but as an intrinsic and value-added component of urban planning. Connecting buildings with the natural landscape is central to all his client work and it comes as no surprise to learn that this has been the guiding principle for his own home and garden.

'From every window, you look out onto green: perennials, hedges, shrubs or wonderful trees,' he says. 'If I look outside, into my garden, I want to see living elements.'

Some of the trees he has planted were already mature specimens, brought in from the gardens of clients who no longer wanted them. 'We dug the catalpa out of a garden because it was too crooked for the client. It was already fifteen years old when I put it into my garden so now, it's fifty years old. It's about sustainability in the garden landscape,' says Nico.

### Ecological landscapes

This philosophy of reusing plants and hard landscaping materials is central to NL Greenlabel, a movement that Nico founded in 2010 with Dutch TV gardener and champion of green issues, Lodewijk Hoekstra, to provide information to the landscape industry about the ecological footprint of the products used by its members.

The garden at Megchelen has grown organically over time, with Nico adding new areas every few years, as his budget and the demands of bringing up his family allowed.





## Nico Wissing

is the founder and owner of Greenm2 and NL Greenlabel. He has more than 35 years' worth of experience in garden design, layout and maintenance, and regularly lectures in the Netherlands and other countries, where he is seen as a 'visionary in green'.

[nicowissing.com](http://nicowissing.com)



The first part to be developed was a formal flower garden that extends all the way around the house. Today, the beds are filled with herbaceous perennials such as *Persicaria polymorpha*, rudbeckia, echinacea and day lilies in red, orange and yellow.

At the back of the house, a long, formal pond flanked on either side by banks of pennisetum, a clipped hedge of *Eleagnus x cbbingei*, and yew balls stretches away from the terrace and merges with the lawn beyond.

At the far end of the tall, undulating beech hedge that runs along the side of the lawn, the garden evolves into a wilder form, with prairie-style planting and a naturalistic



**OPENING PAGE:** trees such as *Euodia hupehensis*, *Malus ssp.*, *Phellodendron*, and *Prunus avium* are a key part of Nico's planting plan. **THESE PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:** *Diascia barbarae* 'Deep Salmon', in a Poggi Ugo pot draws the eye across the pond; *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau' beside a seat designed by Nico; the existing avenue of *Populus nigra* 'Italica' now overlooks the wildflower meadow; *Fagus sylvatica* 'Purpurea Tricolor' and *Liquidambar styraciflua*; in the front garden; the new pond.

pond, the banks of which are a favourite place for family and friends to sit whilst looking out over the water at the trees and fields beyond. 'I dug out the pond and made small slopes so it was connected to the landscape,' says Nico. 'In Holland, you don't have hills but if you stand in my backyard, it looks like the landscape is moving.'

The seven-and-a-half-acre site also includes a walled garden with a greenhouse and Nico's office, and sculpture and seating that Nico takes delight in placing so they draw the eye and bring the sitter as close to nature as possible.

## The main event

The plants are the stars, however, with more than 300 different species on show, starting with spring bulbs such as the snow flower *Chionodoxa*, and the dog's tooth violet, *Erythronium dens-canis*. Summer perennials include the scented white peony, 'Duchesse de Nemours', port wine red *Angelica gigas*, and the towering white spires of *Eremurus himalaicus*, as well as the firecracker flower, *Dichelostemma ida-maia*. There are also wilder plants such as *Dipsacus fullonum*, *Foeniculum vulgare* and *Oenothera missouriensis*. →

GUIDED BY A TALL, UNDULATING BEECH HEDGE THAT RUNS ALONG ONE SIDE OF THIS EXPANSE, THE GARDEN GENTLY EVOLVES INTO A WILDER FORM.



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## WHO'S WHO

**Landscaping,** Green M2, [greenm2.nl](http://greenm2.nl)

**Sustainability passports,** NL Greenlabel, [nlgreenlabel.nl](http://nlgreenlabel.nl)

**Plants,** Marcel de Wagt, Ven-Zelderheide NL, [opvallendeplanten.nl](http://opvallendeplanten.nl); Lageschaar, Aalten NL, [lageschaar.nl](http://lageschaar.nl); de Hessenhof, Ede NL, [hessenhof.nl](http://hessenhof.nl); Hiddink, Sinderen NL, [kwekerijhiddink.nl](http://kwekerijhiddink.nl)

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The selection is based on the plants' ability to naturalise well within the landscape, Nico explains, and they are not all necessarily native. It is an approach he shares with fellow countryman and garden designer Piet Oudolf, with whom he has worked closely on urban greening projects.

### Feel nature around you

In his mission to bring nature into the increasingly sterile urban environment, Nico is also inspired by the work of planting pioneers such as Nigel Dunnett, Professor of Planting Design, Urban Horticulture and Vegetation Technology at the University of Sheffield.

'Nowadays, we have a cleaning complex,' Nico explains. 'I call it "mow, blow and glow". And there is a lot of concrete

and asphalt so we have to bring more natural places into the city. We built NL Greenlabel for gardeners, landscapers, and real estate developers, but also for city planners, so they see the value of existing trees and plants. I hope that it will become forbidden to cut down a single tree.

'My vision is that we become a part of nature,' he continues. 'Maybe we are moving in paradise, but we don't see it. I'm always designing parts that are close to nature, not a lot of plastic furniture with outside kitchens and a fridge and a TV in your garden and this kind of rubbish. Keep it simple, work with the elements around you, the sun, the rain, the wind, the clouds, the light, the shade, but also the trees. Come into the garden with bare feet and feel the nature around you.' ○

**CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT:** the *Catalpa bignonioides* and *Fagus sylvatica* in the Prairie Garden; *The Shooters*, in the Wildflower Meadow, and *Head*, in the Walled Garden are both by sculptor Jozef Kemperman.